

Youth Partnership

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



Analytical paper on Youth Participation

Young people political participation in Europe:

What do we mean by participation?

This section will elaborate on what youth participation means, the different forms of it, taken both from research and practical experience. The research perspective provides mainly but not exclusively insights from four latest European sources: Study “Youth in Democratic Life” conducted by the London School of Economics (LSE) in cooperation with the European Commission, the Finish report “Youth Participation Good Practices in Different Forms of Regional and Local Democracy (Gretschel, A. et. al.), “Between endangered integration and political Disillusion” (Willems, Heinen, & Meyers, 2012) and the Flash Eurobarometer 375 (2013) European Youth: Participation in democratic life, as well as from the authors’ personal research and analyses. The practical experiences relate mainly but not exclusively from recently finished European projects dealing with young people and participation (e.g. youthpart, Ourspace, PuzzledbyPolicy). The authors conclude four interconnected ways to better understand current developments, paradoxes and ways to deal with youth political participation in Europe:

1. Expand the concept of participation and democracy beyond conventional forms of participation and representative democracy
2. Improve mutual understanding of institutions and youth on participation. A major challenge lies in the wide gap and the profound misunderstanding between what institutions and what most young people mean by participation.
3. Participation needs to be more connected to empowerment and agency.
4. No “one size fits all”: A better understanding and a more efficient promotion of youth political participation require a specific handling of various categories of young people with specific challenges.

Rational // The paradox of youth participation today

Young people are not – or not only – “future good citizens in training”, a role where they are often pushed back by education and political institutions. They are actors of today’s democracy. It has become particularly clear since the beginning of the second decade of the century. Young people have taken the leading role in movements that protest the mechanisms that led to post-democracy and proclaim the urgent need to deepen and expand democracy. The LSE report provide number of evidences: “young people are not ‘victims’ or ‘problematic’ as often claimed, but diverse and critical stakeholders in democracy” (p. 8).

At the same time, a wide range of recent studies synthetized by H. Willems, A. Heinen, & C. Meyers (2012) points that voting turnout, membership in political parties, interest in politics and trust in

political institutions show a decline especially among young people. The 2010 Eurobarometer shows that 37% of young people didn't vote at the last national elections, far more than any other age category and the OECD finds a general trend to declining voters turnout in the last generation (OECD, 2011). Constant preoccupations at each elections, and seems particularly justified concerning the 2014 European elections, both about the low turnout among young people in many countries and the high vote for far right Eurosceptic parties.

A broad scientific literature¹ has reached a wide consensus to explain this apparent "paradox": Young people are far from apathetic but participate mostly in non-conventional ways. Surveys and analysis underlining a poor participation by young people are often "the product of an overly formalistic definition of political participation, too focused on very limited measures of engagement, exclusively in the arena of formal politics" (LSE report, p. 45).

Even low voter turnout in the 16-26 age group should not be regarded as a sign of political apathy (LSE, p. 11). Indeed, various networks of critical youth citizens have developed campaigns to promote abstention or blank vote at the 2014 European elections in various countries (notably Romania, France, Spain and Greece).

Recommendations:

- ✓ Promote in-depth qualitative research and practice on youth political participation to foster a better understanding of "out of the box" forms of political participation
- ✓ "Developing new measures that take in account the broader types of political activity in which young people engage." (LSE report).
- ✓ Extend the definition of participation

Definition of youth participation and the extended concept of participation

The scope on classical participation thus needs to be extended to include multiple forms of participation. As many authors and three reports state, we need to "define 'the political' more widely".

The *Council of Europe* has embraced this broader scope on participation for many years. The 2003 Council of Europe's "Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life", states that "participation in the democratic life of any community is about more than voting or standing for election, although these are important elements. 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 engaging in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society." (quoted in the "Finnish report")

Furthermore two dimensions of participation can be distinguished:

Direct participation: Political decisions are influenced directly and structural links to political decision-making processes are enabled.

