

# FINNISH YOUTH BAROMETER

## ABSTRACT

The Youth Barometer is an annual publication surveying the values and attitudes of Finnish young people 15-29 years of age. The Youth Barometer series has been published since 1994 by the Advisory Council for Youth Affairs. Since 2004 the Barometer has been made in cooperation with the Finnish Youth Research Network. The 2008 Youth Barometer is based on 1,933 telephone interviews carried out in April-May of 2008 by Taloustutkimus Oy, a Finnish market research company. Comparing this year's results with the results of earlier Youth Barometer surveys provides follow-up data on the changes in youth attitudes since 1994, a sufficiently long time span for identifying real trends.

The main theme of this year's Youth Barometer was inspired by the upcoming municipal elections and focuses on the relationship young people have with their municipality and their appraisal of the extent of their influence locally. The municipal theme of the publication comprises only half of the publication, however, as numerous permanent themes appearing regularly in the series are also considered. In this way, timely and otherwise important new subjects are supplemented by the key scope of the Barometer, namely the observation of changes.

Sudden changes in youth values and attitudes are rare. It is natural that changes and trends are of interest, but this should not obscure the fact that, in general, the values of young people are quite stable. An example of this is how young people have ranked different matters in terms of importance in their lives: not once in the last decade has this ranking changed. Spending time with family and close relatives remains the most important issue for young people, followed immediately by time spent with friends and acquaintances. Four out of five of the respondents felt that these two matters were of primary importance, and virtually all of the respondents felt that they were at least somewhat important in their lives.

The greatest changes in youth values are observed in the young people's appraisal of the importance of working for the good and betterment of society. While every tenth respondent felt that this was very important in 2000, now every fifth respondent felt this way. More young people than ever before feel that active work in organisations in society is important.

Work for local organisations is not just considered important in theory; it is matched by a real increase in youth participation influencing the planning and services of their neighbourhood. Young people are now more likely to contact authorities, sign appeals, and participate in political party activities and residential associations. It is probable that some of these changes can be attributed to the increasing prevalence of the Internet as a new arena for facilitating participation.

Beyond participation itself, another series of questions in the survey determined the readiness of young people to engage in various kinds of activity. Respondents were prepared to sign an appeal or petition, go on strike, write letters to the editor, and engage in trade and consumer boycotts. The readiness for all these means of participation is increasing. Out of all the activities polled for, only the readiness for participating in a public demonstration was on the decrease. What is also notable is a shift in attitudes towards political parties. Whereas ten years ago about one third of young people were 'perhaps' or 'certainly' willing to be a member of a political party, this figure has now increased to almost half. The readiness to consider standing for political office has also increased considerably. All these changes

reinforce the trend noted in earlier Youth Barometers: that young people have an increasingly positive attitude towards activism in political parties and other conventional politics.

By contrast, the responses regarding the interest of young people in politics show a different picture. In the 1990s, interest in politics increased from one survey to the next, but in this decade the trend has peaked. At the moment, 43% of young people are at least 'somewhat interested' in politics. Nearly as many (35%) are only a little interested, and the percentage of those who are not interested at all is the highest ever measured (22%). Indeed, the most notable change compared with the previous survey is the increase in the percentage of those not interested in politics at all, while the percentage of those interested in politics has remained just about the same. It is important to monitor how interested (or not) young people are in politics, but we must remember that this says nothing about how young people view politics or about how the existing interest could be channelled into political activism.

As this is a municipal election year, the survey explored young people's interest in municipal politics, which turned out to be clearly lower than interest in politics in general, and slightly lower than the same figure ten years ago. How these apparently conflicting trends manifest themselves in voter turnout in the local elections in the autumn is uncertain for many different reasons. Survey results do not directly translate into voter turnout, and elections involve factors that not even the best calculations can account for. However, the results of the Youth Barometer allow for a cautious prediction of a slight increase in voter turnout among young people.

Concern for young people not voting is one factor fuelling the debate on online voting. Young people themselves estimate that if online voting were introduced, voter turnouts would increase. More than half think that they themselves would vote more frequently, and virtually no one believes that online voting would decrease their voting frequency. Also, more than 90% of respondents believe that online voting would improve the voting frequency of young people other than themselves.

