

Chapter 3

Youth and politics: towards a new model of citizenship in advanced democracies

Anne Muxel

Transformations in the relationships between young people and politics are obvious in all Western democracies. In all established democracies, their engagement in traditional political institutions has declined in recent decades, leading to what some have seen as a crisis in citizenship. What are the most characteristic transformations? And what is so special about young people's politics?

Our democracies have become more reflective and the links that ordinary citizens establish with the political system have become more individualised than in the more recent past. Partisan allegiances have become looser in the same way that social allegiances have. The great political narratives have faded and no longer provide a readable map of systems of belonging to which individuals can attach themselves and become involved. In terms of social politicisation, experimentation has won out over identification and affiliation among the younger generations. More and more, political involvement takes place by means of many different types of expression and action. The civic norm linked to the duty to vote has weakened and abstention continues to become more widespread acquiring a certain level of democratic legitimacy as it does so.

The new tools of communication and information available to all have also changed the framework for political and civic engagement. As an instrument for the acquisition of knowledge and a facilitator of exchanges, the Internet provides a stage for anyone who wishes to denounce or publicise a given subject or cause, thus fostering new ways for ordinary citizens to be involved in the world around them. It encourages collective mobilisation in real time, entertains a culture of derision and a critical stance towards politics and politicians. The ever-present image and instantaneous availability of information has created a need for transparency and authenticity that reinforces the requirements of democracy. These new parameters have changed both the demands young people make on the political classes and also the expectations they have of them, thus giving rise to new types of behaviour among young people.

This new political context has led to what some have seen as a crisis in citizenship. However, these transformations can be interpreted in another way and seen more as a sign of the emergence of a new model of citizenship than as a democratic deficit. This new model is relevant within all the categories of the population as a whole and can be considered as an effect of the period rather than as a generational effect. Nevertheless, it is more acute among younger generations who have come into contact with politics in this transformed context, without having experienced the framework of a more traditional political socialisation. For this reason, young people are facing a new and very specific situation, and adopting new attitudes and behaviours.¹

Before expanding further on the emergence of a new model of citizenship among young generations today, I would like to make a few remarks:

1. Transformations in political attitudes and behaviours do not only concern young people. They can be observed among the entire population, but tend to be less pronounced. Young people function as a kind of magnifying glass reflecting changes in the relationships between ordinary citizens and politicians, and also changes in the practice of politics and political action. New demands on democracy are visible today and are expressed, to a greater or lesser degree, in all categories of the population.

2. Social and political cleavages are clearly present among young people. Some general trends can be observed among the young in general, but these trends do not have the same impact on all categories. There is a clear division between young people with and without qualifications. Those who are educated are deeply attached to representative democracy even though they are highly critical of politics. For less educated young people, although they more readily embrace universal values than older people with the same level of education, their universal beliefs are not sufficiently strong to compensate for their relative rejection of politics. Their trust in representative democracy has been more seriously undermined and they tend to be more detached from all forms of political participation and more attracted by populist leaders and parties. In both cases, there is a danger of an increasing democratic deficit.

3. Despite the existence of these social and political differences among the young and despite the fact that in most European countries they share the same mistrust and express the same doubts about the political system and representative democracy with their elders, the political changes present among younger generations today will have different consequences in the long term and on the future of democracy. Because young people are only discovering politics in a period of mistrust, protest and growing abstention, these new parameters of their relationship to politics will probably continue to influence their future attitudes and behaviours. There has been a profound political change in the intergenerational dynamics and within the socialisation process itself. Future citizens will not be the citizens of yesterday. They will

1. See Muxel A., "Young People and politics", in Pascal Perrineau and Luc Rouban (eds), *Politics in France and Europe* (2009), Palgrave Macmillan, New York; See also Muxel A., *Avoir 20 ans en politique. Les enfants du désenchantement* (2010), Seuil, Paris.

probably continue to be more critical, more likely to abstain, more likely to protest, more sophisticated and to have less confidence in politics. In this sense, an obvious generational gap does indeed exist. Therefore, the transformations observed today will have an impact not only on the way politics is practised and the expression of political choices, but more broadly speaking they will change the future of democracy.

