

Youth Partnership

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YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Literature review

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This research was commissioned by the Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth, with the aim of gathering knowledge on political participation of young people and the main formats and trends of youth participation in Europe today. The review, based on desk research and analysis, identifies key definitions of youth political participation, different forms of engagement, as well as main challenges concerning political participation of young people in Europe.

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Current discourse on youth political participation

In the discourse about the interrelations of youth and political participation, a dominant narrative is the one about passive and disinterested young people who care little about political processes. The aim of this analysis is to explore these claims and to present contemporary understanding of young people's political participation, specify the main forms of participation and motivating factors, as well as showing the main trends and challenges concerning youth political participation today.

Defining youth

Sociologists, youth workers and policy makers have their own different notions of what constitutes young people and many of these understandings differ from the ways that young people see themselves (Cieslik and Simpson 2013: 3). Youth research offers at least three approaches to conceptualise youth: as a generation; as a life stage; and as a social group.

Perhaps one of the most common understandings of youth is presented in the Macmillan Dictionary: "Youth is the time of life when one is young, and often means the time between childhood and adulthood" (Macmillan Dictionary 2013). It is also defined as "the appearance, freshness, spirit, etc., characteristics of one who is young" (dictionary.com 2019). At the same time, its definitions of a specific age range varies, as youth is not defined chronologically as a stage that can be tied to specific age ranges; nor can its end point be linked to specific activities (Furlong 2013: 2-3).

The youth sector generally uses age-based classifications, following either the UN or the EU guidelines. The UN defines "youth" as representatives of the 15-24 age group, while the EU uses the 15-29 age range. Taking into consideration these classifications, today's youth, people aged 15-29, were mainly born in the 1990s, and they are called digital natives or Generation Y. This generation has a high level of internet dependency. Generation Z of the 2000s were born in the era of the internet and social media. Generation Alpha (born in the 2010s) is a less studied generation and social theorists have yet to explore their characteristics (Council of Europe 2018).

These different conceptualisations of youth are closely interconnected and could be discussed in the same "space" of dependency or independence of youth from different aspects of life, groups or persons. 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 in which they play their roles. During the 20th 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 contemporary society, characterised by the fast development of information technology and widespread use of the internet, young people have access to information about opportunities which allow them to make independent 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.

Defining youth participation and political participation

One of the main differences between traditional and modern societies is high level of citizens’ participation in politics and existence of open political system (Huntington 1996). This system comprises a complex range of complicated, autonomous, adaptive and agreed institutions which promote and strengthen civic engagement in the process of modernisation. Therefore, the goals and objectives of modernisation of the society cannot be achieved without political modernisation. In order to achieve this, changes should first be done at institutional level, meaning that norms and values that will lead people in their political behaviour should be established. Second, it is necessary to create a political system based on political pluralism and competitiveness which would represent and co-ordinate the interests of different social groups. If the government is not able to create a political system which complies with the above-mentioned requirements, citizens will find other, non-institutional ways to pursue their goals (appeal actions, “direct actions”).

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 theory, participation is narrowly limited to the process of people’s voting in elections (Forbrig 2005).

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 of influencing institutions and society (EU-Council of Europe youth partnership, Glossary on youth – Political Participation 2019).

There are **many theoretical approaches and conceptualisations of 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 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” 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 (Farthing 2012).

Critical approach to participation is also widely discussed in literature, according to which participation is a new way to manage and control people. Within the critical approach, youth participation is defined as function, mean, tool or mechanism of the society towards social control of young people. Foucault’s theoretical ideas about discursive practices and governance practices were also significant for development of this approach (Foucault 1972). This concept is criticised because it considers young people as passive objects of adults’ influence.

Defining youth political participation

Conceptualisation of the phenomenon of youth political activism in political processes was conducted within the framework of different disciplines: Structural functionalism (T. Parsons, R. Merton and others); Behaviourism (G. Laswell and Ch. Mariam); System approach (G. Almond, N. Luman, K. Doich); Institutionalism and neoinstitutionalism (P. Hall, R. Taylor and others); and Conflictological (R. Darendorf, L. Kozer and others). Modern theorists reflected on how the processes of modernisation of society also affect the forms of youth political participation (R. Inglehart, G. O’Donnell, R. Dahl, J. Habermas).

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

Taking into consideration different understandings and theoretical approaches to political participation, we can conclude that it is any activity that shapes, affects or involves the political sphere. Political participation cannot be narrowed to the conventional forms of participation in elections or referendums, or being members 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 (EU-Council of Europe youth partnership, Glossary on youth 2019).

