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Electoral Behavior of Students: The Case of Barnaul Universities

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the electoral behavior of students. Due to the high educational level, they represent a certain reserve for the future Russian elite and will determine various transformations in our society. The paper reflects the results of a survey among Barnaul students conducted in 2018 by the Center for Political Analysis and Technologies of the Altai State University. The authors show the attitude of students to the elections. The authors ranked the channels through which students receive information about candidates or parties according to popularity. The paper reveals the motives of students to participate or not participate in elections. The forms of participation in election campaigns are defined. The paper indicated the subjects of the political system influencing the student's electoral behavior. The authors determined the influence of gender characteristics and the availability of work among students on their participation or non-participation in elections.

Key words: Absenteeism · Elections · Motives for participation · Political life · Students · Electoral behavior.

Introduction

The most popular area in political science is electoral research. It leads to the formation of various theories of electoral behavior. Nowadays, we can talk about rationalizing the electoral choice of citizens. This process connects the electoral choice of citizens with certain problems, in particular, economic ones [22]. In this regard, the theory of economic voting by E. Downs acquires relevance. In his opinion, citizens vote for a party that will provide them with more benefits than any other [8]. This point of view actualizes the need to study the electoral behavior of students in Barnaul, who perceive politics rather pragmatically.

The electoral behavior of young people is an object of research in foreign and domestic political science.

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Questions of electoral behavior of citizens have a long history of study in Western Europe. The research methodology and the hypotheses proposed by P. Lazarsfeld do not lose their relevance nowadays [16]. M. Giuliani and S. A. Massari consider the specifics of economic voting and electoral behavior during aggravated economic problems, noting the importance of economic satisfaction of voters [12].

The peculiarities of the electoral behavior of modern youth in different countries are analyzed by E. B. Helldorsson and E. H. Onnudottir [13]; D. Dermody, S. Hanmer-Lloyd, and R. Scullion [6]; A. Acuña-Duarteab [1]; R. Dolandeli and P. Capra [7].

D. F. Melo and D. Stockemer conducted a comparative analysis of the electoral behavior of different age groups in Germany, France, and Great Britain. They established trends in the behavior of young people. Thus, they indicate that young people are much more likely to participate in direct action (demonstrations and petitions). According to the authors, this fact indicates only a change in the participation patterns of young people and not a decrease in civic engagement [23].

K. B. Mann, G. A. Eilbed, and N. A. Birkhead indicated that the participation of students in the electoral process as observers increased the electoral activity of youth [20].

Russian political science also actively studies the features of the electoral behavior of young people. Its specificity and determinants are analyzed by A. V. Bugrova [5]; D. A. Ezhov [10]; E. V. Efanova and A. E. Samolazova [9]; R. V. Pyrma [26]; and D. A. Filimonov [11]. I. V. Malashenko [18], A. V. Mochalin [24], and A. E. Samolazova [29] analyzed the regional features of electoral behavior in young people in the regional context.

Many works are devoted to the core of Russian youth – students. The studies are performed in various Russian regions. Of particular interest are the studies of E. V. Arshinova, M. A. Bilan, M. M. Gorbatova, and Yu. I. Rassokhina [2]; P. A. Vorobyov [35, 36]; L. N. Kurbatova [15]; E. B. Marin [21]; O. N. Mochalov [25]; N. A. Tregubov and I. A. Poselyauscheva [34]; A. Yu. Shadzhe, E. S. Kukva, and A. Yu. Mulyar [30]. There are works devoted to studying the youth of the Altai Krai [3, 31-33]. However, studies of electoral behavior in Barnaul students are of fragmentary nature.

Materials and Methods

This research bases on the survey of students conducted in 2018 in Barnaul. The sample size is 500 people aged 17–24 and older. The sample is an unrelated quota with control of gender, age, and place of residence.

As Russian researchers note, there is no generally accepted definition of electoral behavior in modern political science [35, 36]. Thus, V. L. Rimsky [28] defines electoral behavior as a system of interrelated reactions, actions, or inactions of citizens, which are carried out to adapt to the conditions of political elections. I. V. Malashenko [17] offers a similar interpretation. She views electoral behavior as a type of conventional political participation of citizens, a set of citizens' actions. The author emphasized that it is an important indicator of involvement in political life.

