

Youth Partnership

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YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Literature review (brief paper)¹

Marina Galstyan

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Youth Political Participation – problem statement

When we consider young people as holders of certain social roles and statuses, we must pay attention to the fact that they are somewhat dependent on the social groups and institutions within which they exist and act. During the twentieth century, young people's lives were heavily conditioned by class, race and gender processes, which set limits to what they might possibly become through adulthood. In the contemporary society, characterised by the fast development of information and communication technologies and widespread use of internet, many young people have access to information about opportunities, which allow them to make decisions about their own lives, education, work, and political participation without being dependent on the views of social groups in which they are involved. The period of youth is characterised by the transition from 'dependency to independence'.

From this point of view, political participation could be discussed as a **catalyst** for young people's independence – political participation promotes young people's independence and autonomy. At the same time, the more independence young people have, the more likely they are to participate in politics and exercise their political rights. Thus participation is both, dependent on independence, and promoted by it.

Participation itself is a changing concept, which has evolved over time due to developments of social science and civic processes. The main understanding of participation is rooted within the context of democracy and governance. In political theories, participation is narrowly limited to the process of voting in the elections and to certain extent also running in the elections as candidates/political representatives².

¹ Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this paper, commissioned by the European Union–Council of Europe youth partnership, are the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of either of the partner institutions, their member states or the organisations co-operating with them.

²Joerg Forbrig (2005), *Revisiting youth political participation: Challenges for research and democratic practice in Europe*, Council of Europe Publishing.

However, there are many forms and types of political participation which surpass the formal act of voting, and there are many unconventional ways of political engagement which are carried out with the intent to influence the institutions and society.³

What is our understanding of PARTICIPATION?

There are **many theoretical approaches** to youth participation:

- **Participation as a rights-based practice.** Based on the CRC, young people are viewed as holders of rights, including the right to participate in politics and decision-making
- **Participation as a mechanism of empowerment of young people.** This approach proposes a more progressive view of participation as a way of giving young people a voice in a society, addressing political marginalisation of youth and changing power relations between generations
- **Participation as a guarantee of efficiency in policy, practice and services.** This approach is based on the understanding that young people are best aware of their own needs and also have new ideas. Thus, youth participation is considered as a way in which young people can 'enlighten' the policy makers to be more informed and aware of young people's reality, in order to 'rejuvenate' the political system and develop better policies and services.
- **Participation as an instrument of young people's development.** By engaging in decision making, young people, are learning about the political processes in society, but are also developing necessary skills, such as self-esteem, confidence, negotiation skills, a sense of autonomy etc. Thus participation is considered a tool for individual development of a young person as a citizen.⁴

Critical approach to participation is also widely discussed in literature, according to which participation is a new way of managing and controlling people. Participation of youth is defined as a function, means, tool, mechanism of the society towards social control of the young people. M. Foucault's theoretical ideas about discursive practices and governance practices were also significant for development of this approach⁵. This concept is criticised because it considers young people as passive objects of adults' influence.

Different approaches, debates and critiques of the concept of participation have resulted in development of more inclusive and progressive understandings of the concept and their promotion by various institutions at the European level.

Contemporary political participation

The most common classification of the forms of political participation is a differentiation between **traditional/conventional and non-traditional forms**. Traditional or institutional forms of participation are **elections, membership in political parties**, and non-traditional or unconventional forms of participation are petitions, demonstrations and movements.

Within this distinction, youth research generally focuses on three basic forms of political participation (Chisholm & Kovacheva 2002):

- involvement in institutional politics (elections, campaigns and membership);
- protest activities (demonstrations and new social movements);
- civic engagement (associative life, community participation, voluntary work).

³ EU-CoE youth partnership (2019), *Glossary on youth*, available at <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/glossary>, accessed 5 October 2019.

⁴Rys Farthing (2012), *Why Youth Participation? Some Justifications and Critiques of Youth Participation Using New Labour's Youth Policies as a Case Study*, © YOUTH & POLICY.

⁵Foucault M (1972), *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, New York: Pantheon Books.