The different forms of youth political participation

The gap between society and political institutions has been fluctuating as a result of reforms improving the quality of education and economic development. A number of processes had an important impact on increasing the level of political participation, and one of them was institutional complexity. The considerable expansion of democratic politics has been accompanied by a significant broadening of political participation and citizens' ability to influence political processes (Forbrig 2005).

In Europe, student social movements in the 1960s had significant influence on youth political participation, giving young people and wider society an option to engage in political processes through different means (Forbrig 2005).

There are different approaches to differentiation of formats of political participation.

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

Within the context of conventional political participation, political and civic education is considered 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 the least trust in democracy. Considering this trend, the research indicates that the participatory processes should be entirely transformed in order to implement full participation, and combine the online and offline forms of participation, including not only the decision-making process but also a follow-up.

Youth research generally focuses on three basic forms of political participation (Chisholm and 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).

In literature, we can also note the following classifications:

- youth political participation: groups of young people, who meet on a regular basis, with the aim of raising awareness, or challenging policies and/or practices, at a local, national or international level (Eden and Roker 2002);

- modern participation: representative participation and direct participation with all their variants, such as NGO-based structures, co-management, youth parliaments, school councils, youth hearings, demonstrations etc. (Forbrig 2005);
- postmodern or emergent and future forms of participation include various types of expressive, emotional, aesthetic, casual, virtual and digital participation (Forbrig 2005);
- a proactive, problem-solving approach to youth participation perceiving it as the active involvement of young people in the social transformation of their societies (Kovacheva 2000).

Siurala (Kovacheva 2005) defines these types of participation as “postmodern” types, including expressive, emotional, aesthetic, casual, virtual and digital participation.

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/LiquidFeedback: 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 programme and sessions are developed by the participants themselves. This method combines Open Space Technology with effective use of internet-based tools (Pleyers and Karbach 2014).

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

Trends in youth political participation

Global society is fast-changing, which has an effect on youth political participation as well: forms of participation, goals, intensiveness and other characteristics change over time as well. Although it is difficult to identify long-term trends, there are certain characteristics of youth political participation which can be noted.

- 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 a small-scale democracy.
- Boundaries between online and offline communication are disrupted, which has an impact on building relations in offline life and creation of non-hierarchical relations in both online and offline spaces. It also impacts on the forms of participation and development of open method – a combination of online and offline participation.
- Young people have low and declining trust in democracy as a political system. Thus, political and civic education as a means of understanding a political system plays an important role in learning about the political system and decision-making processes.
- The role of youth work is re-evaluated, 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 "informalisation" of politics (Bang and Sorensen 2001).

Paradoxes of youth political participation

In the studies and concepts of youth political participation, we can see paradoxes in several meanings and levels:

1. **Divergent opinions.** The opinions of youth researcher, policy makers and youth workers are divided into two groups: some are pessimistic about youth political participation, as they note the decreasing political engagement of young people. On the other hand, the others are more optimistic, claiming that young people are rejecting traditional ways of political participation of the older generation and creating new models and forms of political participation. Therefore, young people always actively take part in political processes, but the type of participation is different from the usual models of the older generation.
2. **Knowledge of political participation.** The studies and knowledge of youth political participation indicate on the one hand that young people are passive and disengaged. Yet, at the same time, they agree that new models and forms of political participation are developing, and that young people are active in using these forms.
3. **Democracy paradox.** In theory, the enlargement of democratic institutions should have increased the level of political participation of wider society, including youth, but the same studies show a steady decrease in public participation and a widening gap between politics and citizens.
4. **Transition paradox.** If “youth” is considered to be a transition from dependency to independence, and political participation as a promoting factor and the result of independence, then a young person will, through political participation, achieve independence and, therefore, move to adulthood.
Hence, these ideas are closely connected to each other, but are also contradictory, as they imply that “When a young person integrates, (s)he is no longer a young person” (Garrido and Requena 1996: 15).
5. **The paradox of participation and control.** According to theorists, political participation is a process of socialisation, the learning of social norms accepted by society. In this sense participation converts to control, management of behaviour and actions of young people, instead of being an empowering practice.
6. **Is political participation always a good thing?** Youth political participation includes not only activities related to promotion of human rights, democracy, equality and inclusion of diverse social groups, but it also includes actions related to extremism, xenophobia, intolerance and terror; posing the question of what type of political participation we want to promote.

The role of the magic triangle in youth political participation

The changing nature of youth political participation and emerging trends have an important impact on all three sides of the magic triangle: youth policy, youth studies and youth work.