There is also a broader view on the content of electoral behavior. In particular, M. N. Bogdanova saw this concept as a set of value attitudes, political orientations, preferences, interests, motives, the degree and nature of citizen participation, and stratification, belonging to a certain environment and social group, mentality, and political and electoral culture [4].

Results

Elections are an important indicator of the involvement of citizens in the political life of a country. In this regard, of particular interest are the answers of the Barnaul students to the question: "What is your attitude to elections?" Thus, out of 500 respondents, 45.4% of the respondents noted that elections are held with violations, but it is necessary to participate. The honesty of elections raises no question in 23.8% of respondents. They believe that it is a civic duty of every person to participate in elections. However, 25.6% of students believe that it makes no sense to participate in elections because they are conducted with violations. Only 2.8% found it difficult to answer.

A significant part of students treats elections as a necessary political mechanism. However, the survey shows that a little more than half (52.2%) of the students do not participate in elections, while 47.8% do.

The answers to the question "Why are elections needed?" are also of certain interest. Students not participating in elections also answered this question, emphasizing the importance of this process.

The majority of respondents (32.6%) noted that elections represent an opportunity to influence and control the government. According to 27.4% of students, elections give hope for an improvement in life in the country. The fact that elections ensure that decent people stay in power was indicated by 12.2% of surveyed. Of all students, 9.2% indicated that the elections are a tradition or a type of habit. Only 1% of the respondents noted that elections are not needed. A small number of students (0.2%) answered that the elections are a formal celebration of democracy. Finally, 13.8% found it difficult to answer.

A significant part of students sees elections as an important mechanism for expressing and defending their interests.

Next, students were to indicate whether elections and their results affect a student's life. Most students (46.4%) believe that elections have no influence. The indirect influence was indicated by 19.6% of students. According to 19% of students, elections significantly influence their lives. The question was found difficult to answer by 15% of the respondents.

Students are not very interested in election campaigns of parties and candidates. Thus, 35.4% of the respondents practically do not follow it. Another 25% of students try to follow it but do it incuriously. Many students (16.4%) do not follow election campaigns of parties and candidates because they "do not care." No real struggle is seen by 6.6% of the respondents. Election campaigns annoy 4.8% of students. Only 10.8% of the students noted that they follow the struggle and carefully study the propaganda materials.

During the survey, we also tried to identify the primary channels for obtaining information about candidates or parties. The results can be divided into groups and ranked according to the degree of popularity among students. The first group includes television – central television (51%) and local television (30.6%). The second group includes printed publications – party literature and campaign materials (23.4%), local newspapers (16.6%), and central newspapers (12.2%). The third group of channels is represented by means of the Internet – social networks (67.2%) and information portals (48%). One more group were meetings with other people – friends or acquaintances (23.4%). However, family, university, and meetings with candidates are less significant information sources against the general background; their influence was noted by 0.2% of students. The fifth group is the radio (12%). Simultaneously, 3.8% of the respondents did not turn to any source at all. The sum of answers to this question exceeds 100% since the survey provided for several answers.

Thus, in the modern information society, social networks are undoubtedly the prior source of information.

The results of the survey actualize the reasons why students do not take an active part in elections. The students identified the following reasons for their non-participation:

- 30.8% indicated the predictability of the election results (everyone knows in advance which party will win);
- 25.6% estimate elections as dishonest;
- 20% believe that everything was already decided for them;
- 17,8% state the absence of worthy candidates (parties);
- 17.2% consider that their vote does not decide anything;
- 12 % indicated the absence of clear and vivid programs among candidates (parties);
- 11.8% do not believe that the elections affect the life of the country, region, or city;
- 11.6% are not interested in participating;
- 7.6% do not trust politicians;
- 7.20% found it difficult to answer;
- 4% do not yet have voting power (under 18 years of age);
- 2% think that there are too many elections;
- 1.4% said that the elections should be canceled, and the leaders should be assigned;
- 1% is represented by citizens of another state;
- 0.6% are registered in another city;
- 0.2% could not come to the polling station.

