

Engaged and active: Exploring new forms of youth participation

Traditionally, when thinking about the participation of young people in modern democracies, some keywords like vote, political party and elections come to mind. However, when looking at the last voter turnouts of young people at the European elections in 2014, it seems like young people have become increasingly disengaged from the traditional forms of political and civic participation, a phenomenon that might make us think that young people are completely uninterested in democratic life.

Indeed, according to research published by the Eurobarometer¹⁵, once again, the greatest abstainers at the European elections in 2014 were young people (only 28% aged 18-24 voted). This is a big contrast from the two thirds (64%¹⁶) of young Europeans surveyed in May 2013 who said they intended to vote in the European Elections.

In the light of these results, a question arises... Why do these young people not participate? According to research from the Eurobarometer, young people, by not voting, even if they generally fell optimistic about the EU, express a lack of trust in or dissatisfaction with politics in general. It seems like they do not see anymore a solution in the traditional political system. In spite of that, other variables influencing participation have to be taken into account. Either, the economic

situation of these young people doesn't allow them to participate; or they don't have access to the necessary resources for participation (i.e. material resources, interest, and knowledge). Even more, they are not stimulated enough, or they don't have enough time to participate. Indeed, participation is a life-long learning process which is still not accessible to all groups of young people, especially young people with fewer opportunities or in vulnerable situations, and who need to be supported and accompanied¹⁷.

Nevertheless, according to many researchers, young people still want to have their say but they address their dissatisfaction using different ways or tools and by acting in unexpected areas. Nowadays participation is no longer a matter of voting and being part of a political party. Participation can be individual or collective; continuous or isolated; internet-based; private or public; manifest or latent. The last decade provided us with many examples of young people's engagement: they gather and protest in Turkey, France, UK, Italy, Greece; they take part in social movements like the Arab Spring and Indignados; they sign petitions such as "Stop TTIP 18 and CETA 19", they support

¹⁵ European Parliament, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/2014/post/post_2014_survey_analytical_overview_en.pdf

¹⁶ European Commission, Press Release, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-13-462_en.htm

¹⁷ SALTO Youth Participation RC, *Jugend Für Europa, Nationale Agentur für das Eu-Programm E+*, Amplify participation of young people in Europe! Recommendations for policy and practice, Seminars, Brussels, <https://www.salto-youth.net/trc/participation/participationpublications/>

¹⁸ TTIP- Transatlantic Trade Investment Partnership. CETA: Comprehensive Trade and Economic Agreement

¹⁹ <https://stop-ttip.org/fr/signer/>

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causes online, write blogs, post on Facebook with political and social messages, change their habits of consuming food and goods, find new alternatives to our consumer society. By engaging in their communities, educational environments, the labor market, social enterprises, cultural projects, their daily life, they demonstrate that engagement happens in different ways, sometimes unexpected, and young people, through their daily life, intensively participate in the development of our democratic societies²⁰. Therefore, participation is not only political but also civic, economic, social and cultural. Institutional and political actors have to acknowledge and take on board these new mechanisms of participation in our democratic societies because young people are not only the actors of tomorrow's

20 SALTO Youth Participation RC, Jugend Für Europa, Nationale Agentur für das Eu-Programm E+, Amplify participation of young people in Europe! Recommendations for policy and practice, Seminars, Brussels, <https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/participation/participationpublications/>

democracies but they are already the actor of today's democracies.

SALTO Youth Participation RC plays an essential linking role between actors in this field and National Agencies and policy-makers at the European level. SALTO Youth Participation RC, with its bottom-up approach, provides political and institutional actors with expertise and knowledge on the paradigm shift related to public participation and forms of participation used among young people²¹. Furthermore, since 2014 SALTO Participation has adopted and continues to promote a cross-sector approach in the support provided to youth workers, National Agencies and beneficiaries of the new integrated Erasmus+ Youth in Action Program. Indeed, in order to better support participation of young people in democratic life in its different forms and promote a broader understanding of the concept of participation, SALTO Youth Participation RC creates bridges between youth researchers, youth

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leaders, young workers, entrepreneurs, private companies, political and institutional actors and young people. By extending its field of action, SALTO Participation RC intends to deepen reflections on the link between young people's engagement and its impact on the development of democratic societies. For example, in the context of globalization including new ways of communication, different economical contexts, and various political systems and structures, SALTO Participation will further address the issue of active citizenship by exploring new or alternative forms of civic engagement and their connections, including E-democracy.

Moreover, SALTO will play a more dynamic role in the development, promotion, recognition and dissemination of new tools and methods to increase the participation of young people in

their daily life. Through trainings, conferences and seminars, SALTO Youth Participation RC in cooperation with National Agencies, creates conditions and opportunities for youth workers to develop new participatory approaches, techniques and tools. These will enable young people to actively participate in projects supported by the Erasmus+ Youth in Action Program.

Once more, there is not only one way but thousands of ways for young people to participate in democratic life. By recognising these new mechanisms and taking it on board, political and institutional actors will send a strong signal to young people that they are ready to build the future hand in hand with young people.

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