

Youth Partnership

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



What is political participation?

Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth hosted a Symposium: “The future of young people’s political participation: questions, challenges and opportunities” at the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg from 18-20 September 2019. Young people’s participation is central to our work – but what is it that we are talking about when discussing political participation?

Dan Moxon, Director of People, Dialogue and Change and member of the Pool of European Youth Researchers helped us in answering this question, by looking at different forms of political participation.

Political participation is hard to define - politics is all around us and not just in political institutions. In the youth field, we use the term participation to refer to a wide variety of activities, phenomena and practices. There is currently much discussion on the different forms and styles of participation - some of these forms are easy to identify as political:

- **Voting and standing for election** - elections are a traditional form of participation in democratic society- but this form of participation is less appealing to young people today than it was to previous generations .
- **Youth civil society** – young people also participate through youth organisations, youth clubs or youth councils. However, not everything they do is automatically political – there is a clear difference between involvement in a sports club and a Youth Council.
- **Innovative approaches from public bodies** such as co-management, participatory budgeting and co-production - these types of participation can significantly influence public policies, but they can reach only a limited number of young people.
- **Protest movements** – Young people today widely engage in protests and movements which focus on single issues, such as climate strikes, and demand immediate action. On the other hand, young people are also members of extreme

right or left populist protests, which begs a question – are all protests to be encouraged, and if not, which ones should we support, and why?

On the other hand, some forms of participation may be disconnected from political institutions, having a limited impact on policy making. These include:

- **Youth activism / youth social action** – young people take things into their own hands, instead of lobbying decision makers. These include actions such as #trashtag movement which sought to clean up beaches and public spaces from litter
- **Alternative use of “public” spaces** - such as political night clubs focused on gender issues - is this political or just a party?
- **Political memes and online political debates** have taken over the internet. Yet, are they too disconnected from policy and political institutions to be able to make any difference?

Ultimately politics happens all around us, and not just in political institutions - this is why political participation can be so hard to define. One of the challenges of talking about politics outside of traditional forms, such as voting, is that it raises a question “At which point is participation no longer considered political?”

At a policy level we see an increasing focus from policy makers on promoting not only conventional, but also “new forms of participation” as a way of involving more young people. Whilst innovation and development is desirable, we also need to reflect about what these forms can deliver in the youth field. Currently there is a lot of enthusiasm for digital methods which offer a lot of potential for reaching large numbers of young people - but the youth sector has not yet managed to engage very large inclusive groups of young people through digital tools.

Rather than focusing on which type of political participation is better, we should think of their impact in terms of:

Influence – Does the policy or programme enable young people to influence politics? Who do we influence and to what extent? How can people who are excluded have more voice?

Social Inclusion - Critical evaluation of who is included in participation is vital. Which social groups of young people are enabled to have this influence? How does participation contribute to the promotion of equality and human rights?

Scale - How many young people does it reach and how can we reach all young people, working across the sectors?

To find answers to these and other questions about political participation of young people, follow us on social media.

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