It is interesting to look at this data in terms of gender and the place where students grew up and graduated from school. We tend to stick to the hypothesis proved by P. Lazarsfeld, one of the first researchers of electoral behavior. Based on deep sociological analysis, he drew attention to the fact that the social features of an individual influence electoral behavior. Even though P. Lazarsfeld was more focused on voters' choice, the issue of participation or non-participation in elections, in our opinion, also depends on the social status of an individual. The results of our analysis clearly demonstrate this statement. Negative attitude to participation in the elections is more often expressed by students who grew up and graduated from a general educational institution in villages and cities remote from the regional capital. This is most likely due to the low economic and socio-political development of these territories. Women turned out to be more pessimistic about participating in the elections. They do not consider their votes weighty (Table 1). A similar trend can be found in the work of E. V. Kopaeva, K. A. Kotova, and S. Yu. Lisova [14].

Table 1. The distribution of answers to the question “If you do not (do not wish to take) participate in the elections, then why?” by gender and place of study before the university, %.

	Gender		The place where the respondent grew up and graduated from school							
	Male	Female	Barnaul	Another city of the Altai Krai	Village	Another country	Another of Russia	subject	Difficult answer	to
I am not interested in it	11.3	12	9.2	14	13.4	0	14.3		13.3	
I do not believe in the fairness of elections	25.2	25.2	25.2	27	26.2	12.5	0		33.3	
The lack of worthy candidates (parties)	20.3	15.1	20.4	21	14	0	0		20	

I think that everything was already decided for me	14.4	24.8	16.5	23	23.2	12.5	14,3	20
My voice decides nothing	14.4	19.3	14.5	23	16.4	12.5	14.3	26.7
The elections should be canceled, and the leaders should be appointed	2.3	0.7	1.5	3	0.6	0	0	0
Elections do not affect the life of the country, region, or city	11.7	12	13.6	9	11	12.5	14.3	13.3
The results are predictable	25.7	35.4	32	31	29	12.5	57.1	20
I do not trust politicians	7.7	7.7	7.3	9	7.9	0	0	6.7
There are too many elections; they are boring	1.8	2.2	1.4	3	2.4	0	0	0
The lack of clear and vivid programs among candidates (parties)	10.4	13.5	13.6	14	9.15	0	28.6	6.7
Difficult to answer	6.8	7.7	8.3	8	4.9	12.5	14.3	6.7
I am not of voting age	3.1	4.7	3	2	5.5	12.5	14.3	6.7
I do participate	12.6	10.6	14.6	8	11	0	14.3	0
I do not want to go to the polling station	0	0.4	0.5	0	0	0	0	0
I could not come to vote	0	0.4	0	0	0.4	0	0	0

Source: Compiled by the authors.

American scholars, studying the electoral activity, note that a higher level of such activity is characteristic of citizens with high social status. Due to their reduced dependence on the state and more pronounced socio-economic interests, representatives of the middle class also tend to be more active and independent in their judgments. The conducted research showed that the presence/absence of work among students determines their attitude towards electoral participation to some extent (Table 2). This fact may indicate that students without a permanent job are at risk and uncertainty. Thus, the level of stress and the critical perception of the political process increase. Another acceptable option to explain the fact that working students speak negatively about the possibility of participating in elections is related to the fact that they are forced to work due to their insufficient financial support. Consequently, the presence or absence of work among students as a factor influencing their electoral behavior is challenging to interpret and requires additional in-depth research.

Table 2. The distribution of answers to the question “If you do not participate (do not want to participate) in the voting, then why?” by place of work and degree of employment, %.

	Do you have a job?			
	Yes, in a commercial structure	Yes, in a public institution	No	Inconstantly
I am not interested in it	11.4	14.3	11.4	11.9
I do not believe in fair elections	22.8	23.8	26.1	27.1
The lack of worthy candidates (parties)	16.5	19	18.8	13.6
I think that everything was already decided for me	13.9	14.3	22.9	13.6
My voice decides nothing	12.6	9.5	18.5	18.6

The elections should be canceled, and the leaders should be appointed	1.3	4.8	0.9	3.4
Elections do not affect the country, region, or city	6.1	19	13.2	10.17
The results are predictable	31.65	33.3	32	22
I do not trust politicians	7.59	4.76	7.9	6.8
There are too many elections; they are boring	0	0	2.9	0
The lack of clear and vivid programs among candidates (parties)	10.1	9.5	12.6	11.8
Difficult to answer	5	9.5	7.9	5
I am not of voting age	3.8	0	4.9	0
I do participate	15.2	0	11.4	10.2
I do not want to go to the polling station	0	0	0.4	0
I could not come to vote	0	0	0.4	0

Source: Compiled by the authors.

