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The cultural making of the citizen: a comparative analysis of school students' civic and political participation in France and Wales

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Abstract

This paper examines the complex relationship between the state, civil society and education through comparative research with young people in France and the UK. Survey data derived from two cohorts of school students in South Wales and Lyon reveal strong differences in their levels of civic and political participation. While our Welsh students have higher levels of 'civic participation', as measured in terms of charitable work and volunteering, our French students have far higher levels of what might be considered 'political engagement', defined in terms of campaigning and demonstrating. We argue that these differences can be accounted for by the different cultural repertoires and priorities of citizenship education which themselves reflect the contrasting historical configurations of education, the state and civil society in these two countries.

Key words

Civil society; civic engagement; political participation; France; Wales; citizenship

Introduction

This paper explores the complex relationship between the state, civil society and education through comparative research in France and the UK, and Wales specifically. In so doing it seeks to contribute to enduring and ongoing sociological inquiry into the historical and structural factors that might shape different kinds of citizenry (Brooks & Holford 2009; Bevort & Veugelers 2016). It investigates what Tröhler et al (2011: 3) refer to as the 'specific historically grown cultural visions of the (ideal) state and the (ideal) citizen' that are embedded within education systems. These visions are more pervasive and enduring than formal explicit courses of citizenship education, and underpin the deeper 'cultural making of the citizen' (Tröhler et al 2011: 5).

Exploration of the cultural making of citizens is not only an enduring sociological interest, it is also a matter of contemporary political concern. In both France and the UK, and Western Europe more generally, there are concerns about the lack of civic and political engagement among young people. There are fears that this lack of engagement signals an increasing withdrawal of young people from formal democratic processes that will lead to a decline in societal wellbeing and civic life (e.g. Putnam 2001; Furlong & Cartmel 2011; Henn and Foard 2014).

In France, Cicchelli (2009: 104) talks of 'haunting claims about the alarming civic apathy' of younger generations who are 'prone to egoism', 'indifferent to the plight of others' and who 'display no interest in things public'. This alleged civic apathy may also reflect a lack of trust in formal democratic processes. A report of a recent survey (CNESCO 2018) reveals that 37% of young French people (15-29 year olds) feel they are unable to participate in politics and the only a minority (31%) have confidence in the formal democratic system. The report concludes that 'the link between high school students, institutions and

civic life seems to be crumbling'. In a recent study, the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE 2017) noted that fewer than one in five voters under 29 years of age had voted in all rounds of elections in 2017. This is the lowest rate in 15 years in France. In the UK, one survey (Randall 2014) reported that 42% of young people (aged 16-24 years) say they have 'no interest at all in politics' – compared to 21% of older people. Younger people are also less likely to vote than older people with less than one half (44%) of 18-24 year-olds turning out in the UK general election in 2010. Indeed, the UK has the widest gap in voter participation between young and old – with the younger generation displaying significant apathy towards politics (Fox 2016).

In order to explore young people's citizenship practices and perspectives, we have undertaken comparative research with school students in France and the UK. France and the UK, in this case, Wales,¹ provide two important contexts in which to explore these issues as the relationship between the state, the education system and civil society is very different and reflects contrasting modes of development (Green 1990).

The paper begins by outlining why France and the UK provide such useful points of comparison, before going on to outline the research methods and how we are conceptualising modes of citizenship in terms of civic and political participation. After the presentation of the data on the nature of citizenship practices among our two cohorts of school students, we return to consider the deeper social configurations that might account for the marked differences that we found. We then go on to discuss the implications of our findings for predicting the future modes of citizenship practised by young people in Wales and France.

Why compare France and the UK?

As Green's (1990) comparative study has shown, France and Britain have very different histories. In France, the education system was put in place much earlier. Since the beginning of the 20th century, France's education system has been highly centralised, with a national curriculum and assessment regime – a powerful state apparatus geared to achieving the collective goals of the nation state (see, for instance, Prost 1968; Corbett 1996; Schnapper 2001).

By contrast, throughout most of the 19th century it is difficult to speak of an education system in the UK at all – either in terms of centrally organised provision or a national remit, even within the four jurisdictions of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. For most of the century, the countries of the UK rejected a statist approach to education and settled for the more piecemeal development. Education was largely provided by an extensive number of charitable and private schools (West 1970). The legacy of this remains – over one in five state-funded schools in England and Wales are still controlled by either the Roman Catholic Church or the Anglican Church (or the Anglican-affiliated Church in Wales). While schools in France may have had their origins in the Church, the laicisation of

¹ Wales is part of the United Kingdom, along with England, Northern Ireland and Scotland. Although democratic devolution in 1999 has now given Wales greater control of its education, before that time it was subject to English legislation and policy. The systems have been so inter-twined that it was possible, until very recently, to talk about 'England and Wales' as having one system. For the purposes of this paper, when we are talking about the history of the relationship between the state, education and civil society, we can consider England and Wales, as being subject to the same historical trends. It is only towards the end of the paper, when we discuss developments in the promotion of citizenship that have taken place since democratic devolution, that it is important to distinguish Wales from England.

the education system in the 18th Century effectively removed any church influence (Durkheim 1977). Moreover, in the UK, and unlike in France, there was no state intervention in what schools taught until well into the 20th century when the 1988 Education Reform Act introduced a national curriculum to both England and Wales for the first time.

