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## The young protester: the impact of belongingness needs on political engagement

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### ABSTRACT

As institutional forms of political engagement continue to decline, participation in protests steadily become more common. These trends are particularly strong among younger citizens. Previous research indicates that social factors can explain participation in political protests, and that younger citizens' participation in protests is more affected by social ties than older people's participation. Even though the desire for social affiliation is a fundamental human need, there are individual differences in the need for belongingness. The aim of the current study is to investigate if part of younger people's higher level of participation in protests can be explained by individual-level differences in belongingness needs. More specifically, the study investigates whether a larger part of younger people's participation is explained by need to belong (NTB), as compared to older people's participation. In line with the hypothesis, results from a survey study of a representative sample of the Swedish population ( $N = 2034$ ), show that only younger people's participation is predicted by individual-level belongingness needs; the higher the NTB among young people, the higher the tendency to protest, while this effect is absent among older people. These results have important implications for our understanding of participation in protest activities and youth mobilization.

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Protest activities; young citizens' participation; need to belong; peer-pressure

## Introduction

Several Western nations have witnessed similar changes in the political engagement of their citizens. While institutional forms of activism, such as voting and party membership, have decreased since mid 20th century (e.g. Bennett 2007, 2008; van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012; Inglehart et al. 2014; Norris 2002; Putnam 2000), less conventional forms of *protest activities* have become more common (Dalton 2017; Loader, Vromen, and Xenos 2014; Norris 2002; Putnam 2000) – especially in the younger segments of populations (Bennett 2007, 2008; Gauthier 2003; Loader, Vromen, and Xenos 2014; Norris 2002; Putnam 2000;

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Sloam 2013, 2016; Sloam and Henn 2019). Party membership in European countries collectively has gone down from 15% to 5% between the years of 1960 and 2008 (Van Biezen and Poguntke 2014), and in Sweden, where the current study took place, political parties lost half of their members between 1990 and 2010 (Erlingsson and Persson 2014). These declining numbers have been particularly prominent among youth, who - in France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, the UK, and the US - are more likely to participate in petitions, boycotts, and demonstrations than to vote in national elections or become members of political parties (Inglehart et al. 2014). Moreover, younger citizens are numerically over-represented among protesters (Loader, Vromen, and Xenos 2014; Melo and Stockemer 2014; SOU 2015; Wennerhag 2012). For instance, 10% of Swedish citizens aged 16–29 had participated in a demonstration in 2013, as compared to 5% for the population at large (SOU 2015).

Some researchers suggest that cultural shifts towards post-materialist values explain part of the aforementioned changes, whereby political activities in modern Western societies need to offer an expression of social identity in order to attract participants (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Bennett 2012, 2013; Copeland 2014; Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Norris 2002; Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005). Moreover, some research suggests that social pressure could be a strong explanatory factor when it comes to participation in protest activities. More specifically, the pressure to conform to social groups and their norms due to belongingness needs seem to predict individuals' likelihood of taking part in protest activities (Bäck, Bäck, and García-Albacete 2013; Bäck, Bäck, and Knapton 2015; Bäck, Bäck and Sivéén 2018). Relatedly, research has shown that social ties are important in the formation of younger people's political interest (Dostie-Goulet 2009; Higdon 2019), as well as being crucial to younger people's mobilization to protest activities (Loader, Vromen, and Xenos 2014).

Youth identity exploration is associated with a heightened susceptibility to peer-pressure, and experimentation with worldviews (Arnett 2000; Baumeister and Muraven 1996; Brown 1990; Kroger 2004), which could make social incentives to participate in protest activities particularly strong among younger people. Thus, the aim of the current study is to explore if social incentives can explain why younger citizens are over-represented in protests. More specifically, we examine whether the previously found effect of age on participation in protest activities is conditioned upon younger peoples' desire for social belongingness.

## Theoretical framework

### *The social nature of protest participation*

Protest activities constitute a political category of their own, distinct from more conventional forms of engagement, such as party activity or voting (Bäck, Teorell, and Westholm 2011). They consist of a wide range of activities from signing online petitions and peaceful demonstrations, to violent riots, and seem to become more common as compared to the more conventional forms of political activities (Dalton 2017; Loader, Vromen, and Xenos 2014; Norris 2002; Putnam 2000). Different types of political engagement may be differentially motivated, and there is reason to suspect that protest activities in particular may be socially motivated. In contrast to voting, which is not publically displayed, many protest

activities are performed such that they are in full view of others. Participating in demonstrations, or wearing a badge with a political message, allow observers to draw inferences of the participant. Hence, such acts are in themselves social.