In general, the survey data showing the low activity of student youth correlate with all-Russian tendencies. This fact allows us to speak about the presence of models of negative electoral behavior, identified by A. A. Malkevich, in relation to the students in Barnaul. Based on the answers, we can trace the following models:

- Students not going to the polls because of their disbelief;
- Students not going to the polls because of the disbelief that their vote can change something;
- Students not going to the polls because of their disinterest.

Accordingly, different reasons are distinguished within each model. Thus, the first model is based on the fact that young people have a negative attitude towards the current government and the institution of elections. The second model explains the lack of participation of young people because there are no forces in the political process that can reflect their interests, which ultimately leads to the fact that young people lose faith in their strength. Consequently, they believe that there is no point in going to the polls, and their absence will not affect the results. The third model emphasizes that young people are absorbed in solving personal problems. Therefore, political life is of no interest to them [19].

Based on these models, the answers of students about their motives for participating in the elections look quite logical. The dominant part of students (52.2%) notes that they are ready to go to polling stations in the presence of worthy candidates or parties. The second most popular answer (43%) is that there must be confidence that the elections are fair. The threat of political forces, whose ideology is not accepted by the respondents, coming to power is a motivating factor for 26%. Another 21.4% of students will come to the polls if they find free time. Of particular interest are answers indicating the dependence of the participation in the elections on the improvement of the standard of living and the solution of material problems. Thus, 10.2% of students stressed that their participation in elections is possible if the state of affairs in the country improves. Another 7.6% of students will vote if their material problems are solved. There is also another group of students, whose participation in elections depends on good mood (7%) or invite from friends or acquaintances (5%). Attention is drawn to the responses of an insignificant part of students, in which elections are considered as a measure that can be used if the general state of affairs in the country deteriorates (6.4%) or the financial situation deteriorates to the limits of survival (3.6%). Indifference is another motive due to which 2.6% of students will not come to the polling stations under any circumstances. This indicator is low, which indicates that the majority of students proceed from the rational

aspect. Therefore, there is no need to talk about the ideological motivation and civic duties of student youth.

Research interest is to consider the motivation of students to participate in elections and identify its possible dependence on gender, territorial factors, and the factor of employment (Tables 3, 4). Thus, for the women surveyed, a more significant motive for electoral participation was a guarantee of confidence in the integrity of elections. However, as shown in Table 1, the level of uncertainty in the integrity of elections is the same for both genders. Another interesting difference against the background of gender characteristics was the women's need to join the electoral process with a reference group of friends and acquaintances. Another distinctive motive for women is the threat that unacceptable political forces can come to power. On the other hand, the solution of material problems was more pronounced among men. The number of respondents who do not want to vote under any circumstances and found it difficult to answer is higher among young people.

Table 3. The distribution of answers to the question "Under what conditions are you ready to go to the polling station on the election day?" by gender and place of study before the university, %.

	Gender		The place where the respondent grew up and graduated from school					
	Male	Female	Barnaul	Another city of the Altai Krai	Village	Another country	Another subject of Russia	Difficult to answer
If there are worthy candidates or parties	46.4	57.3	53.4	57	48.2	50	71.43	40
If I am sure that the elections are fair	37.8	46.7	41.8	46	43.9	37.5	42.8	33.3
If there is a real threat of coming to power of political forces whose ideology is not acceptable to me	19.8	31.4	29.1	25	22.5	37.5	14.3	26.7
If my material problems are solved	10	5.8	6.3	8	8.5	12.5	0	13.3
If I have free time to go to the polling station	20.7	21.9	21.8	28	17.1	0	42.8	20
If I am in the mood	7.7	6.6	8.3	5	6.1	0	14.3	13.3
If the general state of affairs in the country deteriorates	5.9	6.9	5.3	7	7.3	12.5	0	6.7
If the general situation in the country improves	11.3	9.5	10.7	15	6.7	0	0	20
If friends or acquaintances invite me	3.1	6.6	5.3	5	5.5	0	0	0
If my financial situation deteriorates to the limit of survival	4	3.3	4.4	4	3	0	0	0
Under no circumstances	4	1.5	2.9	2	3	0	0	0
Difficult to answer.	5.9	2.6	3.4	2	5.5	12.5	0	6.7
I always go to vote	3.2	0.7	2.4	0	1.8	12.5	0	0