I would now like to introduce what I believe to be the three most relevant characteristics of these changes for the definition of what could be seen as a new citizenship model in our advanced European democracies. I will essentially focus on France to do this. Even if certain differences and national specificities do exist, most of the traits I will discuss can be also observed in other European countries.

FIRST CHARACTERISTIC: GENERAL MISTRUST TOWARDS POLITICS AND ESPECIALLY POLITICIANS

The crisis of confidence in political institutions and representative democracy has been well established in many European countries for more than 30 years. Dissatisfaction with political representatives can be detected in citizens of all ages. Less than 40% of young Europeans aged between 16 and 29 trust (or neither trust nor distrust) politicians and political parties. Older generations tend to trust (or be neutral to) politicians slightly more than young people do. Conversely, young people are more positive towards political parties than their elders. Trust in national parliaments remains higher than in politicians and political parties, but remains nonetheless below 50%.² In France today, fully half the population do not trust either left or right to govern.³ More than eight people in ten think that politicians do not take care of their problems and their difficulties.⁴ There is a very deep gap between the elite and the people. Two thirds of the population consider that politicians are corrupt and do not do their job with integrity and honesty. Young people share the same attitudes and start their life as citizens with this very negative perception of the political sphere.

This new framework clearly reveals the difficulties and dangers at hand. Democracy needs mutual trust between the citizens and their representatives to function. But setting aside the negative consequences of generalised political distrust for the moment (populism, political crisis, civic defection, etc.), it could also be argued that on the one hand it provides an opportunity for the political system to be more demanding of its institutions and of the people who govern. And on the other hand, it provides an opportunity for citizens to strengthen their vigilance and their search for what this democratic system can give to them. Keeping this positive interpretation in mind, and trusting in this optimistic view of the future of democracy, this generalisation of mistrust in the socialisation process could clearly lead to more critical citizens, who both support democratic ideals and are critical of the political system, and who are also more capable, involved and vigilant from a political point of view.

2. Eurostat Report 2011.

3. *Baromètre de Confiance Politique du CEVIPOF*, December 2012.

4. *Idem*.

SECOND CHARACTERISTIC OF THIS NEW MODEL: THE LEGITIMISATION OF ABSTENTION AND THE SPREAD OF INTERMITTENT VOTING

Abstention has constantly increased in most European countries over the last 30 years.⁵ The most recent mid-term French elections involved record levels of non-voting. This growing abstention rate is less explained by social factors than by political factors. Sociological reasons for abstention do still exist. They include lower levels of social integration (among young people, women, the less well-educated, the unemployed, etc.) and social divides which cut across age categories, reflecting divides in electoral turnout. In France, when the last presidential election took place in 2012, 62% of students said that they voted in all elections, while only 49% of the young people in employment said the same, and 42% of the unemployed; 26% of students recognised they were hesitant about who to vote for right up until election day, making their final choice at the last minute, 27% of young people in employment said the same, as did 34% of the unemployed; 75% of voters born before 1945 said their choice was made a long time prior to the election while only 45% of younger voters born after 1980 said the same (-30pts).⁶ Nevertheless, social factors are not sufficient to explain why citizens abstain more, despite the fact that levels of education continue to improve. Fully 35% of students abstained in the first round of the last presidential election in France.⁷ Factors other than sociological and cultural ones must also be considered. Abstention can be used to express political dissatisfaction and protest about the candidates and parties on offer in an election. The spreading of this political use of abstention suggests that it is a behaviour that is being used and legitimised more and more often and above all by young people.

Stepping into this new model of electoral behaviour, young people will adopt the habit of voting or not voting depending on the importance they attach to the result of the election. They tend not to consider mid-term elections such as European elections as crucial. In France, presidential elections are the only ones to be perceived as more decisive. Therefore, intermittent voting became the normal way to practise one's civic duty. This new framework will change ordinary citizenship in the process of political socialisation and will necessarily create a generational gap. It will also have an impact on the electoral system and on competition. This toing and froing between voting and non-voting constitutes real political change and redefines the democratic tools citizens use to express their opinions. Obviously, the consequences of an early socialisation towards abstention among younger generations, and above all its legitimisation, will change the rules of the democratic game. If systematic abstention constitutes a real danger for democracy, in that it threatens the legitimacy of democracy itself, I also strongly suggest that the growth of the political and intermittent expression of abstention could on the contrary be a sign of political vitality.