Indirect forms of participation: Reach out to citizens and encourage them to support certain issues and positions, also enabling discussions, opinion-building as well as campaigning.

In a broad and ambitious acceptance, to foster young people political participation is to empower them and provide them the means and ways to become actors of their life and of their world. The scope on political participation thus has notably to be expanded in three directions: 1. Beyond political institutional democracy; 2. Beyond the public spaces/private life divides and 3. Beyond the online/offline divides.

¹ Wring et al, 1999, Hurrelmann & Albert, 2002; Gauthier, 2003; Youniss et al., 2002; Pleyers, 2005; Dalton, 2008; Kiilakoski & Gretschel, 2013.

1. Beyond institutional and representative democracy

Democracy is not limited to the formal institutional system, nor is political participation to voting and supporting parties. A look at the complexity of our democratic systems and at theories of democracy shows that it offers multiple ways for (young) citizens to participate.

The Finnish report provides a structured and insightful synthesis on four complementary models of democracy that each offer ways for (young) citizens to participate and contribute in decision-making processes at different levels, for instance

- Representative democracy is a form of government where elected politicians must renew their positions in elections.” It enables decision-making in a fairly economical way by a small group of well-informed people, as it is the case in national or youth parliaments. Three recommendations are listed to improve young people participation in representative democracy: to lower the voting age (the Austrian experience), create representative institutions for young people (youth councils...) and strengthen the link between chosen representatives and young people (e.g. “School debates should be organised during election time, especially with young politicians to improve awareness and interest”, LSE report).
- Participatory democracy: “offers organised citizens’ groups and non-governmental organisations the opportunity to challenge and deliver information, views and suggestions.”
- Deliberative democracy: it is genuinely collaborative with decision makers – in other words it should influence the policy outcome.
- Counter-democracy, with forms of monitoring, protest and non-conventional practices. Youth practices of counter-democracy may be divided into direct, responsible, expert and protest democracy (see Finnish team report). Even if may not directly interact with institutional politics, “collective action is key to forming strong and lasting political identities among young people” (LSE report, p14).

2. Beyond the public spaces and private life divides

Political participation is often thought about from the analytical angle of a public space disconnected from everyday life, as if only the actions that matter are those that point to political institutions and find a space in the mass media. Politics and daily life are not two separate spheres (Pleyers, 2014). This perspective offers new levers both to a better understanding of participation and to ways to promote it.

1. Involve young people not only in politics but in society. Promote participation as empowerment.
2. Daily life also provide important space to experience participation and learning by doing.
3. Daily-life itself is an arena of political participation and social transformation: Daily life provides spaces to participate in multiple ways, including critical consumption (including local food, de-growth, solidarity economy...), that has been invested by many young people.
4. Online participation through the expression and diffusion of one opinion and multiple forms of e-participation.

3. Beyond the online and offline divides

The increasing use of ICT in people’s everyday lives has created new ways to communicate, new spaces to share cultural experiences, and new methods to make their voices heard. For a majority of young people, consuming digital media and engaging in social networks have become normal parts of their lives. Besides it offers new ways of engage online and to become involved in (political) decision-making. Some projects made valuable experiences during the past three years (e.g. youthpart, Ourspace, PuzzledbyPolicy) and assembled valuable insights into this new field. One of the key insights of all of them is that there is no straight separation into online and personal interaction. Rather both dimensions together apply in a mix. A selection of overall principles to e-participation can be listed.

E-participation processes...

- need to be aligned with young people’s lives. This relates to matters such as content, information and time management, but also to design and technical implementation. The processes should be designed to interest, stimulate and motivate young people to ensure their continuing involvement.
- require sufficient resources such as expertise, time, funding and technology, as well as staff to provide guidance and advisory services.
-needs to be transparent for everyone. This requirement extends to all information related to the process as well as to the software and tools used.
- young people need to be involved in all stages of the process. This includes a feedback option in all phases of the process.