Previous research shows strong ties between social identification with a group or cause and the propensity to engage in collective actions, including protest activities (Van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears 2008). Moreover, some studies have found that participation in protest activities can fulfil the need for social group belongingness (Bäck, Bäck, and García-Albacete 2013; Bäck, Bäck, and Sivén 2018; Bäck, Bäck, and Gustafsson 2015; Starr 2009). Such social incentives to participate in protests can be completely detached from the political outcome of the action, and solely have a social function. The extensive effect that the Internet and social network sites have had on the spread and mobilization to protest activities is well-documented (e.g. Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Higdon 2019) and recent research indicate that social incentives affect online political activity (Bäck, Bäck, Fredén and Gustafsson 2019), and that *need to belong* is particularly important in protest participation via social media (Bäck, Renström, and Sivén 2020).

Humans are a social species, and people generally strive to belong to social groups, which provide them with a sense of belongingness and self-esteem (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Tajfel and Turner 1979, 1986). Although the need for belongingness is a global and strong human innate need, there are individual differences in levels of need to belong (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Individuals high in need to belong tend to be preoccupied with being liked. They are attentive to what is best for those who would recognize and praise their efforts (Robinson, Joel, and Plaks 2015), indicating their heightened social skills can be used with self-serving motives. They also tend to compare themselves with others, and to be highly aware of – and conform to – others' opinions (Koudenburg, Postmes, and Gordijn 2013; Rose and Kim 2011). The need to belong, hence, makes a good candidate for studying the effects of social incentives on participation in protest activities.

### **Youth participation and identity development**

Identity development is a lifelong process, but tends to peak between the life stages of adolescence and adulthood (Arnett 2000; Baumeister and Muraven 1996; Kroger 2004). During this age-period, peers become increasingly important as reference groups, or even identity prototypes (Baumeister and Muraven 1996; Brown 1990). Adolescents and young adults also become more sensitive to normative influence and tend to conform to groups they are motivated to be a part of, and adopt their values as their own (Brown 1990). Popularly denoted *identity-crisis* (Erikson 1968), the increased uncertainty makes many in this age-period explore and 'try on' different identities and world views (Arnett 2000; Baumeister and Muraven 1996). For example, younger people's political voting patterns have been shown to be more sensitive to temporary ideological trends, than older people's (Oscarsson and Persson 2010), suggesting that they are more susceptible to be swayed in their political sympathies.

Research on age differences in political participation is quite unanimous in that younger people show a greater tendency to participate in protest activities. Whereas conventional participation, such as party activity and voting, tends to peak in the middle age (Fieldhouse, Mark, and Russell 2007; Leighley 1995; Melo and Stockemer 2014), the likelihood to participate in protest activities is magnified among younger people, only to steadily

decline with rising age (Watts 1999; Melo and Stockemer 2014). This has been explained by lifecycle effects of younger people having fewer commitments related to adult roles, thus making them less motivated by collective incentives (García-Albacete 2011; Lindberg and Persson 2013; Oscarsson and Persson 2010), or having limited access to positions of authority (Jarvikoski 1993; Marsh 1974), as well as sociocultural changes in values that are oriented toward self-expression and individualism (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Bennett 2012, 2013; Copeland 2014; Inglehart and Baker 2000; Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Norris 2002; Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005).

The young citizen's political interest and mobilization is more dependent on social ties than it is for older people (Dostie-Goulet 2009; Loader, Vromen, and Xenos 2014), and they are more likely to actively encourage friends to participate in protest activities (SOU 2015). It is thus likely to assume that there are generational differences (e.g. Mannheim 1952; Sloam and Henn 2019) in motives to participate in protest activities, and that the social incentives are of particular importance for younger people's participation.

### *Hypotheses about age, belongingness needs and protest activities*

The aim of the current study is to examine whether younger people's higher propensity to participate in protest activities can be explained by belongingness needs. It is quite uncontested that young people are more engaged in unconventional forms of political participation, i.e. protest activities, compared to middle-aged and older people (Melo and Stockemer 2014). Different explanations have been put forth, such as life-cycle effects, or value-changes in post-materialist societies, where younger individuals are more concerned with values related to self-expression (Inglehart and Baker 2000). Combined, these theories indicate that younger citizens in individualistic cultures could be more willing to participate in political activities that offer an expression of their social identity (e.g. Inglehart and Baker 2000). Participating in certain activities allows an individual to present themselves in specific ways, and to take control of how others perceive them (Fiske 2004; Schlenker 1980). People may do this to ensure acceptance and minimize the risk of social exclusion. Again, it is a fundamental human need to feel belongingness (Baumeister and Leary 1995), and many of the social ties that fulfil the need for belongingness are formed during adolescence and young adulthood. This could mean that younger people's generally stronger concern for developing an identity and fitting in, makes them – as compared to older people – more sensitive to social cues while choosing which activities to participate in, including political ones. Moreover, if social factors are more important for younger people's participation in protest activities, and need to belong has been shown to affect participation in protest activities, it could be worth investigating if part of younger people's over-representation in protest activities is conditioned upon belongingness needs. Thus, the aim of the current study is to examine whether the effect of age on protest participation that is found in previous research (Marsh, O'Toole, and Jones 2007; Melo and Stockemer 2014) is moderated by need to belong. Hence, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H1 The younger the individual, the higher their likelihood to take part in protest activities.