It is not surprising, then, that these very different histories, which reflect wider political and philosophical foundations of the two countries, have brought about contrasting roles for schools in the development of citizens. Mitchell (2003: 395) points out how in the UK, and unlike in France, the educational system has traditionally had a limited role to play in the explicit shaping of ‘citizens’ compared to other countries:

... public education was *not* called upon to assist in state formation either through the constitution of properly disciplined national subjects oriented towards a newly unified national identity. [our emphasis]

It is against this contrasting political and historical background that we sought to examine young people’s modes of citizenship.

The research

The data we draw on in this paper are derived from two questionnaire surveys undertaken in 2017 – one in France and one in Wales. The Welsh survey was undertaken as part of larger project on the intergenerational transmission of civic participation in Wales². That larger project has collected data from nearly one thousand young people in South Wales, together with a sample of their parents and grandparents. For this paper, we draw on data from a subsample of the larger set. This subsample comprises a total of 227 students from two schools which have been selected to achieve the best match our French sample. Data from the French sample were collected from 211 students from one lycée in Lyon, in the Rhone-Alpes region of France.³ Although we have tried to match the samples, there are some differences between the two cohorts. Some of these arise inevitably from the different ways in which education is organised in the country and the challenges of gaining access to different phases of education. Thus, our French sample come from one large lycée and have a modal age of 15. Our Welsh sample are drawn from two secondary schools and have a modal age of 14. There is also a difference in the gender balance which should be borne in mind. The French sample higher proportion were female – 62% as opposed to 50% in Wales.

Because of national differences in demographic measurements and regulations, there are also likely to be variations between the samples that we cannot know about. For example, in the UK, we largely use free school meal (FSM) eligibility as a standard indicator of socio-economic disadvantage – for which there is no direct equivalent in France. However, we do know that our French lycée is situated in a relatively advantaged quarter of Lyon. The proportion of FSM eligibility of the sample of pupils in our

² The project ‘The Intergenerational Transmission of Civic Virtues’ was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council within the WISERD Civil Society Research Programme..

³ This component was enabled by the award of a Visiting Researcher Placement funded Ecole Normale Supérieure de Lyon.

two Welsh schools is 11.6% which is significantly below the national average for Wales of 17%. However, beyond these crude indicators we cannot be sure about the degree of socio-economic match. Other differences that may have a bearing on the findings relate to religion. All state-funded schools in France are secular, whereas around one fifth of schools in the UK are faith-based. As one of our Welsh schools is a faith-based school, the profile of religious affiliation is somewhat different. As French law prohibits the collection of any data relating to race and ethnicity, we are not able to compare the profiles of our two samples. However, if we look at our young respondents' countries of birth, it is possible to infer that the two samples are not too dissimilar. These differences are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: **Differences in religious affiliation and country of birth**

		<i>Wales</i>	<i>France</i>
<i>Religious affiliation (n=421)</i>	Christian	54.1%	28.6%
	Jewish	0.0%	5.0%
	Muslim	4.5%	10.0%
	No religion	35.0%	44.0%
	Other/prefer not to say	6.4%	12.4%
<i>Country of birth (n=410)</i>	Born in Wales/metropolitan France	75.3%	84.8%
	Outside of Wales but in the UK/French overseas territories	16.0%	1.0%
	Outside the UK/France	7.8%	11.5%

Because of the issues with size and potential dissimilarities of the two samples, as well as the unavailability of comparable demographic data, our findings can only be very tentative and we are unable to explore the socio-economic dimensions of their responses in any depth. However, the contrasts between the two cohorts are stark. All the associations presented in the paper are strongly significant statistically – the significance threshold is set at $p < 0.05$, but in the majority of cases is actually $p < 0.00$. We do not think that patterns we have found can be explained away by sampling issues alone.