Social participation by young people involves much more than just pre-election concerns about how or whether young people vote. The Youth Barometer also explored young people's experiences of whether they have been able to make a genuine difference in their local community. The results are not encouraging. Responses were given on a scale of 1 to 5, and top scores of 4 or 5 were given by fewer than one in five respondents. About one in three gave a 3 in response to whether they have been able to influence things in their community, but a huge 42% considered that they have no influence at all. Young people are also not very impressed with how seriously decision-makers in their city or municipality take young people. Only one in six respondents believed that decision-makers see young people as seriously worth talking to or as partners in decision-making in some or all matters. One in ten feel that young people are not taken seriously in any matters. These results should be noted well, because growing into an active citizen requires that young people feel that their opinions matter.

In addition to influence, young people were also asked about their views on the content of municipal policy. The percentage of young people who would accept an increase in municipal tax if the money were put into improving local services has increased from one in four in 1996 to 45%. The majority of young people also feel that a municipality should produce its principal welfare services itself. Related to this is the fact that compared with a municipal survey ten years ago attitudes are now much more critical about putting local services to competitive tender. In 1996, two out of three young people considered it favourable for the local authority to compete with private service providers, but this figure has now dropped to 40%.

Increased focus on the role of society is also apparent in how young people view themselves on the political left-right axis. In 1996, 12% of people aged 18 to 29 placed themselves at the left edge of the continuum; this figure is now 23%. The shift of young people's social attitudes towards the left has scarcely manifested itself in the support of parties, however, at least not in the ratings of the traditional left-wing parties. The increase in importance of the Greens does fit this pattern, however, since young people who support the Greens are generally more left-leaning than those who support the SDP. Actually, 15% of those identifying themselves with the SDP actually consider themselves more right-wing than left-wing. Out of all respondents, slightly more place themselves at the right end of the left-right axis than at the left end.

One way of measuring how well the local authority is performing its duties is to ask respondents how good a place the municipality is to be in and live in. The evaluations given by young people to their home communities have clearly improved, as now 60% consider their own municipality better than average. The highest scores went to cities and urban municipalities, above all those in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area and university cities.

Young people were also polled regarding individual local services. Respondents were the most satisfied with libraries, schools and sports services. Users of social welfare offices, employment offices and the Social Insurance Institution were less pleased. Here, too, the most satisfied respondents were found in cities, above all in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area. The greatest differences in satisfaction between rural municipalities and cities were in cultural services and public transport.

Only respondents aged under 20 were asked about youth services, because the average age of youth services users is considerably lower than the average age of Youth Barometer respondents. The most dissatisfaction was expressed with online youth services and young people's potential for influence. Respondents were more satisfied with excursions, camps, youth workers and facilities for young people. The question regarding youth workers was divided into two parts: the number of workers and their activities. It is an important observation that what youth workers do is clearly more important to respondents than how many of them there are.

The importance of youth services was explored both through a direct question and by calculating the correlation between satisfaction with individual services and overall satisfaction. Both question and calculation revealed the same priority: facilities for young people and youth workers are the most important. Young people also consider it more important now for nearly all services to be available in their home municipality than they did six years ago. The likely conclusion is that youth work and local services aimed at young people in general are considered more important now than before. The importance of youth workers, Internet access, leisure-time premises and youth councils in has increased particularly sharply.

Young people feel a strong affinity with their family and friends, followed by affinity with their extended family, school or workplace community and Finnish society. Other communities in the survey trail clearly behind these in terms of level of affinity. Compared with four years ago, the level of affinity with nearly all of the social units polled for has decreased, especially with regard to hobby clubs and other leisure-time associations. Regional affinity has also decreased with regard to local community, city district, village, city, municipality and region.

The greatest issues of uncertainty and insecurity voiced by young people had to do with big issues such as climate change and energy sufficiency. The greatest such issues involving their own situation and that of

their families were their own income and the safety and welfare of their family members. Young people now feel less insecure about most of the things in the survey than four years ago, particularly with regard to world politics and insecurity in their own living environment. The greatest increase in insecurity was observed in the issue of climate change due to human activities.

The confidence of young people in the future was gauged by asking how optimistically or pessimistically they view the future. Respondents were more positive about their personal future (87% optimistic) than about the future of Finland as a place to live (74% optimistic). Their view of the future of the world was considerably bleaker, with only one in four being optimistic. Here, too, the principal question in the light of the results is how to translate concern for the state of the world into action.