Within the context of conventional political participation, political and civic education is considered as a means of understanding of democracy and critical assessment. Through political education, young people learn how the political system functions, how decisions are made and how they can participate in decision making processes. At the same time young people should have an opportunity to question, criticise the system and processes and follow the whole process of discussion, solution, further development of their ideas and raised issues. Yet, according to research by Harvard University and the University of Melbourne, of all the age groups, young people have least trust in democracy⁶. Considering this trend, the research indicates that the participatory processes should be entirely transformed in order to implement the full participation, and combine the online and offline forms of participation, including not only decision-making process but also a follow-up.

As a result of this mistrust in the conventional politics, and a rise of new trends, non-conventional forms of participation, such as protests and rise of social movements, have become more dominant. These post-modern/emerging and proactive types of political participation challenge the existing policies, with the aim of achieving social transformation, using the expressive, emotional, aesthetic, casual, virtual and digital means.

Some of these new forms of political participation are presented below:

- **Hacking and ddos attacks:** A form of protest aiming to force down online servers and make online service temporarily unavailable (see case of Mastercard and Wikileaks)
- **Clicktivism and slacktivism:** Voluntary or invitation-based clicks on certain links, in order to express agreement with certain statements;
- **Online campaigning:** Special online platforms invite users to start their own causes and gain interest for them through sharing links in their social networks (e.g. avaaz.org).
- **Crowdsourcing and crowdfunding:** Using the crowd to gain ideas, input, feedback and financial support to realise projects and transform ideas into reality.
- **Liquid Democracy/Liquid Feedback:** a new form of online participation tool which allows collaborative decision-making by giving each individual an opportunity to vote on all issues directly, or delegate their votes to a chosen representative.
- **Barcamp:** Online conference system where the program and sessions are developed by the participants themselves. This method combines the Open Space Technology with effective use of internet-based tools⁷.

Considering different forms, emerging trends and new tools, we can conclude that political participation is any activity that shapes, affects, or involves the political sphere. Political participation cannot be narrowed to the conventional forms of participation in elections, referendum, or membership of political parties. Unconventional forms like signing petitions, organising demonstrations or strikes have, for some time, been considered legal forms of political participation, as are supporting boycotts or expressing political opinions via badges, T-shirts, stickers or letters to media and online postings. Beside these legal forms of political participation some activities carried out with the intention of influencing society and/or the political sphere are considered illegal. These could involve actions such as vandalism or acts of terrorism, as well as civil disobedience or resistance.⁸

Tendencies in political participation

Although it is difficult to identify long-term trends, due to fast-changing global societies, there are certain characteristics of youth political participation which can be noted:

⁶Guilford, G. (2016, November 30), *Harvard research suggests that an entire global generation has lost faith in democracy*. Quartz, available at <https://qz.com/848031/harvard-research-suggests-that-an-entire-global-generation-has-lost-faith-in-democracy/>

⁷ Pleyers G., Karbach N. (2014), *Analytical paper on Youth Participation, Young people political participation in Europe: What do we mean by participation?* Brussels: Council of Europe.

⁸ EU-CoE youth partnership (2019), *Glossary on youth*. available at <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/glossary>.

- Non-traditional forms of political participation have become more common among young people, including protests and social movements.
- Research shows that for many young people, political participation starts at the local or regional level. This is where young people get a chance to see the direct impact of their involvement and participate in democracy.
- Boundaries between online and offline communication are disrupted, which impacts on the way young people build non-hierarchic relations in offline spaces. It also impacts on the forms of their political participation and development of requests for full participation of young people. This would combine online and offline forms of participation, including not only decision-making process but also their involvement in a follow-up phase.
- Young people have low and declining trust in democracy as a political system. Thus, political and civic education, as a means of understanding political system, plays an important role in learning about the politics and decision-making processes.
- The role of the youth work is reevaluated, as youth workers play a role of connector and translator, transferring information about political processes to young people, and also informing policy-makers about young people's needs.
- The boundaries between social and political, private and public are removed, as political participation now surpasses the 'traditional' politics, and concerns itself also with the wider issues, resulting in the "informalization" of politics.⁹

The changing nature and pathways of political participation have opened new and interesting horizons and perspectives for the youth studies, policies and practice, and this will remain to be an important topic of interest for the researchers, policy-makers and youth workers.

⁹ Bang, H. P. y E. Sorensen (2001). "The Everyday Maker", en P. Dekker y E. M. Uslaner (eds.) Social Capital and Participation in Every Day Life (pp. 141-168). Londres: Routledge.