The students were asked about a wide range of issues that might throw light on their orientations towards different aspects of citizenship. It is important to note that we were not aiming to evaluate any particular programme of citizenship education, but rather to explore differences between the two sets of students in the extent of their current civic and political engagement, how this might reflect different historical and social positioning of the state, civil society and education, and the significance of these contrasts for the future. In the following sections we explore these data to a) compare the level and nature of young people's civic and political participation in Wales and France and b) consider the implications of our findings for young people's future civic and political engagement.

Conceptualising civic and political participation

The concepts of both civic and political participation are complex and contested. As Ekman and Amnå (2012: 286) argue, they can be either so broadly defined as to be meaningless or so narrowly interpreted so that they exclude significant dimensions of engagement. They argue that in some accounts, such as Putnam's (2001) *Bowling Alone*, civic participation seems to include any activity that

involves some kind of social interaction or interest in social affairs. Political participation, on the other hand, is often very narrowly defined as voting (Ekman and Amnå 2012: 286). Moreover the relationship between civic and political participation is often unclear. In order to provide greater clarity, Ekman and Amnå (2012) have constructed a typology that distinguishes the two different kinds of participation (Table 2). Civic participation is seen to include various forms of social involvement and civic engagement that tend to be community-focused. Political participation includes activities that are explicitly designed to *influence*. These can include voting and contacting politicians, as well as various other forms of activism.

Table 2: **Different forms of civic and political participation**

Civic participation (latent-political)		Political participation (manifest)	
Social involvement	Civic engagement	Formal participation	Activism
<i>Belonging to an association</i>	<i>Volunteering Donating money to charity Charity fund-raising</i>	<i>Voting Contacting politicians</i>	<i>Boycotting goods/services Supporting campaigns Demonstrating Attending a rally</i>

[Adapted from Ekman and Amnå (2012: 295)]

While Ekman and Amnå distinguish these two types of participation, they postulate that they should not be treated as entirely unrelated. In line with Putnam (2001), they argue that civic participation may be an important ‘latent’ or ‘pre-political’ form of engagement that may be of great significance for future political participation. This is something to which we return at the end of the paper.

In the following section, we consider the levels of, firstly, civic participation, and secondly, political participation as reported by our two cohorts of school students.

Levels of civic and political participation among school students in Wales and France

The research reveals very strong contrasts between our two groups of young people in terms of both the level and nature of civic and political participation. In the following section we examine those dimensions of civic participation outlined in Table 2 – the social involvement of club membership and the civic engagement activities of volunteering, donation and charitable fundraising.

Civic participation

Belonging to an association

Putnam’s (2001) famous thesis, *Bowling Alone*, attributes declining levels of democratic engagement with declining levels of associational activities. Young Americans, he argues, no longer belong to the kind of association – such as the eponymous bowling club – that their parents did. He argues that they therefore lack the social bonds that build trust in civil society and promote a commitment to build a strong democracy. There have since been a number of studies that have sought to examine the scale of club membership among the young and its impact of young people on social learning. For example,

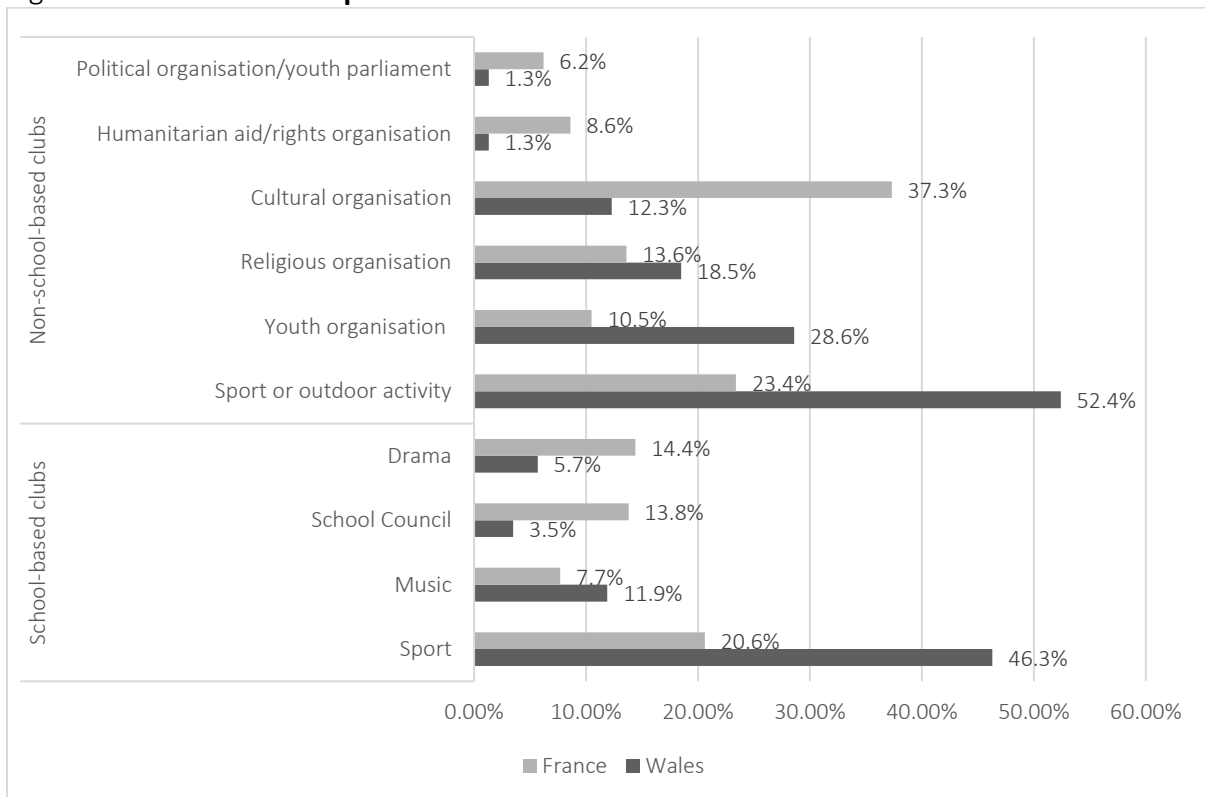
McFarland and Thomas’s (2006) ‘Bowling Young’ uses extensive longitudinal data from the US to demonstrate that early membership of clubs has a ‘nontrivial’ impact on political engagement in later life (although there are caveats here that we shall return to later).

