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(translated from French)

# Youth participation as a factor in **democratic values**

• Coyote Theme

**Participation is an inseparable element of the founding project of Western democracies. These democracies are legitimised by the sovereignty of their citizens, to whom they attribute a responsibility with regard to the running of public affairs. They consider them as independent individuals, capable of engaging to ensure the recognition of collective interests and of exercising an influence on those who govern. Participation reflects the vitality of a civil society that is the intermediary between the private and the political and State spheres. In such a context, participation can be seen as both a value and a practice. As both an individual and collective practice, it can be broken down into two main forms, both of which feed the democratic process, namely political participation and participation in organised groups.**

However participation is also a value: One of the essential democratic values of our societies, from the perspective of building a public space to promote the common good. Every society is based on shared values and collective ideals acquired throughout the socialisation process. During Youth, this socialisation phase is continued mainly under the influence of family and school, which prepare them to carry out their adult roles and for the stages that introduce those roles. As the age of possibilities, of engagement and of choices, youth is a period for learning responsibilities, constructing an autonomous identity and also the period when political participation is experienced for the first time.

- Is participation a factor in the transmission of democratic values and if so, what are the institutional conditions required to enhance it in the eyes of young people?

This paper will put forward elements of answers to each of these questions. The trends referred to in this paper reflect the outcomes contained in the third survey on European values. For a more detailed presentation of these outcomes, we recommend consulting the books that summed up the results for young people and more specifically the two relevant chapters (Bréchon, 2005), (Roudet and Tchernia, 2005).

Any discussion of youth participation, therefore, immediately brings up the following questions concerning democratic values and their relationship with new generations; the conditions under which they are transmitted and implemented and their influence on political or associative participation: The questions are...

- Are democratic values solidly established among the new generations and what are their ties with the current modes governing youth participation?

▶ **A more fragile relationship with democratic values, greater distance from the political process and new forms of participation in organised groups**

**Democracy is a value that is generally defended by young people throughout greater Europe**, since the vast majority agreed with the statement that: «while democracy is not perfect, it is still better than any other form of government».



This approval of democracy is linked to a knowledge of politics: young Europeans continue to take an interest in politics, although less so than adults and without giving it a central place in their lives. Another indicator of the democratic vitality of a society is the level of involvement in associations: overall, the level of young people's participation in various forms of organised groups is quite high, although there are significant differences between countries. **However, setting aside these positive elements, this enhancement of democracy is not exempt from weaknesses and contradictions.**

Alongside the clear support for a democratic political regime, other forms of government, such as technocratic or strongman regimes, also meet with the approval of a significant proportion of young people. Almost half of young Europeans think that it would be good for their country to be governed by specialists rather than a government. Even more troubling, a significant majority of young Europeans are prepared to accept a strong man leader, who would not have to take either a Parliament or elections into account, as head of state. Trust in democratic institutions is on the decline: the negative image of Parliament and political representatives bears witness to a generalised crisis in representation. In addition, while they continue to be interested in politics, young people are less so than in the past, which has had an impact on political participation, and this non-voting attitude increases during election periods. The forms of participation that have developed have tended to be of the protest politics variety and mainly involve better-educated school goers or young people from privileged social groups.

While considerable numbers of young Europeans continue to belong to associations, it is rarely to those associations signalling a militant engagement to defend the common interest (unions, ecological movements...). Young people today veer more towards those focussing on personal development and providing an opportunity for a shared sports or leisure activity that will allow them to make new friends. Nowadays, associations tend to distance themselves from any political link likely to divide the group. The desire to remain independent within the association has replaced an ongoing engagement reflecting a global vision of the world: the involvement of young people is more distanced and their engagement tends to be on a one-off basis aimed at immediate efficacy (Roudet, 2004). Their forms of associative participation also appear to be heavily influenced by national cultures. Southern and Eastern European societies participate

less in associative life than do Scandinavian or Dutch societies, where the participative culture and grassroots organisation is well-established and where civic and political engagement remains buoyant, along with a real sense of belonging to a group.

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**While democracy in Europe would appear to be well established and where democratic values are supported by a wide number of institutions, it would seem that the attachment to such a political system is perhaps not strong enough to withstand all attacks.** Young people's attraction to the populist movements found in many countries reflects this apparent fragility. How should we interpret these ambivalent trends? Their wariness with regard to the parliamentary institution and their attraction to technocratic regimes most certainly represent less a distancing from the democratic idea itself than from current forms of political representation. However, this withdrawal from politics is potentially damaging

for democratic life, since a political arena for both deliberation and representation is an essential component of the democratic ideal. The expressed desirability of an authoritarian government could be interpreted as the expression of a need for stronger regulation of public life by the State. This desire for a strong hand concerns primarily public morality in the minds of young Europeans and much less private morality: young people are more permissive and tolerant with regards to private morality and stricter with regard to the respecting of standards in public life.