Source: Compiled by the authors.

As a factor in the electoral activity of student youth (Table 4), employment predominates among non-permanent workers who found it difficult to answer or refuse to participate in

elections under any circumstances. Unlike working or unemployed students, they can be motivated by two factors: (1) confidence in fair elections and (2) an improvement in the situation in the country. In contrast to non-working students, the fact of free time and mood prevails among working students. With a greater degree of probability, non-permanently working students experience material difficulties. Therefore, they are forced to look for opportunities to earn money. Due to the depression of the region, they do not have a permanent income, which contributes to their apathy regarding elections.

Table 4. The distribution of answers to the question “Under what conditions are you ready to go to the polling station on the voting day?” by place of work and degree of employment, %.

	Do you have a job?			
	Yes, in a commercial structure	Yes, in a public institution	No	Inconstantly
If there are worthy candidates or parties	45.6	38.1	57.5	35.6
If I am sure that the elections are fair	43	42.8	41.9	49.1
If there is a real threat of coming to the power of political forces whose ideology is not acceptable to me	21.5	9.5	28.7	22
If my material problems are solved	6.3	9.5	8.5	3.4
If I have free time to go to the polling station	22.8	33.3	20.8	18.6
If I am in the mood	8.8	9.5	7	3.4
If the general state of affairs in the country deteriorates	5.1	4.7	7	5
If the general situation in the country improves	7.6	0	11.4	10.17
If friends or acquaintances invite me	5	9.5	4.7	5
If my financial situation deteriorates to the limit of survival	2.5	9.5	3.8	1.7
Under no circumstances	2.5	4.7	1.7	6.8
Difficult to answer.	2.5	4.7	3.8	6.8
I always go to vote	2.5	0	2	0

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Our research showed that students are more involved in political life if various topical problems are addressed. According to their importance for youth, the problems are distributed as follows:

- The problem of rising prices (71.2%);
- The problems of material support (64.4%);
- The problems of unemployment (56.8%);
- The problems of education and culture (55%);
- The problems of the state of the economy (49.6%);
- The problems of healthcare (46.8%);
- The problems of the political situation (37.2%);
- The problems of ecology (29.6%);
- The problems of personal and public safety (28.4 %);
- The problems of housing and communal services (25.8%);
- The problems of ethnic relations (25%).

Additionally, students identified the problems of bureaucracy, corruption, housing, and an accessible environment. Nevertheless, all of them turned out to be less significant and

received 0.2% each. Here, the sum of answers exceeds 100% since it was possible to choose several options.

The majority of students participated in the elections as voters (30%). Moreover, 13.8% of the respondents took part as observers, 6% participated as precinct election commissions, 2.6% as agitators, and 0.6% – as headquarters employees. Even fewer respondents worked in a call center (0.2%), as a field worker (0.2%), or an assistant to a political strategist (0.2%). Only 1.2% of the respondents nominated themselves in the elections. As expected, this survey showed that students with a major in “Political Science” have a greater interest in elections; they are more practice-oriented. The most active are students aged 18–23.

Several reasons explain the unwillingness of students to exercise their passive rights – the lack of experience and the lack of necessary resources (financial and administrative). Moreover, the majority of elections and politics are not perceived by students as an opportunity for a “social lift.” This is relevant only for 1.2% of students.

Nowadays, the dominant part of young people is politically passive [3].