Table 3: Levels of club membership

	<i>Wales</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Total</i>
Not a member of any club	13.2%	26.3%	19.5%
Member of one club	25.1%	29.7%	27.3%
Member of two clubs	32.6%	21.1%	27.1%
Member of three of more clubs	29.1%	23.0%	26.1%

In terms of club membership among our two cohorts there are strong differences in not only the level of club membership – but the type of club they join (Figure 1). These differences are clearly manifest in their membership of non-school clubs and organisations. Our Welsh students are twice as likely to be members of organisations, such as the Scouts or Guides, while our French students are three times more likely to be members of environmental organisations, and five times more likely to be members of political and rights-focused organisations.

Figure 1: Club membership



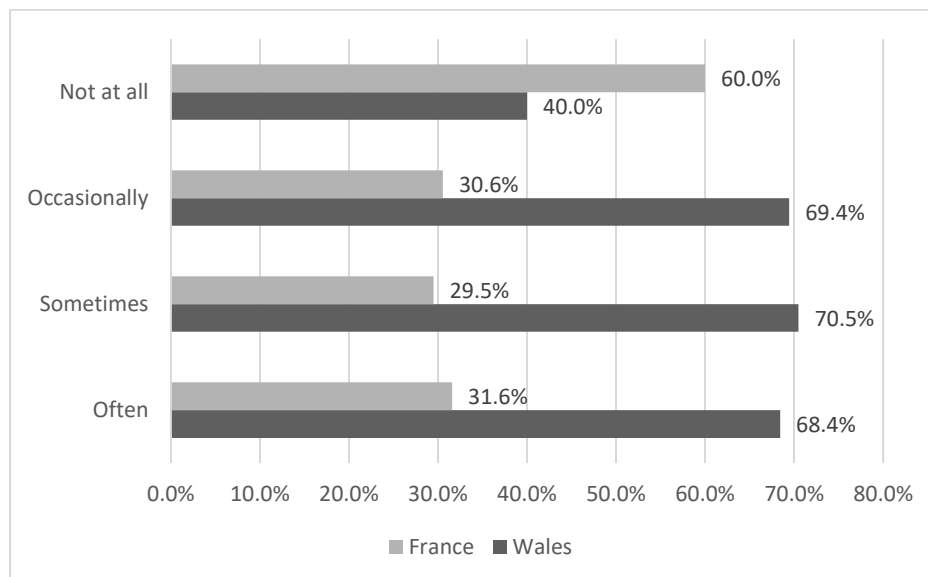
Patterns of engagement with school-based clubs are much the same – again with high levels of engagement with sports clubs amongst the Welsh pupils (46.3% compared to 20.6%) and high levels of engagement in cultural clubs among the French students (14.4% compared to 5.7%). The French students are also more likely to be involved with the student councils (13.8% compared to 3.5%) than the Welsh students – even though student councils are mandatory in Wales.

Volunteering

Rates of volunteering are often seen to be *the* principal indicator of the level of civic engagement – and traditionally one of the dimensions for international comparisons of the strength of civil society (e.g. Anheier & Salamon, 2001).