The influence of educational levels on these trends cannot be ignored. **While the most highly educated young people are critical of the political class, they nevertheless remained positively attached to the operation and principles of representative democracy.** Needless to say, a good educational level does not automatically eliminate the depoliticisation process and non-voting but it does sustain adherence to the universal values of tolerance, openness to the world and other people that compensates for political withdrawal and guarantees an attachment to the democratic system (Grunberg and Muxel, 2002). **On the other hand, ties with democracy have come increasingly under pressure among the least educated young people.** As is the case with xenophobia, the anti-democratic attitude is very sensitive to educational levels: as social integration is now linked to school results, less-educated young people reject a political and social system that seems to have no place for them and can even reject outsiders.

As these young people tend not to participate in conventional and protest politics, they are more likely to accept authoritarian leadership styles. They accumulate a democratic deficit: the absence of education coupled with a low level of social and vocational integration consolidates a refusal of democratic principles as a way of regulating how people live together. **Generational renewal does not, therefore, automatically ensure the continuity of the democratic model.**

▶ **Enhance participation during youth in order to encourage the transmission and exercise of democratic values**

**Given the importance for the future of our societies, what policies will help consolidate democratic values among young people and reinforce their political participation?** It is clear that schools alone, via civic education and other subjects, cannot guarantee such a transmission. Educational institutions pass on knowledge but are less equipped to transmit values, especially as the young people who are the most critical and radical with regard to institutions and democracy are often those who attend school least or have dropped out completely. Democratic values are likely to be best transmitted **via the development of a democratic regulation throughout the whole of the social body and the implementation of participative projects at different levels of society** (Bréchon, 2001). Young people who have had the opportunity to experiment with it in their daily lives will have greater faith in the efficacy of the democratic process.

While politics tends to be linked to the negative image of political parties and power struggles, it can have a more positive connotation for young people in terms of the concrete aspects of their day-to-day lives or to the issues arising from living in society. While they are quick to criticise those in power, young people are usually more comfortable with major social issues. Their social identity is built on the quest for personal development models rather than on political or ideological positions: it is more a question of personal choices made throughout a more varied and fragmented personal path and based on a diversity of experiences. **Young people today, through their values and engagements, bear witness to new forms of involvement in the public arena:** the social and political forms of youth involvement and expression are being reconstructed via

less institutionalised and more individual conditions (Becquet and De Linares, 2005).

**Areas for dialogue and the elaboration of collective choices, set up at different territorial levels in public life, need to be recognised** to ensure the enhancement of participation. Experiencing participation at local, district or community level can also contribute to the construction of democracy (local youth councils, district committees...). In other words, young people's strong identification with the areas they come from should not be ignored. Almost half of young Europeans have stated that they come from the social space closest to them, namely their town or locality. They are attached to a space that structures daily life in terms of social relationships (Belot, 2005). As a result, **the local level will certainly become a more significant area in terms of the organisation and expression of civil society**, essential to ensure the establishment and implementation of areas of participative deliberation (Loncle, 2008).

**The purely democratic dimension of such areas of deliberation and participation will be determined by their openness to diversified populations.** For that to happen, these spaces should be defined in terms of relevant political issues that give meaning to what is said by those involved, rather than by a predetermined categorisation (involve young people, poor people, immigrants...). In France, for example, there is a deficit in participation and representation in so-called "sensitive" areas found in underprivileged suburbs. The pressing issue is less to encourage the young people who live there to participate (since they are often already experiencing social difficulties) than to define the relevant issues and the needs of the inhabitants (in terms of public facilities, for example), and then to collectively come up with an adequate response. **This approach would avoid using areas reserved for young people and where they are in a majority in favour of a more intergenerational approach** that would facilitate contacts between young people and adults.

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*Bréchon, 2001*

**Another aspect of such deliberation areas is the question of participation in the decision-making process.** In France, participation frameworks have been set up in some institutions, such as pupil councils in schools or youth municipal councils in many municipalities. However, these institutional frameworks are rarely in a position to really impact the



decision-making process. More often than not, they are consultative rather than decision-making bodies: real participation in decision-making is thus either completely absent or rather indirect. However, the recognition of the input from actors in the deliberative process and the establishment of a link between them and the elaboration of the public decision-making process would be a way of establishing the democratic dimension of such areas of participation. In return, the stake in decision-making would ensure greater involvement of all the social actors, both at local government (district and municipality) and institutional (school...) levels. **Young people only act when significant causes are at stake.**

In conclusion, we believe that the exercise of participation will consolidate the recognition of the democratic values behind such a practice and which such a practice translates into action. In European societies faced with a more complex relationship between young people and democratic values, with their increasing distance from politics and creation of new forms of engagement in organised groups, the implementation of participative projects, based on active citizenship, could be a way of passing on democratic values and reinforcing the political link. Young people's commitment, given its one-off, concrete and pragmatic nature, would thus find areas and causes to support in either cultural or social fields alongside the traditional political area that such projects can eventually bring about and rejuvenate. ■



## Notes and references :



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