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5. See Bruno Cautrés and Anne Muxel (eds) (2011), *The New Voter. France and Beyond*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
 6. Post-Electoral Survey CEVIPOF, June 2012. The "-30pts" indicates the difference between the 75% of voters born before 1945 who said their choice was made a long time prior to the election and the 45% of younger voters born after 1980 who said the same (-30 points).
 7. *Idem*.

THIRD CHARACTERISTIC: THE DEVELOPMENT OF PARTICIPATORY PROTEST

The crisis in representative politics has resulted in more calls for direct democracy and greater involvement in protest campaigns by citizens. These trends are particularly clear among the younger generations. Voting, although still regarded as useful and effective by the young, is no longer considered to be the sole means of civic involvement. According to Eurostat, less than 4% of young Europeans declared that they took part in the activities of political parties or trade unions.⁸ Expression of political awareness is emerging and protest is increasingly seen as being legitimate. Non-conventional participation is on the increase in all European countries. This is predominantly a generational phenomenon: members of the older generations are unlikely to be involved in protests, baby boomers more likely and young people today more likely still: increasing involvement in protest is a continuing trend. In France, one in two young people has already taken part in a street demonstration.

Conventional participation (voting) and non-conventional participation (demonstrating) are not rival options but are closely linked and often complement each other. Protest movements cannot be seen as an alternative to electoral turnout. The more citizens value conventional participation, the more they also regard participating in protests as important.

This protest-style politicisation can also be found at the ballot box. Many European countries have seen extremist parties or parties outside the system achieve electoral success. In the same way that abstention is more and more used as an instrument to express political protest, the vote has become a means of protest that expresses a rejection of government parties and the conventional political system. When the last presidential election took place in France, many young people voted for extreme right or extreme left candidates. In this sense, protest can have recourse to conventional means of participation. Within this new model of citizenship, conventional and non-conventional types of involvement are not mutually exclusive but rather have become more and more intertwined. The range of tools used in democratic expression has diversified hugely. More than any other, the younger generations know well how to use the different means of collective action to affect political decisions and governments.

WHAT SHOULD BE RETAINED?

This triptych – mistrust, intermittent voting and protest – is common to all categories of young people today. It characterises their politicisation even if it is more or less pronounced according to social insertion and levels of education. This explains why it can be considered as a new framework for citizenship. The widespread idea that young people are no longer political is false. Young people are indeed as critical and distrustful of politicians, parties and politics as they have always been, but they also want something from politics. Pragmatism, efficiency and individualisation are the key words in a type of political action that is more

8. Eurostat Report 2011.

experimental than it was in the past, since it continually needs to be renegotiated and readjusted. Socialised in an atmosphere of disenchantment and mistrust of politics and bearing the disillusionment of their parents, young people have built a new approach to politics on the basis of a new paradigm for engagement. This approach combines intransigence on matters of principle and a desire for pragmatism, demands for values to be upheld and for real effectiveness. Youth is indeed marked by a certain withdrawal from involvement in elections and by a civic moratorium, but, on the other hand, young people are very present on the collective scene and have proved themselves to be extremely reactive politically. However, this ability to react and this relative involvement has moved away from organisations and traditional political institutions towards more individualised and more sporadic forms of action, where achieving an immediate effect and outcome has become the main objective. Young people have a great ability to get involved in issues concerning both local preoccupations and international problems. They move within a kind of “globalised proximity”, combining concerns for both what is near and what is far away. The national framework is no longer the only one within which they build and express their politicisation. Their relationship to politics is more individualised and more directly linked to their life experience. Class interests and partisan or ideological affiliations are less decisive in the process.⁹