As shown in Figure 2, over two thirds (68.4%) of our Welsh students claim that they have given time to a charity of cause ‘often’ in the previous twelve months – whereas this is the case for less than one third (31.6%) of our French students, well over one half (60%) of whom claim that have not given *any* time during the previous year.

Figure 2: **Have you given time to a charity or cause in the previous 12 months?**



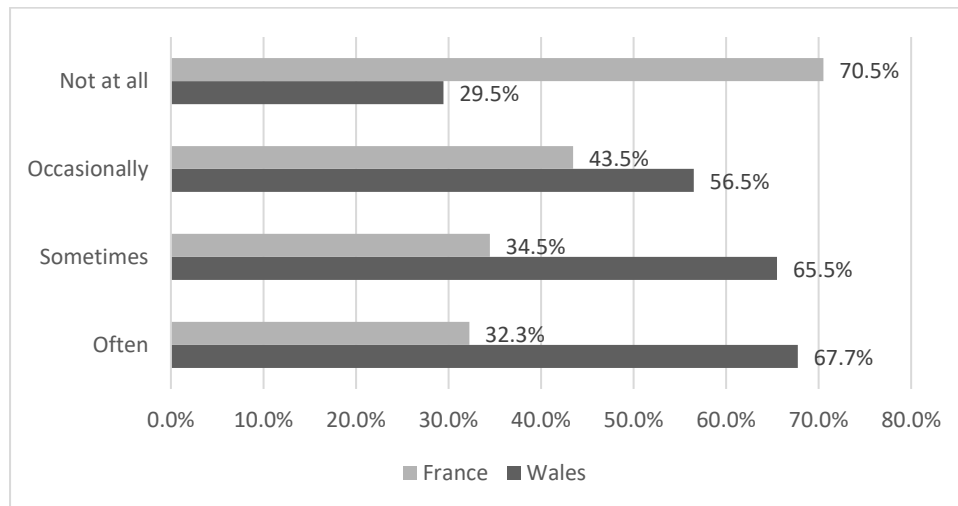
One should not infer from this that our French students are any less socially-minded or altruistic. They were just as likely – if not more so – to have undertaken activities that can be classified as ‘informal’ volunteering. For both our French and Welsh cohort, around one in five volunteered have often ‘supported other people who aren’t friends’ or relatives during the last year. However, our Welsh respondents were significantly more likely to report that they have not done this ‘at all’ – 32.4% compared to 15.2%. This points to a greater *formalisation* of volunteering in the UK than in France.

Giving money to charity and fundraising

Fundraising and giving money to charities, and not just time, is also more prevalent among our young Welsh students (Figure 3). The pattern is almost identical to the responses for volunteering. Over two thirds (67.7%) of our Welsh students claim that they have donated money ‘often’ in the preceding twelve months – whereas this is the case for less than one third (32.3%) of our French students. Even

more strikingly, 70.5% of French respondents claim they have *not* given money to charities during the previous year, compared to only 29.5% of Welsh respondents. Our Welsh students were also more likely to have ‘often’ undertaken charitable fundraising activities in the previous year (58.1% compared to 44.8%).

Figure 3: **Frequency of donating money in the previous 12 months**



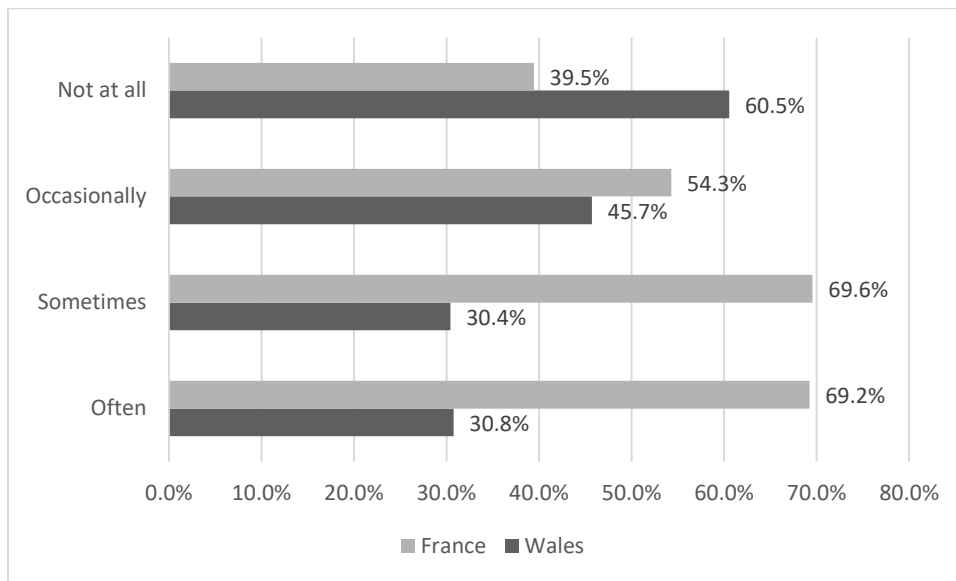
In summary, it would appear that our Welsh students have far higher levels of participation in activities that can be classed as civic participation (Table 2) than our French students. They were much more likely to be members of clubs, to have volunteered and to have donated money than our French students. We turn now to look at levels of participation in those activities that might be classed as ‘political’ participation.