H2 The effect of age on participation will be moderated by individual need to belong such that young people will be increasingly likely to participate in protest activities as the level of need to belong increase.

## Methods and data

The present research was conducted in Sweden. The Swedish multiparty system, resulting from a proportional electoral system, consists of eight parties in the Parliament. During the time in which data was collected (2016), Sweden was led by a minority coalition government, consisting of the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party. According to the World Values Survey ([worldvaluessurvey.org](http://worldvaluessurvey.org)) the proportion of Swedish citizens who had engaged in protests at some point increased from 15% to 31% between 1982 and 2006. This constitutes a mid-level position among other Western European countries, where France, Italy and Spain are higher, but the UK is lower, and is equivalent to Germany. Moreover, the Swedish population is relatively highly educated (SCB 2016; Human Development Report 2016), and has a high political interest (Oscarsson and Holmberg 2016). Previous research also shows that younger Swedish citizens are more likely to participate in protest activities than in other forms of participation, and that they are more active in such forms than older people (see e.g. SOU 2015). This suggests that we should be able to find a considerable share of younger individuals who have been active in protest activities, even when analyzing a representative sample; this is highly valuable when analyzing protest activities, since we may otherwise end up with a highly skewed dependent variable.

The hypotheses were investigated with a cross-sectional design, using a survey. The data was collected in March-May 2016, by a company that specializes in carrying out surveys (*Enkätfabriken*). The sample was recruited based on a mix between a self-selected and probability recruitment procedure (the probability-based share was 18%, and 22% among those who completed the survey). The self-recruited participants were mainly recruited via online news media sites. About half of the participants had attended some higher education, which means that citizens with higher education are slightly over-represented in the general Swedish population, 42% of citizens aged 25–64 have attended some higher education (SCB 2016).

The sample was representative of the 2016 Swedish population in terms of age, gender and region according to official statistics. The mean age in the Swedish population was 41.2 (SCB 2019a), and in the sample 41. The female to male-ratio in the Swedish population was 49.9% women and 50.1% men (SCB 2019a), and in the sample 50.3% women, 49.6% men, and 0.1% missing. Regarding region, the sample represented Sweden's eight National Areas (*riksområden*) to the following extent: Stockholm 21%, Östra Mellansverige 16.9%, Småland och öarna 9%, Sydsverige 15%, Västsverige 19%, Norra Mellansverige 9%, Mellersta Norrland 4%, Övre Norrland 5.9%. Official numbers on how many of Sweden's citizens lived in the National Areas in 2016 show the following: Stockholm 22.7%, Östra Mellansverige 16.7%, Småland och öarna 8.5%, Sydsverige 14.9%, Västsverige 19.9%, Norra Mellansverige 8.5%, Mellersta Norrland 3.7%, Övre Norrland 5.2% (SCB 2019b). Hence, the sample was also representative in terms of regional variation.

The survey consisted of questions regarding political activism, use of social media, personality, and demographics. Its front page had a short presentation of the survey and its purpose, as well as an informed consent, and a clear statement of participants' anonymity and their right to end their participation at any time. Participants were also informed that data would be analysed on a group-level, and for research purposes only.

## Participants

Participants consisted of people who were signed up to Enkätfabrikens web panel. Thus, sampling does not qualify as random. Out of the original  $N = 3820$  who received the survey, 53.2% ( $N = 2034$ ) completed the survey. A non-response analysis was conducted to check for differences between the total number of participants and those who were included in the study – no major differences were identified. Mean age in the full sample was 41 years ( $SD = 19$ ), and in the included sample 43 ( $SD = 19$ ). Age ranged from 16–80 years in both the full sample and the included sample. Differences in female to male-ratio was marginal; 50.3% women, 49.6% men, and .1% missing in the full sample, and 50.3% men, 49.6% women, and .1% missing in the included sample. Regarding region, the included sample was representative and had a distribution similar to the one described above (Stockholm 19.5%, Östra Mellansverige 17.1%, Småland och öarna 8.3%, Sydsverige 15.7%, Västsverige 20.4%, Norra Mellansverige 9.1%, Mellersta Norrland 3.6%, and Övre Norrland 6.1%).