Recommendations:

- ✓ Accept contentious and dissent. Vs consensual democracy
- ✓ Debate on participation shouldn’t hide contentious issue. Promote a more contentious democracy in Europe
- ✓ Ways to express their disagreements and forecast the cases where young citizens have had an impact on European policies, campaigns and initiatives

Forms of youth participation and related problems

(European) Institutions and participation of young people

Youth participation mainly applies in this setting in form of voting and engaging in political parties. Part of this relationship is the **gap between institutional vision on youth participation and experience-oriented practices of participation privileged by young people**. Many young people privilege cultural and personal forms of political commitment and experience-based, expressive and horizontal way of participation. Their focus on experience, loose structure and horizontality is little compatible with an institutional perspective. Many young people are generally distrustful of institutions which embody, in their eyes, a ‘top-down’, state-centred approach to political life which they reject. This gap often results in deep misunderstandings between active young citizens and institutions. On one side, many young activists develop monolithic and often very simplified views of institutions, and in some case even a rejection of all intervention by institutions and all dialogue with political and institutional actors. On the other side, institutions fail to consider these forms of political participation as genuine participation. The authors of the Finnish report consider that the EU fails to recognize demonstrations, online-communities, signing petitions as “genuine participation” (Finnish report, p. 55). Young people are often considered as “good citizens of tomorrow in training” who may later develop “more mature” (ie institutionalized) forms of participation.

Disillusionment with institutional participation settings marks the second gap the three reports refer to. “Young people are not apathetic or unwilling to participate, but rather feel that the political system is neither sufficiently listening nor sufficiently adapting to their hopes and needs.” (LSE report, p. 19). They don’t vote “because they don’t think politicians deal with their problems”.

A third issue lies in the **subsequent limited openness to unconventional forms of participation** by European (and national) institutions. Taking their concept of (conventional) participation for granted, they develop mechanism that allows young people to participate in the way institutions think about participation, and don’t look at other way to participate. The issue of inclusiveness is thus often reduced to a communication problem and a lack of information, which is only a part of the problem. “How can we reach them?”, “How can we use Internet to reach the crowds?” are certainly important questions, but they should be completed by the converse perspective: “How to take into account the claims expressed by young citizens?” or “What can we learn from the existing experience?”.

Finally, an element to explain the decrease in young people conventional forms of participation indicators and notably of the voting turnout in the last 5 years lies in its connection with a decreased

of trust in the European Union and disagreement with austerity policies that particularly affect young people in Southern Europe.

Youth organisation and the participation of young people

Another opportunity for young people to participate and shape politics are youth organisations, parliaments or political parties and therefore constitute another category ("*Institutional youth*", Pleyers, 2010: 75). These more conventional ways of participation are present at all levels, are sometimes youth-led, and offer many possibilities to learn from each other (peer learning), to initiative and run projects as well as to experience democracy in well-defined and safe environments. To promote young people participation would require improving their connections with both decisions-makers and their constituencies. On one side, the Finnish report points that these young people are not always taken as autonomous actors by adults in their own organizations (eg political parties). On the other side, one has to take into account that institutional youth mostly represent a specific part of youth (eg students are over-represented) and should thus not be considered as the representative of all the young people. To expand their representativeness, maintain strong relations with their constituency, and attracting new members remains a permanent challenge (as it is for actors of representative democracy).

