

Politics and youth in Europe

These days, the commonly accepted view on the topic of **youth** and **political participation** has moved beyond the paradigm depicting young people as apathetic and uninterested in politics. On the contrary, it is widely acknowledged that they are very political, being even more active than a majority of adults. That is, as long as parties and elections alone are not setting the purview of what 'political' is; the phrase '**the personal is political**' offers the best expression of the broad sense of 'political', where most, if not all, forms of participation are political and where youth's extensive participation found its recognition. Young people's political engagement is mainly confined to new forms of participation, as traditional politics feels unrepresentative and unable to address the concerns associated with contemporary youth culture.

It is wonderful that youth's manifold contributions to their families, communities, societies, and the world are being finally acknowledged, but there is one recurring thought I get whenever I read about the new ways in which young people engage

with the political: how much **influence** do **young people** really have through these new modes of participation? Are they truly at the decision-making table on issues that interest and affect them? Recognizing something until recently overlooked, does not necessarily entail its augmentation. In other words, does decision-makers' admitting that young people do have a voice, also make it stronger?

Brave new modes of participation

Young people in the EU are more inclined than the rest of the population to sign petitions, display a badge or sticker, participate in demonstrations, and express their political views in online forums. They consider demonstrations and strikes (although voting comes first) as the most effective ways to make their voice heard.

Transformation, not decline is what best depicts youth political participation. Feeling excluded from mainstream forms of influencing political decision-making, young people are over-represented in alternative modes of participation. They try to influence political decision-makers and policies through **alternative channels of action**, some of which are considered excessive or even on the margins of democratic means. Youth's new forms of participation are:

- personally meaningful
- issue-based
- non-institutionalised
- horizontal
- informal
- ad-hoc
- less linked to traditional societal cleavages
- **Does more, mean more influential?**
- What I fear is that these alternative ways of participation do nothing more than signal (in small ways) an issue, thus rendering themselves susceptible to a particularly pertinent metaphor – the '**blinking LED light**':
- *“Young people’s projects and actions catch fire and die out in the new urban and global political space, characterized by a lack of centre, from the Internet to the streets and squares, at a pace inconceivable for adults and those with a similar frame of mind.” Tommi Hoikkala*

- Choosing not to participate in formal politics and participating mainly through the new channels of action, young people risk being disconnected from the actual decision-making process, damaging their own interests.
- The bigger problem is when they choose to participate, expecting a **partnership** with decision-makers, only to realize that their involvement is merely a **tokenism**, which makes them feel used rather than empowered. For example, new media is often used to reach the young generation by using their familiar modes of communication, but in the wrong way. Instead of facilitating a two way process of information sharing, it is, most of the times, just another way to push information onto them. Faulty use of this tool can do more harm than not using it at all. Young people want to be listened to and they want to see the impact of their involvement, which would necessitate embedding the online consultation within a broader process of deliberative decision-making in the offline world. Employing **online** tools has the potential to enhance, but cannot replace young people's participation **offline**.
- When decision-makers fail to meet young people's expectations in terms of a genuinely collaborative involvement, it only drives them further away from what they were trying to lure them to. Youth cynicism towards politicians and formal politics increases, only to reinforce their predilection of engaging in new forms of participation.

In the new democracies of the world, the role of youth is of special importance, and in the world today there are more new than established democracies. Older generations of a society include leaders of the discredited undemocratic regime and many who supported, or at least tolerated it as likely to last their lifetime or because they saw no way of opposing it. By contrast, young politicians are freer of association with excesses of the past, and have often been prominent in demonstrations calling for an end to an undemocratic regime. The way in which a new democratic government develops is of special concern to young people, for it promises to rule their lives for forty years or more -- whether it becomes a completely consolidated democracy or remains an imperfect, incomplete democracy. If a new democracy demonstrates continuing weaknesses, idealistic young people may become indifferent

or cynical in reaction. Insofar as idealism declines, then this reduces popular pressure for better governance.

In established democracies, continuity in fundamental political values through the turnover of generations is necessary to maintain a democratic political system. Insofar as young people endorse the "rules of the game" of an established democracy, their political views will be only marginally different from those of their elders. In such circumstances, the turnover of generations changes who rules, but it does not alter how government works. If young people in such a society rebel against the values of their parents, this would lead to support for anarchic or undemocratic forms of government, destabilizing a democratic system.

A positive commitment to democratic values is of fundamental political importance, for in a democracy what ordinary people think is important. Insofar as young people are idealistic, they may be especially in favour of democracy. But insofar as the character and performance of a political regime falls short of the standards of an ideal democracy, then frustrated idealism can lead to constructive criticism, vigorous attack or political cynicism. Insofar as experience creates tolerance of less than ideal systems of government, then middle-age people may be more positive about their democratic regime than young people.

Young adults can be seen as having distinctive political interests, more inclined to change than older generations, more idealistic in their goals and less loyal to established traditions. In economic terms, young people are specially vulnerable to increased unemployment, because this hurts most those who are just entering the labour market. They are much more affected by a government's education policy toward cash grants for students and tuition charges than by pension measures that affect their parents or grandparents. Especially in new democracies, education policy affects the opportunity of getting a good job and social mobility. Insofar as the life styles of young people differ substantially from older generations, youths are more sensitive to laws that regulate behaviour that their elders reject, for example, concerning sex, abortion and the use of soft drugs.