## Instruments and variables

*Protest activities.* The items used to measure our dependent variable were selected based on Bäck, Teorell, and Westholm's (2011) study of different forms of political participation, focusing on items that can be labelled 'manifestations', or 'protest activity'. Activities included were 'Signed a petition', 'Collected petition signatures', 'Wore a badge or other symbol', 'Boycotted, or bought, a certain product', and 'Participated in a legal demonstration or strike'. Participants were asked to rate their participation from 1–4 (1 = 'Yes, within 12 months ago'; 2 = Yes, but longer than 12 months ago; 3 = No, I haven't, but I would consider doing it; 4 = No, I haven't, and I would not consider doing it). Scores were reverse-coded, so that higher scores indicated greater likelihood of participation. Finally, each participant's score was calculated by creating a mean value across the included activities. Cronbach's alpha was good ( $\alpha = .74$ ).<sup>1</sup>

*Need to belong.* Need to belong was measured using the 10-item version of the Need to Belong Scale (NTBS), originally created in 1995 (Baumeister and Leary), and construct validated by Leary et al. (2013) in its 10-item version. Participants are asked to rate statements of how they view themselves in relation to others, for example, 'I want other people to accept me', and 'I easily get hurt when I feel that others don't accept me'. Statements are rated on a scale from 1–5 (1 = *Not true at all*, 5 = *Completely true*). Each person's score consisted of a mean of all 10 rated statements, after three of them had been reverse-coded, to make higher scores indicate a higher degree of need to belong. Cronbach's alpha was high ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

**Table 1.** Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations for all variables.

	M (SD)	1	2	3	4
1. Age	43.49 (19.00)				
2. Need to belong	2.32 (0.56)	-.23***			
3. Gender	–	.05*	-.21***		
4. Education	5.15 (1.73)	.12***	-.05*	-.02	
5. Protest activities	2.13 (0.72)	-.12***	.05**	-.12***	.10***

Note. \* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ , gender is dummy coded where 0 = women.

We included two control variables in our regression analysis. We included one variable measuring the gender of the respondent coded as 0 for women and 1 for men. We also included education level measured on an 8-point scale from 1 = Not completed basic schooling, 2 = Basic schooling, 3 = Studied at high school level, 4 = Degree from high school, 5 = Post high school education (not college/university), 6 = Studied at college/university, 7 = Degree from college/university, 8 = Studies/degree doctoral level.

## Empirical results

### Descriptive results

Means and standard deviations for independent, and dependent variables, as well as correlations between them, are shown in Table 1. Both independent variables age and need to belong correlated significantly with the dependent variable protest activities. The median of the NTBS scale was 2.3 in our sample and in Leary et al.'s (2013) study of 15 samples in total (a combination of different university samples and M-turk, total N = 2461) the median was 3.3. Our sample hence reported slightly lower levels of need to belong as compared to previous research.

Table 2 shows how the participants' responses were distributed across the four response options and the separate participation items, as well as the means and standard deviations for each form.

Of all participants, 914 (45.5%) had not participated in any of the five types of protest activity, while 1094 (54.5%) had participated in at least one form within the last 12 months. Further, 580 (28.9%) had participated in one form, 311 (15.5%) had participated in two forms, 142 (7.1%) had participated in three forms, 44 (2.2%) had participated in four forms and 17 (0.8%) had participated in all five forms within the last 12 months.

A *t*-test revealed that there was a significant difference,  $t(2003) = 2.35$ ,  $p = .019$ , between those who had participated and those who had not, on age, such that those who had participated were significantly younger ( $M = 42.65$ ,  $SD = 19.84$ ) than those who had not ( $M = 44.65$ ,  $SD = 19.09$ ).

There was no significant difference in need to belong between those who had participated in the last 12 months and those who had not,  $t(1855) = 0.16$ ,  $p = .87$ .