A REAL NEED TO GIVE YOUNG PEOPLE ANOTHER KIND OF SPACE AND, ABOVE ALL, TO CONSIDER THEM DIFFERENTLY

Young people give rise to recurrent and well-founded preoccupations. They are the object of numerous measures and planning arrangements in many sectors including education, employment, culture, health, sport and even politics. And that is a good thing. Young people are thought of and dealt with through sector-based interventions, about which it is not the intention here to make judgments. However, they are not very present in the minds of politicians and in political speeches when it comes to thinking about them from a future perspective, offering them a vision of society for the future, thereby inviting them to place their hope in politics. Because they upset the apple cart and cause confusion too often and because they are sometimes seen as threatening, they tend to be avoided as a subject by politicians. Because they represent not only the present of a society but also its future, they force politicians to adopt a truthful discourse that is often difficult to assume. This explains the attempts by politicians to both avoid the subject and the convenience of seeing young people as a series of symptoms to look out for or to deal with. Youth can then be divided up into sectors where particular interventions can be staged. Public policies proposing an overarching project for young people are a rarity. Youth is primarily addressed when things go wrong and when it is seen as a risk not only to itself but to the rest of society as well. The focus remains primarily and above all on the negative and threatening aspects of youth. There

9. See James Sloan, “New Voice, Less Equal: The Civic and Political Engagement of Young People in the United States and Europe”, in *Comparative Political Studies*, September 2012, <http://cps.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/08/30/0010414012453441>.

are reasons for this: as in a magnifying glass they reflect the many failings affecting European societies (endemic unemployment, the slowdown of social and professional integration, decreasing buying power and the danger of impoverishing certain sectors of the population, particularly young people, obstacles to young people's financial autonomy, a failing education system, etc.). Those in power tend to forget that young people need another image of themselves. They are rarely mentioned for positive reasons. They are more often thought of in relation to the symptoms and the malfunctions they are associated with than for their qualities and the potential for the future they incarnate. In the long term, this situation is in danger of becoming a source of anxiety, of malaise and leading to a generalised crisis of confidence that will not only prevent dialogue between the generations but will also prevent thinking about society in terms of what young people can contribute to it. Almost three quarters of French people today (73%) believe that their children will do less well than they did. Of course, it is a well-known fact that French society is among the most pessimistic in advanced industrialised democracies, but it seems to me nonetheless that this profound lack of confidence in intergenerational transmission affects other countries also. All young Europeans are today faced with a particularly problematic environment: austerity budgets that reduce spending on public services and a hostile labour market for new entrants. A feeling of economic and social insecurity together with the perceived risk of a lessening of job opportunities dominates the dynamic between the generations. The development of public policies that lead to a reversal of this feeling of social and economic disorder (going way beyond problems specific only to the young) in successive generations will be a decisive issue. Appropriate policies are needed not only to improve the confidence of ordinary citizens in their governments but also to guarantee the good health and credibility of democracy in many of our societies that are threatened by the rise of different forms of populism and the temptation to turn to authoritarian regimes in the continent of Europe.

From the perspective of a type of politics that would create a space for youth at its centre and above all that would conceive of this space as being part of the planning process for intergenerational social links as a whole (both affective and symbolic), I would like to suggest that three priorities should be highlighted to orientate public policies.

The first is that it is absolutely essential to think of all the generations together rather than separately. Together with much "knowledgeable" discourse, existing policies are much more likely to exacerbate the reasons for generations to oppose each other. Intergenerational bonds and solidarity exist in the private sphere, they now need to be relayed to the public sphere. The conditions need to be created so that the different generations can think in terms of what links them together rather than what opposes them. In order to do that, it is imperative not only to encourage all initiatives made in this area but also to change much of the discourse pronounced on the subject which frequently stigmatises the young.

The second is a reminder of the urgent need to deal with the twofold demand of young people: integration and autonomy. This must be translated into concrete means and measures but also into symbolic markers and benchmarks so that young people feel once more that they are socially useful and that they have a role to play in political decisions.

The third encourages the development of representation for the future, not only for young people but also for society as a whole. Politicians do not talk enough about the future. And yet, there is a real need to give meaning to all the changes and transformations that are shaping the future of younger generations.

There is therefore a real need for a new citizens' pact laying down the building blocks for the future of our European democracies. Such a pact must bring together citizens who, without any doubt, are more critical and demanding and who will remain so. But it must also be able to count on citizens who are capable of building a constructive (and not only reactive) dialogue with those who govern them, and who have confidence in the ability of politics and public policy to improve the societies we live in. Although in the Eurostat 2011 report on young people in Europe older citizens were more pessimistic about the future of ordinary people's involvement in political decisions, a majority of young people (53%) aged 15 to 24 considered that in 20 years from now people would be more involved in political decisions. It is a result we can consider as an optimistic note for the future of our democracies.