Political participation

As with all the other concepts, what counts as political participation is problematic. Voting in elections is the standard measure of political participation, but clearly that is not a measure that can be applied to the young people in our survey. However, that does not mean that we should discount other forms of participation. Indeed, some argue that alternative modes of engagement, such as consumer boycotts and rallies, will displace traditional modes of representative democratic participation (Loader *et al.* 2014). We therefore asked about a range of other forms of political activism – as well as about their voting intentions if they had been eligible to vote.

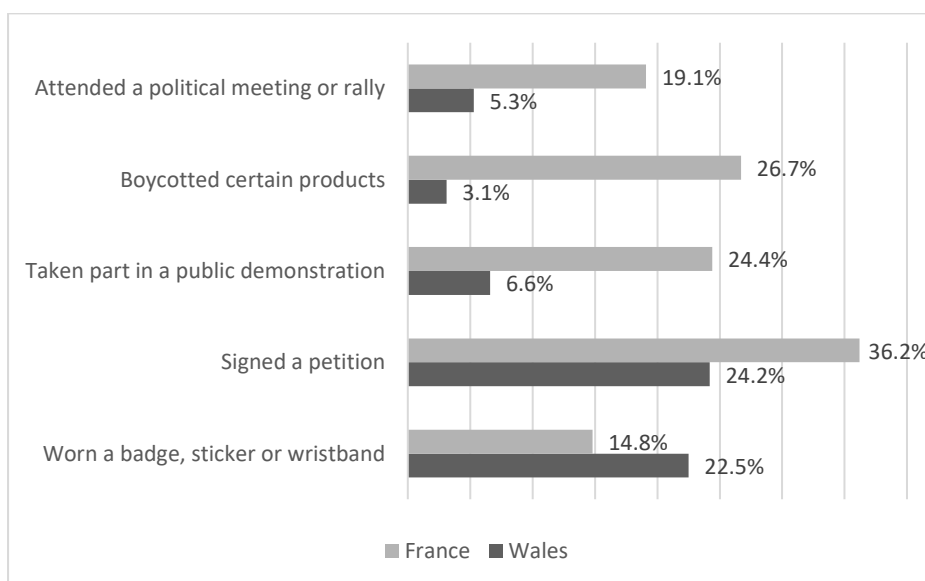
While some sociologists (e.g. Bozec 2018) have expressed concern about the lack of political education in France, our French students report far higher levels of political participation – in terms of campaigning, petitioning and demonstrating – than the Welsh students. They are more than twice as likely to have campaigned both ‘often’ and ‘sometimes’ for ‘something they believed in’ during the preceding year (Figure 4)

Figure 4: **Frequency of campaigning ‘for something you believe in’ the previous 12 months?**



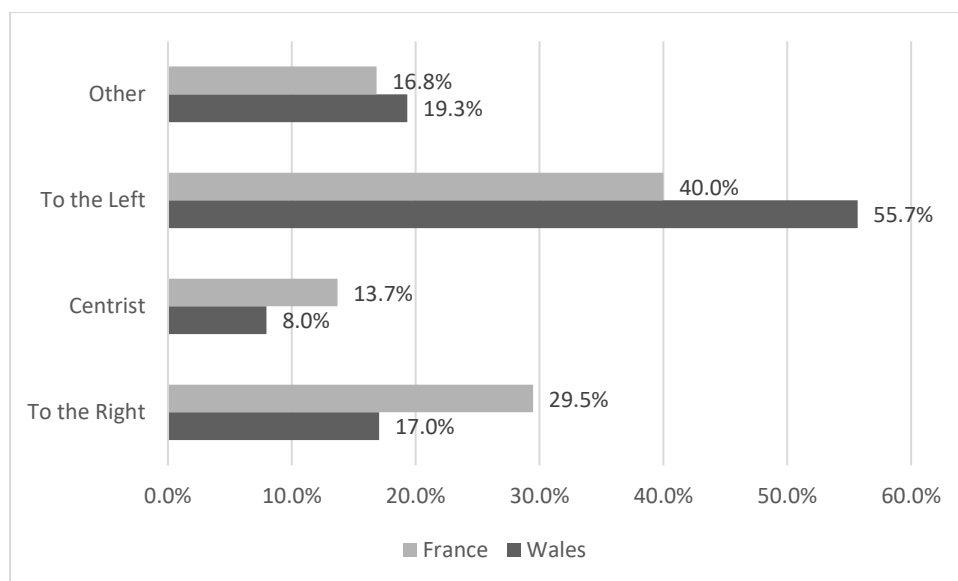
In terms of types of political engagement, the French students are four times more likely to have participated in a political rally, eight times more likely to have boycotted certain products, and four times more likely to have joined a demonstration (Figure 5). The two forms of activism where the differences between the cohorts are less marked are signing a petition and wearing campaigning badges, stickers or wristbands – indeed our Welsh students are more likely to have done this than our French students. The significant minority engaging in this sort of (relatively low-level) activism is likely to reflect the increasing significance in both countries of social media and the growth of what Moore (2008) refers to as the ‘ribbon culture’.