### Main analyses

To test our hypotheses, we performed a hierarchical multiple regression analysis. In this analysis it is possible to successively build on previous models, allowing for a close

**Table 2.** Means, standard deviations and distribution of responses to the separate protest items.

	Petition <i>M</i> = 2.78, <i>SD</i> = 1.08	Collect petitions <i>M</i> = 1.55, <i>SD</i> = 0.77	Wear badge <i>M</i> = 1.99, <i>SD</i> = 1.09	Boycott <i>M</i> = 2.58, <i>SD</i> = 1.21	Demonstration <i>M</i> = 1.75, <i>SD</i> = 0.92
Within 12 months	710 (34.9)	65 (3.2)	283 (14.1)	703 (35.0)	128 (6.4)
Yes, longer ago than 12 months	427 (21.0)	158 (7.8)	323 (16.1)	285 (14.2)	269 (13.4)
No, but could imagine	582 (28.6)	584 (28.7)	493 (24.5)	498 (24.8)	581 (28.9)
No, and cannot imagine	290 (14.3)	1202 (59.1)	910 (45.3)	522 (26.0)	1030 (51.6)



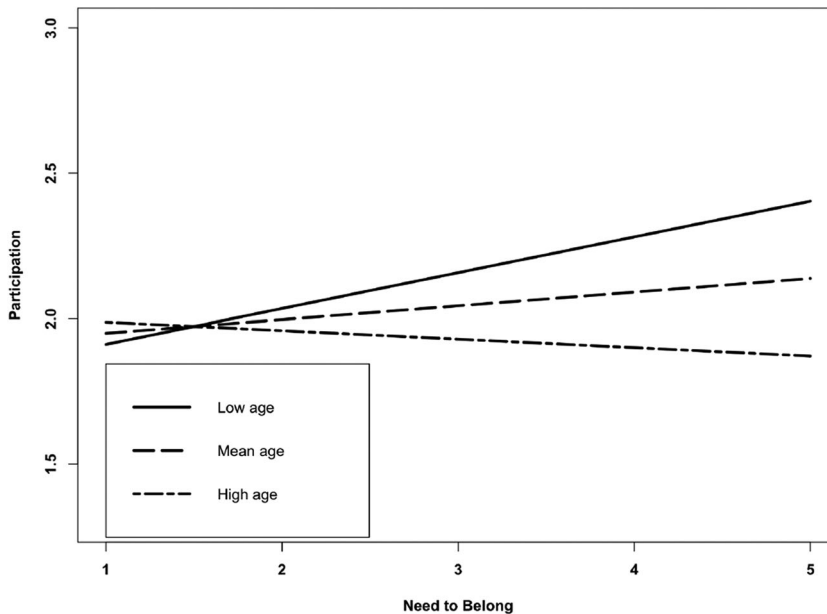
**Table 3.** Hierarchical multiple regression predicting participation in protest activities from age, and need to belong (NTB).

Predictor	Step 1 $\beta$	Step 2 $\beta$
Gender	-.109***	-.110***
Education	.112***	.114***
Age	-.128***	.281**
NTB	.006	.232***
Age $\times$ NTB		-.429***
Adjusted $R^2$	.038***	.046***
$R^2$ change		.009***

Note. \* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ , gender is dummy coded with women as reference category (=0) and men = 1.

inspection of how added predictors in separate steps change the fit and coefficients. The regression analysis tested the hypotheses that age will predict participation in protest activities (H1) and that this will be moderated by individual-level need to belong (H2).

In step 1, age, and need to belong were added. In step 2, the interaction-term between age and need to belong was added.<sup>2</sup> We also included two control variables; gender and education level. The effects of education and gender were significant. First, we find that men were less likely than women to engage. Given that our protest forms were mainly nonconfrontational, this result is in line with previous research (Dodson 2015). Also, in egalitarian contexts, women tend to be more engaged in protest compared to men (Dodson 2015), and Sweden consistently score among the top countries on the Global Gender Gap Index. People with higher education level were more likely to participate, which is in line with a resource perspective on political engagement (see for example Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995). Overall, these results are consistent



**Figure 1.** Regression slopes plotted at the mean of age, 1 standard deviation above and below the mean of age, showing the effect of need to belong on participation intentions.

with depictions of the typical protester in post-materialist societies being a so-called young cosmopolitan; an urban, educated, and female younger citizen (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Sloam and Henn 2019).

The results from the hierarchical multiple regression in Table 3 indicated an overall support for the hypotheses. In line with H1, age negatively predicted participation indicating that the younger the age, the higher the tendency to participate in protest activities. This result is clearly in line with previous research which has shown that younger people tend to participate in protest activities to a larger extent than older people. Hence, a general tendency in the sample was that younger participants were more likely to participate in protest activities compared to older ones. There was no effect of need to belong in the first step of the regression analysis, indicating that need to belong does not have an effect of its own on participation in protest activities, at least not when controlling for age, gender and education.

