

Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of youth



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EU-CoE youth partnership policy sheet

Citizenship and Participation

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Executive Summary: Participation of European young citizens in both political and civic affairs in recent years follows the trend of a decrease in formal (or conventional) forms and an increase in informal (or unconventional) forms of participation. As a matter of fact, young people's access to power structures is often limited and often suffers from a precarious economic situation compared to other age groups. The Council of Europe and the European Commission follow a cross-sectorial approach with regard to empowering young people and have adopted several policy initiatives promoting youth citizenship and participation in the past two decades.

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*The citizen who takes no part in public affairs
(politics) is not harmless but useless.
---Pericles (460-429 BC, Athens)*

1. Introduction

Citizenship in a national context denotes the link between a person and the state. The possession of citizenship is normally associated with the right to work and live in a country and to participate in political life. However, citizenship in the European context (or European citizenship), a concept under development, calls for a broader understanding. In contemporary discourses of citizenship education, citizenship in a democracy not only gives membership status to individuals within a political unit but also constitutes a set of values and practices of social and political engagement over governance issues at personal, local and national levels, which implies gaining and using knowledge and understanding of laws, documents, structures and processes of governance (Enslin, 2000; Knight Abowitz and Harnish 2006; [Dolejšiová 2009](#)).

Participation is an essential element of citizenship in a democratic society and a democratic Europe. Meanwhile, participation is not an aim in itself, but an approach to becoming active citizens. First, as a citizen in any state of the United Nations, participation is a basic human right (UN [Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948](#): Article 20-1, Article 21-1, Article 23-4). Second, as a young citizen residing in any European local community, region or country, “participation and active citizenship is about having the right, the means, the space and the opportunity and where necessary the support to participate in and influence decisions and engage in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society” (CoE [European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life 1992 & 2003](#)). Third, for the European Union, “youth participation in democratic institutions and in a continuous dialogue with policy makers is essential to the sound functioning of our democracies and the sustainability of policies which impact on young people’s lives”. Participation here is understood in a broad way and reaches out to different spheres of life as for example culture: “involvement in cultural activities can also enable young people to express their creative energy and contribute to fostering active citizenship” (EC [Promoting Young People’s Full Participation in Education, Employment and Society 2007](#)).

2. Background information

Research finds that there are two very different youth perceptions of citizenship which influence the forms of their participation (Petrovicová et al. 2012): first, citizenship is something that a citizen needs to work for by trying to influence

policies of the state and by challenging dominant perspectives and norms; and second, citizenship is given to us by the state to provide opportunities and to grant certain rights that may or may not be utilized by citizens.

Participation of European young citizens in both political and civic affairs in recent years follows the trend of a decrease in formal (or conventional) forms and an increase in informal (or unconventional) forms of participation. Conventional forms of political participation involve electoral processes such as voting, election campaigning, representing a political party in national or local community affairs, participating and representing at the working place by means of unions or professional associations. Whereas unconventional forms of political participation include activities such as signing petitions or participating in political demonstrations which are outside the electoral process or formal political institutions.

For young people, unconventional political actions complement conventional participation rather than replace it (Gavray et al. 2012). In political practice, there are real tensions between youth autonomous approaches and formal institutional politics when young people and politicians try to work together ([Flesher Fominaya 2007](#)).

Youth unconventional participation in both political and civic affairs in various new forms such as discussing politics, signing petitions, posting political comments ([LSE 2013](#)) is much enhanced by information and communication technology, including the recent 'protest wave' in Europe or 'European spring' of youth civic and political engagement ([Shihade, Flesher Fominaya & Cox 2012](#)). For example, facilitated by mobile phones and the internet (Facebook), Iceland's 2008 Sauscepán Revolution, the December 2008 Revolt of Greek Youth, the Greek 2011 *Indignado* Movement, and the Spanish 15-M or *Indignado* Movement, all took the form of a large number of young people which were mobilised in a very short time to occupy a central public space.

Youth participation in formal politics is limited to certain extent due to young people's restricted access to the power structures and their vulnerable positions in the social and economic arenas. First, young people are under-represented in formal power structures such as the local community governing councils and the national parliaments ([LNU 2011](#)). Second, less than 4% young people in Europe are members of political parties or a trade union where power of negotiation usually resides ([Eurostat 2009](#)). Third, young people often have temporary jobs, irregular working hours (nightshifts, weekends or holidays), and they are the first to lose their job whenever there is an economic crisis ([EC 2012](#)), which largely limits their participation in local social and political affairs. Also, those young people who hold a position in local community councils have to leave their positions in the council when they have to move for job opportunities elsewhere (in the case of Norway see reference: [LNU 2011](#)).

3. Policies on European level

Youth participation in constructing a European citizenship has been a priority in youth policies for both the Council of Europe ([CoE Recommendation 1019](#) adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly in September 1985) and the European Commission for the past three decades.

First, both European institutions took the point of departure from education to promote youth participation in society by equipping them with relevant knowledge and skills through formal and non-formal education

The Council of Europe has initiated 1) a specific project on Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC) in 1997, 2) the [European Year of Citizenship through Education in 2005](#), 3) CoE Programme of Activities 2006-2009 for EDC/Human Rights Education ([EDC/HRE](#)), and eventually 4) the [Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education](#) (adopted on 11 May 2010).

Meanwhile, the European Commission has been prioritizing the promotion of active European citizenship in its non-formal learning programmes YOUTH (2000-2006), Youth in Action (2007-2013) and [Erasmus+ Youth](#) (2014-2010), following an [EU Youth Strategy \(2010-2018\)](#) of two overall objectives: 1) to provide more and equal opportunities for young people in education and in the labour market; 2) to encourage young people to be active citizens and participate in society.

Second, both European institutions cooperate with their member states in strategically involving youth in the policymaking process and promoting youth participation at local, national and European level.

The Council of Europe recommends member states to facilitate and encourage youth participation in politics and civil societies at local community and national level ([European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life 1992 & 2003](#)) and to make youth participation a priority in public youth policies through its [Recommendation on Citizenship and Participation of Young People in Public Life 2006](#).

The European Union published in 2001 the White Paper [A New Impetus for European Youth](#) encouraging EU member states to promote young people's involvement in the life of local, national and European communities and to foster active citizenship. In 2006, the European Commission adopted a communication on active European citizenship of young people, [COM \(2006\) 147 final](#) to promote a structured dialogue with young people which serves as a forum for continuous joint reflection on the priorities, implementations and follow-up of European cooperation in the youth field. A structured dialogue with young people takes the form of [EU Youth Conferences](#) organised by each EU presidency with specific focusing priorities under certain overarching themes. Member states implement

structured dialogues with young people usually in the form of national consultations. Structured dialogue with young people is included as a funding theme in [Erasmus + 2014-2020](#) (previously in Youth in Action Programme 2007-2013). Moreover, both institutions invest resources to find the best practice of youth participatory democracy at the national level of the member states, which mostly happen in student and youth councils as well as Youth and Children's Parliaments ([Gretschel et al. 2014](#)).

Third, both European institutions have realised the necessity of a cross-sectorial approach in promoting youth citizenship and participation as youth participation in politics and civic affairs is inevitably connected to their participation in education, training, employment, and their wellbeing in social, economic, physical and psychological aspects in life. In this sense, the European Commission adopted first in 2007 a communication [Promoting Young People's Full Participation in Education, Employment and Society 2007](#) and then in 2010 [Europe 2020 - Europe's Growth Strategy](#) aiming for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

Last but not least, the issue of participation and related knowledge production is also taken on board by their joint programme in the field of youth, the [EU-CoE youth partnership](#) (established since 1998).

4. References

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