Within the framework of the study, we tried to identify those subjects of the political process whose influence affects the electoral behavior of students. The dominant part of Barnaul student youth noted that their own opinion (59.6%) or the opinion of their relatives or friends (25.6%) determine the electoral behavior. The influence of well-known politicians and public figures is significant for 15.2% of respondents. Another 9.6% are influenced by leaders of various political parties and associations. The leaders of youth organizations determine the opinion of 8.6% of students. The influence of media was noted by 8% of the respondents. Other responses turned out to be less significant. Nevertheless, they broaden the range of influencing actors. Thus, 5.8% of students noted the influence of teachers and lecturers, 5.6% – famous people (athletes, businessmen, etc.), and 4.8% – acting deputies.

The distribution of these responses in terms of such features as gender and presence or absence of work is noteworthy. Various agents of political socialization influence electoral behavior. Our research showed that the degree of authority and influence of these agents is mediated by gender and employment (Table 5). Thus, women are more inclined to rely on the opinions of prominent politicians, media, teachers, relatives, and friends. It can be assumed that women, in contrast to men, feel less confident in their abilities in matters of electoral participation.

Students with unstable jobs are less inclined to be guided by their own opinion and are more guided by relatives and friends. Perhaps, this fact is due to the instability of their social status and an attempt to find support among close people.

Table 5. The distribution of answers to the question “Whose opinion is important for you in determining your participation or non-participation in elections?” by gender, place of work, and degree of employment, %.

	Gender		Do you have a job?			
	Male	Female	Yes, in a commercial structure	Yes, in a public institution	No	Inconstantly
Relatives, friends	21.6	29.2	24	33.3	24.9	28.8
Leaders of various political parties and associations	9	10.2	10.1	9.5	9.6	8.5
Famous politicians and public figures	13.51	16.4	17.7	23.8	13.2	20.3
Mass media	6.8	9.12	6.3	9.5	8.2	8.4
Leaders of youth organizations	8.6	8.7	7.6	0	8.8	11.9

Famous people (businessmen, athletes, art and culture workers, etc.)	5.8	5.5	6.3	4.8	5.3	6.8
Current deputies	4.5	5.1	6.3	0	4.7	5
Only own opinion	61.3	58.8	59.5	57.1	64.2	33.9
Teachers, lecturers	4.5	6.9	5	9.5	6.5	1.7

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Discussion

Based on the results of the study, the following conclusions can be drawn. Barnaul students view elections as an important means of defending their interests. However, they say that elections do not impact their lives since they do not see a solution to their problems.

Students from rural areas and cities located far from the regional capital have a more negative attitude toward voting. As for the motives for participating in elections, most students are guided by pragmatic and rational attitudes. In particular, this is manifested in the fact that they talk about their readiness to come to the polling stations if their problems are solved.

As for the subjects influencing the electoral behavior of students, first of all, an orientation towards their own opinions and the opinion of their closest circle is noted. Unlike men, women are more focused on the opinions of politicians, media, teachers, and relatives. For students without a permanent job, the reference point for participation is the opinion of relatives. It is also interesting that it is precisely such students who, for the most part, refuse to participate in the elections.

The survey showed that the influence of information technology on students in Barnaul is very strong. Students are influenced by traditional (television, newspapers, radio) and modern (Internet) sources of information.

Conclusion

In general, absenteeism and political apathy predominate in the electoral behavior of student youth, which is caused by several objective and subjective factors. There is a tendency of gender conditioning when women are less active but more neutral in judgments concerning the electoral process. The remoteness of the small motherland from the regional center and socio-economic problems associated with this tend to determine the disappointment of student youth in electoral activity. In many respects, the electoral activity of Barnaul students depends on the ability of the authorities to consider the interests of youth and solve the urgent problems faced by students in everyday life.

Since Barnaul is an average Russian city with a population of less than one million people, electoral activity trends among students are more likely to be identical in similar cities of the country. Students represent a fairly integrated group of modern Russian youth and can become a sufficient mobilization force for political actors who can offer them the most favorable economic conditions. Consequently, the results of this analysis can be used to predict the results of the next elections. It is also possible to calculate the threats of the manifestation of destructive and unconventional behavior of students when defending their interests in politics, as well as to think over possible ways to prevent negative scenarios.

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