In Step 2 of the analysis, there was a significant two-way interaction between age and need to belong providing support for H2 stating that the relation between age and participation would be moderated by need to belong. The results are plotted in Figure 1, where age is plotted at the mean age and one standard deviation above ('high age') and below ('low age') the mean age. First, and most importantly, there was a positive effect of need to belong for those in the low age group. That means that for younger people (in their early 20's), those higher in need to belong were more likely to participate in protest activities as compared to those with lower belongingness needs. For the mean age, that is about 43 years old, there was no effect of need to belong, while the effect of need to belong for those with high age was negative. High age is here calculated as one standard deviation above the mean age, so those in their early 60's.

The results show that there is no general effect of need to belong on participation in protest activities, but rather that the effect is dependent upon age. Simple slope analyses revealed that the slope was significant at 1 SD below the mean age ('low age'),  $B = 1.12$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $t = 2.70$ ,  $p = .007$ , but not for 1 SD above ('high age'),  $B = -0.03$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t = -0.52$ ,  $p = .60$ , nor for mean age,  $B = 0.05$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $t = 0.97$ ,  $p = .33$ . The lower region of significance was at age = 33.44 and the upper at age = 117.27. Hence, even though the slope for the high age group was negative, indicating that as people become older, those with a high need to belong become increasingly less politically engaged in protests, it was not significant. In other words, the results suggest that need to belong interacts with age only for young people, up to about 33 years of age, in the decision to participate in protest activities.

Hence, our hypotheses that younger people would be more likely to participate in protest activities, and that only younger people's participation would be positively affected by need to belong were supported. Altogether, these results indicate that social motives of belongingness is an important factor when it comes to predicting younger people's participation in protest activities. Hence, the results show that some young people are motivated to take part in protest activities in order to fulfil their belongingness needs.

Even though our results are in line with our expectations, caution should be taken given that the relations are quite weak. The correlations in Table 1 as well as explained variance in the regression analysis indicate that age and need to belong constitute significant but weak predictors of political participation. Even though they are weak, indicating that other

factors are also relevant, the results show the importance of including belongingness needs when studying young people's motivation to engage in protest activities.

## Discussion

Recent years' decline in political party engagement is particularly strong among younger people (e.g. Sloam 2013). However, what at first glance may seem like political apathy, could simply be a matter of younger citizens preferring different forms of activism (Bäck, Bäck, and Gustafsson 2015; Gauthier 2003). For instance, younger citizens are more engaged, compared to older, in protest activities (Loader, Vromen, and Xenos 2014; SOU 2015; Wennerhag 2012). Previous research shows that participation in protest activities may be motivated by social incentives, such as feelings of belonging to a social group (Bäck and Altermark 2016; Bäck, Bäck, and García-Albacete 2013; Bäck, Bäck, and Gustafsson 2015; Higdon 2019). As young people are in the process of developing a social identity, and have a heightened sensitivity to peer-pressure (Arnett 2000; Baumeister and Muraven 1996; Brown 1990; Kroger 2004), they may be extra sensitive to such incentives.

The aim of the current study was to examine whether the effect of age on participation in protest activities is moderated by need to belong. Using a representative sample of the Swedish population, the results indicate younger citizens' particular sensitivity to social incentives regarding participation in protest activities. In line with the hypotheses and the previous literature, age significantly and negatively predicts participation (H1); the younger the respondent, the higher the tendency to participate in protest activities. Furthermore, the effect of age is moderated by need to belong, in that only younger people's participation is significantly and positively affected by social incentives of belongingness (H2), while middle-aged and older people's participation is not conditioned upon belongingness needs.

The results support the suggestion that participation in protest activities offers manifestation of not just ideological sympathies, but social group belongingness. The results may indicate that the performative nature of protest activities is particularly appealing to a certain type of participants: young people who aim to gain approval from desired social groups. The indication that younger people are more vulnerable to this effect than older is possibly due to the aforementioned exploration of identity and worldviews, and heightened susceptibility to peer-pressure (Arnett 2000; Baumeister and Muraven 1996; Brown 1990).

The study took place in Sweden, which fits the mould of where protest activities typically have become more common; Western, post-industrial societies with individualistic, consumer culture (e.g. Sloam and Henn 2019). The literature suggests that the culture in these societies encourage self-serving actions – including political actions – in order to improve the appearance of ones' social identity (Bauman 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Bennett 2012; Giddens 1991; Micheletti 2003). The latter is according to other researchers a particularly important incentive to participate in protest activities (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Copeland 2014; Habermas 1984; Inglehart 1990, 1997; Norris 2000; Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005). The combination of a temporarily fragile self due to identity development, and the cultural pressure to market oneself, may make it particularly challenging to resist behavior that will accrue social benefits. If

that is true, younger people who are high in need to belong may be particularly vulnerable to the pressure to attend political events that will enhance social identity.