Figure 5: **Types of political participation**



Until the relatively recent rise of right-wing populist movements, political activism has traditionally been associated with the Left. However, while our French respondents are more politically active than our Welsh respondents, their overall political profile is not more Left-wing. It is of course difficult to make clear-cut comparisons across countries because of the different political systems and configurations. It should also be noted that as our cohorts are too young to vote, we are only able to compare voting ‘intentions’. Nevertheless, if one broadly groups political parties along a spectrum - more of our Welsh students locate themselves on the Left (Figure 6). This suggests that levels of political activism are part of a cultural repertoire rather than a direct indication of political engagement. It should also be noted that a significant minority within both countries either did not know who they might vote for (44.8% in Wales, 28.9% in France) or said that they would not vote even if they could (15.4% in Wales, 19.3% in France).

Figure 6: **Political preferences**



Accounting for these national differences in civic and political participation

Even allowing for differences in the demographic characteristics of the two cohorts, the comparisons outlined above reveal stark contrasts. Our young Welsh respondents have far higher levels of civic participation in terms of club-membership, volunteering and charitable donation and fundraising. Our young French respondents have far higher levels of political participation on almost all counts – in terms of campaigning, attending rallies and demonstrations and boycotting certain products. These contrasts can be accounted for by the different emphases of citizenship education in schools, which themselves reflect the different configurations of state, civil society and education.

Both France and the UK have put in place a range of citizenship education programmes for schools in the last few decades. In France, there has been a national strategy for citizenship education since the 1980s, the most recent manifestation of which is the ‘Citizen’s Path’ (*Parcours citoyen*, MENJ 2016), which will ‘enable every child and adolescent to become a free citizen, responsible and committed, living on a shared planet.’ In the UK, the Crick Report (QCA 1998: 7) heralded the introduction of a

programme of study in England and Wales designed to develop 'active citizens, willing, able and equipped to have an influence in public life'.

Despite the parallel appearance of these programmes of citizenship education, any similarities are relatively superficial. Their content and emphases are subtly, but importantly, quite different. Osler and Starkey's (2001) documentary analysis of early French and British citizenship education programmes shows that the interventions are framed by contrasting conceptions of what constitutes the 'good citizen'. They argue that while both programmes aim to reinforce and strengthen democracy, they do so in very different ways. The French programme, they point out, emphasises 'principles of freedom, equality, solidarity and human rights' – the defence of which may require students to engage in political struggle. For example, the French 'Citizen's Path' highlights the importance of rights and the importance of developing a 'critical spirit' and to uphold the principles of the French Republic. Students are encouraged to take part in various fora of decision-making within the school, including 'free expression debates' and 'actions of solidarity' (MENJ 2016).

In the UK, by contrast, the emphasis is very different. Certainly within the Crick Report, citizenship is defined in terms of social and moral responsibility, for example, through 'volunteering rather than through participating in strikes and demonstrations for change' (Osler & Starkey 2001: 303). These aims have been even more strongly evident in recent reforms. In Wales, these are embodied with the Welsh Baccalaureate, which includes a range of courses such as 'Community Challenge' and 'Global Citizenship Challenge'. The Community Challenge Social Welfare component stipulates that students must spend ten hours on promotional activities for a selected charity, combined with either 'active fund-raising' or 'active support' (WJEC 2017a). The Community Challenge Neighbourhood Enhancement component requires students to improve their local area through undertaking ten hours of voluntary work, including clearing litter, cutting grass, painting walls and cleaning footpaths (WJEC 2017b).