Spontaneous and selective forms of participation of young people

In particular internet-based technology offers various ways for young people to get involved into decision-making processes as well as form of protest. Some of these new forms related to social media are listed:

- Hacking and ddos attacks: A form of protest to force down online servers and make online service temporarily unavailable (see case of Mastercard and Wikileaks)
- Clicktivism and slacktivism: Voluntary or invites to click certain links, expression of agreement to statements; causes viral effects online; similar to word-of-mouth advertising
- Online campaigning: Special online platforms invite users to start own causes and gain interest for it through sharing links in their social networks (e.g. avaaz.org).
- Crowdsourcing and crowdfunding: Using the crowd to gain ideas, input and feedback to realise projects and putting ideas into reality.
- Liquid Democracy: Special software and mindset to decision-making and discussion online, i.e. delegated voting
- Barcamp: Participant-centred bottom-up conference where the program is set up by the participant themselves; combining the Open Space Technology with effective use of internet-based tools

Recommendations:

- ✓ Young people participate massively, but not always in the ways expected by institutional and political actors. Need to understand it their ways by institutions.
- ✓ *Qualitative research to understand youth political participation as it is, and not what institutions want it to be*
- ✓ *Analyse participation both in the public space and in daily life & the interaction between these two*
- ✓ *Better understand online participation, its importance and limits, and how it gets articulated with other forms of participation*

Different forms of participation for different types of young people

While some of the challenges towards a better participation is common to youth as a specific age of life, most challenges are specific to different categories of young people. Policies to foster youth participation should thus target specific sectors of young people and help them to overcome specific barriers or take into account their specific modes of participation.

Classic socio- demographic categories (gender, social classes, ethnic dimension...) have a significant impact. A challenge of major importance for democracy is the inclusion of “**excluded youth**”, notably those from poorer socio-economic background, discriminated ethnic groups and suburbs. In Southern Europe, this category has extended with the economic crisis. Targeted information campaigns may allow providing them with some information than “more included” youth (eg students) may get through other paths. However, converging sets of evidence conclude that to deal with “excluded youth” political participation, we have to deal with exclusion, jobs, child and youth poverty and discriminations (references). For example campaigns and initiatives should also be designed to target specific **ages**, as the experience of youth and of political participation differs considerably among youth.

These socio-demographic variable needs to be completed by specific analytical categories. The messages and ways to promote young people political participation need to take different cultures of participation into account. For instance, providing more information about available opportunities to participate in EU decision processes or initiatives is efficient towards some “excluded youth” who may opt for more conventional forms of participation, but not for critical citizens who are well informed but chose not to take part in conventional participation processes for political reasons. An efficient strategy towards these young people would be to develop ways to take their claims and messages into account, even if they express it in non-conventional ways and how their democratic practices could contribute to social innovations among institutions and representative democracy.

Participatory settings are sometimes used by policy makers to provide a sense of participation or channel dissent, but with no real impact on decisions and policies. Opening spaces for citizens’ participation offer young people a chance to really discuss and listen to each other in a safe public space, and to have an actual influence. But the Finnish report (p. 32) warns: “it should not be “placebo democracy”. Without influence the risk is that instead of empowerment, cynicism will be generated (see Segall, 2005).

Recommendations:

- ✓ To deal with young people political participation cannot be disconnected from the broad discussion about what is democracy today (what are the paths for citizens to have an impact on political decisions), nor from the problems of social exclusion and economic inequalities
- ✓ Training for young people to interact with institutions and training for institutional people to interact with young people, as suggested by Sofia Laine doctoral research (2012)

Good practice of youth participation

This section briefly outlines a limited number of good practice example across all forms and levels of youth participation in Europe.

- Co-management Council of Europe and youth
- Open method of coordination
- Projects focused on digital youth participation: youthpart, Ourspace, PuzzledbyPolicy
- National good examples, e.g. mysaymk.com (England/Milton Keynes), youngscot.org (Scotland), salzblog.at (Austria/Salzburg), vgo.ypart.eu (Germany/Offenbach a.d. Queich), aloitekanava.fi (Finland)
- Finnish eParticipation environment and action program on eServices and eDemocracy by the Ministry of Finance

- Youth BarCamp Vienna October 2013 at youthbarcamp.eu

Recommendations:

- ✓ Include all good practice into relevant databases
- ✓ Showcase good practice during relevant (European) events
- ✓ Share and foster peer learning on all levels

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