Regarding the research suggesting that younger people's numeric over-representation in protest activities is due to lifecycle effects (e.g. Marsh 1974) or generational differences (e.g. Sloam and Henn 2019), the current findings should not be seen as contradicting of these, but rather complementary. According to these theories, younger people of today show greater tendency to participate in protest activities due to having been adolescents during the last couple of decades, as well as having yet to take on the roles of adulthood. In other words, having been politically socialized in the West with its supposedly post-material values and the social movements these have inspired, should have had an impact on their political behavior. We suggest that it may be a combination of precisely those factors and the need to belong that explain part of the numeric over-representation of young people participating in protest activities. It is plausible that a young adult in the West has been exposed to, and internalized, some of the post-materialist values often motivating participation in recent years social movements, and the protest activities they often include, as a means of self-actualization (e.g. Bauman 2001). Concomitantly, individuals living in these settings, and who are also high in need to belong, could face a heightened susceptibility to participate due to social incentives. Thus, perhaps it is precisely the makeup of the sociocultural circumstances of the West today that encourages participation as a means of accruing social belongingness. We welcome a future expansion in a non-western setting to see whether the current results would replicate.

The finding that incentives of social group belongingness explain part of younger people's numeric over-representation in protest activities adds novel and valuable information to the literature on collective action in general, and protest activities in particular. It furthermore shows the importance of attending to age while studying predictors of participation, and offers a possible explanation of the reported effect that social ties have on younger people's mobilization. It indicates that peer-pressure and identity exploration affect the political socialization of the younger generation, which could have implications for the regeneration of a representative political engagement, and, in the long run, for democracy.

In the present study we chose to investigate the construct need to belong as an indicator of sensitivity to social incentives of participation. The need to belong is a psychological construct that is well-established and has good psychometric properties (Leary et al. 2013). Importantly, previous research has also indicated that the pressure to conform to social groups and their norms due to belongingness needs seem to predict individuals' likelihood of taking part in protest activities (Bäck, Bäck, and Knapton 2015; Bäck, Bäck, and Sivén 2018). Nonetheless, other indicators are possible, such as need for affiliation (Holden, Fekken, and Jackson 1985), affiliation motivation (Hill 1987), or rejection sensitivity (Downey and Feldman 1996). Future research may want to investigate these indicators as well.

It is important to consider that the participants were drawn from a web panel, which in general tend to be somewhat skewed. In our sample, we showed that it was representative on important sociodemographic variables such as age and gender. Our sample was slightly higher educated than the Swedish population according to official statistics (SCB 2016). However, while education is an important explanatory factor in political participation, the fact that our results held while controlling for education lends credence

to our analyses. Moreover, our sample was generally lower in need to belong compared to previous research (Leary et al. 2013). One possibility is that our sample represented the population better than previous research which has mainly been based on university students. However, the difference could also be cultural and it is an empirical question to assess this difference. Finally, even though Sweden should be fairly representative as a case of at least the Western European countries, we still prescribe caution when generalising the results to other countries.

The explained variance in the regression models is quite modest, which indicates that other measurements than those included are important for predicting participation in protest activities. The effect of our included control variables – gender, and education level – were significant, which is consistent with research suggesting that the typical protester often consists of an educated, and female, younger person (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Sloam and Henn 2019). While these factors were outside of the scope of our endeavour, the results suggest that they should be attended to in more comprehensive mappings of predictors of participation in protest activities. Moreover, the quite modest explained variance is in line with research suggesting that collective incentives are still important for participation in protest activities (Bäck, Teorell, and Westholm 2011; Finkel, Muller, and Opp 1989). Part of what makes protest activities socially appealing is the freedom to custom-make the content, which makes them easier to ‘sell’ to particular crowds, but also allows for creating engagement for narrower causes that can speak more directly to people’s specific political sympathies. Indeed, trends of individualized forms of engagement can go hand in hand with collective ideological motives (Sörbom and Wennerhag 2011). Some even suggest that citizen-initiated movements stand out as particularly powerful weapons against some of our biggest global political challenges (Klein 2015). The results should thus not be interpreted as all protest-participants engaging with self-serving motives. The younger population in Sweden and in other Western nations is politically interested and well-informed (Amnå and Ekman 2014; Norris 2002; Oscarsson and Persson 2010), thus all too pessimistic interpretations of the current results should not be necessary.