These differences in emphases reflect the different historical foundations of the education systems in the two countries. As discussed in the introductory section of this paper, France's highly centralised state education system is specifically geared towards nation-state building and is highly secular (Green 1990). In England and Wales, the voluntary sector provision which dominated throughout the 19th Century continues to have a strong influence as a significant minority of 'state' schools are controlled by religious organisations. And every study on civic engagement (e.g. Wilson & Janoski 1995; Lam 2006; Lim & MacGregor 2012) shows that levels of associational activity, volunteering and charitable giving are strongly correlated with religious affiliation. It is perhaps, therefore, not surprising that these activities are more prevalent among our school students in Wales than in France - where the laicisation of schooling has meant a strict separation between the state, state-maintained schools and the Church. The presence of any kind of religious symbolism or imagery in French schools is highly contentious – whether it is Islamic headscarves or Christmas trees. Relatedly, charities have also a much more visible role in British schools than they do in France, to the point where it has been argued that there is 'mainstreaming' of charities in education (Pupavac 2010; Power & Taylor 2018).

The relative strength of the state in each country has implications for the relative strength of civil society. A number of international comparisons have indicated that there are different cultural repertoires within civil society. For example, two different international statistical analyses (Anheier &

Salamon 2001; Schofer & Fourcade-Gourinchas 2001) examine the comparative rates of volunteering across a range of countries. Both find higher levels in the UK than in France. In both studies, Britain’s relatively high levels of volunteering are seen to be related to a liberal third sector which stimulates voluntary sector activity and participation. In both, France’s more statist approach leads to a voluntary sector that is less pronounced.

Differences in these ‘cultural repertoires’ are also evident in their contrasting responses to questions about the relative efficacy of the state and civil society in meeting people’s social needs. As we can see from Table 4, our young people in Wales have far greater faith than their French counterparts in the ability of the voluntary sector to people’s needs -- with over one half (52.8%, compared to 35.3%) agreeing with the statement that ‘charities are better than governments at meeting people’s needs’. Indeed, only 9.2% of our Welsh students disagreed with this statement. Our French students, on the other hand, were more than twice as likely (21.6%) to disagree with this statement. Our Welsh students had less confidence in the state – with nearly one half of the Welsh respondents (47.7%) agree that ‘if the government did its job properly we wouldn’t need charities.’ In contrast, only a quarter (25.3%) of the French students support this claim, indicating that civil society organisations should not be seen as an alternative for state provision.

Table 4: **Attitudes to government and charities**

		Agree	Disagree
Charities are better than governments at meeting people’s needs	<i>Wales</i>	52.8%	9.2%
	<i>France</i>	35.3%	21.6%
If the government did its job properly, we wouldn’t need charities	<i>Wales</i>	47.7%	20.0%
	<i>France</i>	25.3%	41.6%

For readability, percentages of those who neither agreed nor disagreed are not included

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to contribute to continuing debates about the relationship between education and citizen-formation through comparing levels of civic and political participation in Wales and France – two countries with very different histories and configurations of schooling.

The data from our two cohorts of students indicate strong national differences in young people’s citizenship practices. The more liberal cultural repertoire of the UK is reflected in our Welsh students having far higher levels of ‘civic engagement’ – in terms of donating money, fund-raising and volunteering – than their French counterparts. The more ‘statist’ cultural repertoire of France, on the other hand, is reflected in far higher levels of what might be considered ‘political engagement’ – campaigning, petitioning and demonstrating – among the French students. It should be remembered that, as with much comparative research, our two cohorts of students do not ‘match’ perfectly. Our French students are, on average, a year older than their Welsh counterparts, which is bound to have bearing on the level and nature of civil and political participation. Nevertheless, the differences between two cohorts are stark, and unlikely to be accounted for in terms of the age difference alone.

We would argue that these differences reflect what Tröhler et al (2011: 3) refer to as the ‘specific historically grown cultural visions of the (ideal) state and the (ideal) citizen’ that are embedded within

education systems. In Wales, visions of citizenship entail civic engagement, largely through civil society organisations. The ideal citizen contributes to making society a better place through fund-raising for charities and volunteering. There is a sense in which political participation is seen as less significant because of the inefficacy of government. In France, visions of citizenship entail political participation - campaigning and demonstrating to effect political change. The ideal citizen contributes to making society a better place through challenging government. The education systems of each country both reflect and reinforce these differences through the emphases within their formal programmes of citizenship education and the more tacit values promulgated in school clubs and extra-curricular activities.

Whether these differences will endure is open to question, though. They may certainly become less clearcut over time. As Veugelers (2020) points out, because conceptions of the citizen and citizenship are socially and culturally embedded, they are likely to be shaped by supra-national forces. Globalisation, and in particular the pervasive influence of neoliberal market based-ideology, is likely to both weaken and strengthen the framing and substance of national values.

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