Youth policy

- A number of recent studies (Deželan 2015) have highlighted the decline in voter turnout, membership of political parties, interest in politics and trust in political institutions amongst young people. Youth's distrust of institutional politics has been seen as a widespread problem in Europe.
- Youth is not represented enough in formal political institutions and processes such as parliaments, political parties, elections and public administration. Representation of young women in political institutions and in mid-level and decision-making/leadership positions is even lower.
- The main challenge for youth is limited opportunities for effective participation in decision-making processes. With limited opportunities to meaningfully participate in inclusive decision-making processes, young men and women feel excluded and marginalised in their societies and communities. The need for participatory structures and greater trust between youth and institutions and for greater capacity development is also stressed in youth studies.
- Individualisation is another global trend affecting the political participation of young people in Europe. Attitudinal surveys (Iacovou and Berthoud 2001; Kovacheva et al. 2003; Macháček 2001) have documented the growing inclination to search for individual solutions and the dislike of collective action.
- The spread of consumerism among young people might be a serious challenge to their civic participation, as it represents a shift away from collective solidarity and ideological engagement.
- Youth participation in voting is usually high when combined with the other two forms of activities: unconventional and civic. Young people quickly mobilise around single issues.
- In Eastern Europe, much of the participatory potential of young people in the region is lost because of emigration.
- Political action is also not only the action structured through political institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) but also involvement in less structured, looser networks and friendship circles, and even individual action, such as political consumerism.
- While some of the challenges towards better participation are common to youth as a specific age category, most challenges are specific to different categories of young people. Policies to foster youth participation should thus target specific groups of young people and help them to overcome specific barriers or take into account their specific modes of participation.

Youth studies

- Different groups of young people might have different definitions of politics and different forms of political expression.
- Researchers should develop concepts that are more sensitive to the political aspects of such forms of youth participation as leisure activities.
- Research methods need to be sensitive to exploring new trends in political participation, which acknowledge variations across national, regional and local contexts in Europe. Another route is to widen the scope of research methods used to study youth participation patterns, which up to now seem to be dominated by quantitative designs.

Youth work

- Youth organisations mostly represent a specific category of youth and should thus not be considered as representative of all young people.
- The internet has become another innovative resource for youth participation. Therefore, this fact should be taken into account when planning and implementing youth work.
- The area of youth work has been enlarged: youth workers should understand the interest and needs of young people and, together with youth, communicate these to decision makers.

Starting points for further discussion

The study of existing literature gives an important overview of the main thesis and arguments regarding youth political participation. It serves as a stepping stone for further research and discussion on the topic.

- The discourse around definitions of youth political participation is characterised by a few paradoxes:
 - whether participation is a realisation of the rights or mechanism of social control;
 - youth political participation facilitates the integration of a young person into society; therefore, the young person becomes an adult;
 - young people are not interested in traditional forms of political participation, but are active in implementation of non-traditional forms.
- Young people are not interested in politics, because politics does not represent the problems that are important for them.
- Trust and social solidarity have a direct impact on political participation.
- As a rule, young people rely on forms of political participation that are understandable and tangible, while traditional forms are complex and impose certain conditions of participation that young people must meet. On the other hand, non-traditional forms of participation do not have any precondition; it is possible to be involved in social movements without any preparedness.
- Recent studies synthesised by H. Willems, A. Heinen and C. Meyers (2012) point out that voting turnout, membership of political parties, interest in politics and trust in political institutions are declining especially among young people (Pleyers and Karbach 2014).
- We can discuss youth political participation in the context of intergenerational relations: conflict or solidarity. In literature we can often see contradiction of political participation of young people and political participation of adults; young people are often presented as not interested, indifferent, apathetic towards political processes, and the adults are presented as active participants of political life. This situation is presented in literature as intergenerational conflict; it seems that active participation of two generations at the same time is self-exclusive. In the literature, conflicts of interest between generations are also discussed. Young people have their own interests and needs that are not always shared by adults (Pleyers and Karbach 2014).
- It is no coincidence that in literature the importance of digital competence, as a component in political education, is also mentioned. Young people today have grown up in a world dominated by the internet, with new opportunities for participation and engagement (Council of Europe 2018).

- Issues of the quality of civic, political education are the subject of much research. They mainly reflect content and teaching methods.

DelliCarpini (2003) at the Pew Charitable Trusts says: “My worry is that as good as a lot of service learning work is, that it does not encourage political involvement and policy involvement, but it may, in fact, even discourage it.”

- Mass media and advanced technologies influence youth political participation. However, in order to achieve positive impact, young people need to have political and digital competencies to engage through these channels.
- Studies about youth political participation cannot reveal new forms of participation. In most quantitative studies, when researchers find that young people participate at lower levels they conclude that they are indifferent to politics. However, this should not necessarily be the case as young people can engage in other forms of political participation which are not often surveyed by researchers.

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