## Concluding remarks

The aim of the current study was to investigate if part of younger people’s over-representation in protest activities could be explained by social incentives. In line with our hypotheses, we found that younger (but not older) people’s participation in protest activities was predicted by need to belong. It is suggested here that social incentives to participate may consist of peer-pressure, and motives of self-actualization common in individualistic cultures. We welcome future expansions of our findings, including studies using other psychological constructs aimed to measure social incentives, preferably conducted in non-western societies. We believe that this is an important contribution to the literature on predictors of protest participation in general, and youth mobilization in particular.

## Notes

1. We also tested different ways to model our dependent participation variable. First, we created dummy variables of each form of participation where 1 = if they had participated in the last 12 months, otherwise 0. We then created an index of all forms coded as 1 = if they had

participated in any of the five forms in the last 12 months, otherwise 0. We also created an additive index of the dummy coded participation items where a higher score indicates that an individual has participated in more than one form during the last 12 months.

2. We also ran the same analysis using (1) an additive index and (2) a binary index of protest participation as dependent variable. These analyses generally show the same pattern as the one reported here, and are shown in Appendix 1.

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## Appendix – Additional analyses

**Table A1.** Frequencies and percent in parentheses of participants' responses on the five participation items.

	Petition	Collected petitions	Wear badge	Boycott	Demonstration	Total
Within 12 months	710 (34.9)	65 (3.2)	283 (14.1)	703 (35.0)	128 (6.4)	914 (45.5)
All other options	1299 (65.1)	1944 (96.8)	1726 (85.9)	1305 (65.0)	1880 (86.6)	1094 (54.5)

**Table A2.** Regression with an additive index as dependent variable where higher values indicate participation in more activities (0–5).

Predictor	Step 1 $\beta$	Step 2 $\beta$
Gender	-.13***	-.13***
Education	.08***	.08***
Age	-.08***	.33***
NTB	.01	.21***
Age $\times$ NTB		-.43***

Note. \* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ , gender is dummy coded with women as reference category (=0) and men = 1.

**Table A3.** Logistic regression using dummy variable index coded as 1 if the participant had participated in at least one of the five protest activities within the last 12 months, all other responses coded as 0.

Predictor	Model 1 Estimate	Model 2 Estimate
Gender	.48***	.48***
Education	.09***	.10***
Age	-.01**	.01
NTB	-.16	.27
Age $\times$ NTB		-.01*

Note. \* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ , gender is dummy coded with women as reference category (=0) and men = 1.

**Table A4.** OLS regression with mean index as outcome variable and social media use as control variable.

Predictor	Step 1 $\beta$	Step 2 $\beta$
Social media use	.14***	.13***
Gender	-.10***	-.10***
Education	.12***	.12***
Age	-.06*	.30***
NTB	.01	.20***
Age $\times$ NTB		-.38***

Note. \* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ , gender is dummy coded with women as reference category (=0) and men = 1. Social media use is a mean index composed of the two questions *How often do you use Facebook or similar to keep in contact with and informed about your friends?*, and *How often do you use social media such as Kik, Snapchat or similar to talk to your friends?*, where responses range from 1 = *Never* to 5 = *Daily*.

**Table A5.** Logistic regression modelling whether the participant voted in the last election (coded as 1) or not (coded as 0).

Predictor	Model 1 Estimate	Model 2 Estimate
Gender	-.08	-.09
Education	.37***	.27***
Age	.05***	.03
NTB	.12	-.14
Age $\times$ NTB		.01

Note. \* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ , gender is dummy coded with women as reference category (=0) and men = 1.

**Table A6.** Logistic regression modelling whether the participant is a member of a political party (coded as 1) or not (coded as 0).

Predictor	Model 1 Estimate	Model 2 Estimate
Gender	.26	.27
Education	.06	.06
Age	.00	.01
NTB	.40*	.58
Age X NTB		-.00

Note. \* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ , gender is dummy coded with women as reference category (=0) and men = 1.

**Table A7.** OLS regressions for each participation item separately.

Predictor	Petition $\beta$	Collect petitions $\beta$	Wear Badge $\beta$	Boycott $\beta$	Demonstration $\beta$
Gender	-.12***	-.07**	-.09***	-.09***	-.01
Education	.02	.03	.06*	.18***	.08***
Age	-.06**	-.12***	-.09***	-.09***	-.11***
NTB	.01	.01	.03	-.05*	.03
Age $\times$ NTB	-.41***	-.45***	-.18	-.25*	-.26*

Note. \* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ , gender is dummy coded with women as reference category (=0) and men = 1.