

Youth Partnership

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



How can we meaningfully engage young people?

Lessons from the Symposium on Political Participation

The Symposium: “The future of young people’s political participation: questions, challenges and opportunities”, hosted by the Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth was held at the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg from 18-20 September 2019. Young people’s political participation is central to the work of Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth, and both of the partner institutions.

More than 120 participants from Europe and beyond attended the symposium, including young people, young political activists, youth leaders, members of political organisations and youth wings of political parties, representatives of civil society organisations and movements, including youth organisations, journalists and influencers, young artists or activists using other public engagement forms, policy makers in the field of youth, youth workers, educators, teachers, and researchers.

Why are we looking at political participation of young people today?

Today in Europe we are witnessing different phenomena, such as a shrinking space for civil society, the rise of populism and illiberal regimes, declining trust in institutions, a changing role of media and diffusion of fake news, a lack of access to rights, the rapid development of digital technologies and the role of civic education in responding to these challenges. They all have a role in how youth political participation happens.

In addition, young people find themselves at the centre of protest movements. They are on the streets in ever increasing numbers, indicating their growing demand for change.

Within this growing youth movement, the question also arises: *which* young people are involved, particularly in youth-led organisations and formal participation structures, and how can we reach all young people, especially those faced with various disadvantages?

Participation is not only an end, but also a means. Symposium was not only exploring the ways of young people's political engagement today, but it also aimed to create a space for learning and participation of young people in the event itself, through co-creation methodology. Symposium was developed in line with the participatory approach, including young people and participants as co-creators, presenters, facilitators and rapporteurs of the sessions.

How did young people participate in Symposium?

1. Young people were involved in setting the priorities

Young people were involved from the early stages of the programme development, in preparatory meetings of the Symposium. Advisory Council on Youth of the Council of Europe, European Youth Forum and representatives of youth-led organisations were invited to shape the programme and priorities of the event.

2. Co- designing the programme

Participants in the Symposium had a chance to also indicate the issues and questions which they found most urgent when it comes to political participation of young people. Their answers were used to create a structure and thematic base of the Symposium.

3. Young people as experts

Youth participants in the Symposium were invited to submit their proposals for the workshops which they could host, based on their practices, area of expertise and experience. In total, 27 different workshops were held on various topics.

4. Young people as visionaries

Throughout the Symposium, young people worked together on the CUBES Process, allowing participants to co-create visions on how we want the future of political participation to be: discussing the main values, conditions needed - resources, knowledge and networks, and the steps needed to reach that vision.

5. Youth as contributors to knowledge products

Participants also had the opportunity to "map" out their political participation, by listing their own initiatives and projects on a physical and electronic map of Europe. This list was used as a basis to develop a Compendium on the political participation of young people, which highlights good practices and stories of success.

What are the lessons and main outcomes/findings of the Symposium?

1. **Various forms of participation are equally valid and accepted:** From street protests, to youth advisory councils, and initiatives focused on formal participation like voting, to artistic activism and memes, participants showed an appreciation of the contribution that all forms make to a vibrant and healthy democracy.
2. **Creativity and imagination** are seen as key elements of young people's political participation, both as a way of appealing to people's emotions, and as a reflection of a future that they would like to live in: colourful, diverse, free, and open.
3. **Frameworks, networks, resources, and security matter:** Youth political participation requires a range of supports and stakeholders, which do not necessarily always work together
4. **It is Unclear what to do with participation that is extremist or illiberal:** Despite a broad consensus in the room on a type of values-based participation, rooted in democracy, human rights, and inclusion, participants were keenly aware that there is a growing chorus of active young people who do not believe in the same values.
5. Young people in the Symposium have emphasised the need for diversity and **inclusion of underrepresented groups**
6. **Digital technologies and social media** offer opportunities for young people's participation in the new ways, but they are also not replacing other forms of political participation.
- 7.

So, **What is the future of young people's political participation?**, as shaped by views, opinions and aspirations of young people at the Symposium? Future of political participation is:

- **DIVERSE:** young people engage in politics in a diversity of ways, including through conventional means of participation, such as voting and membership in political parties or youth organisations, voicing their opinions and influencing decision making processes through formal structures and means of democratic participation and expression. On the other hand, they also participate using alternative channels, digital tools, activism, even civil disobedience. They increasingly engage through youth movements, take part in campaigns and protests, strongly advocating for issues such as climate emergency.
- **SUBVERSIVE:** many young people are not keen to conduct politics as usual and they seek to critique the hypocrisies that they see in the status quo with humour, and irony. This is accelerated by social media and digital technologies, where political satire material is developed using *memes* and *deepfake*.
- **INCLUSIVE:** open and pluralistic participation was one of the top priorities for young people at the symposium, who were committed to finding ways to make their organisations and movements more diverse. Participation was also seen as a key method to making our societies more inclusive for young people.
- **EMPOWERING:** Participating requires a certain level of competences but it is also learned by doing. Sharing the power may empower both young people and other stakeholders, as it gives opportunity to decision-makers to benefit from young people's creativity and diverse perspectives, but it also allows young people to learn how decision-making happens in practice at various levels.
- **COLOURFUL:** Symposium utilised a wide range of artistic tools, from preparations for the Fridays for Future march, theatre performance and songs, giving young people an

opportunity to use artistic expression in order to advocate for political and social issues they care about.

- **UNCOMPROMISING ON KEY VALUES:** while young people are flexible when it comes to engaging in various types of political participation, those at the symposium did not compromise on the values that they felt political participation should be based upon: democracy, human rights, diversity, and respect.

For more inspiring stories, questions and thoughts on political participation of young people, visit:

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