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Part VII

Civic engagement and disengagement

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Youth political participation in Europe

A new participatory landscape

James Sloam

Young people's politics: a new participatory landscape

There has been much debate about the so-called decline in youth civic and political engagement (Putnam 2000; Norris 2002 and 2003; Furlong and Cartmel 2007; Wattenberg 2007; Dalton 2009). Some have seen this as a *crisis in citizenship* (Macedo *et al.* 2005). Others have viewed it as a *crisis in the political system* (Stoker 2006; Hay 2007). Youth voter turnout (and turnout in general) has been falling in most established industrial democracies for several decades (Franklin 2004). And, the membership of mainstream political parties has collapsed (Van Biezen *et al.* 2012), as older members are simply not being replaced.

However, the situation is much more dramatic in some countries than in others. European Social Survey (ESS) data¹ shows that around three-quarters of (eligible) 18 to 24 year olds voted in national elections in Sweden and Denmark compared to just over one-third in the UK and Ireland. Yet even the much-vaunted Scandinavian democracies have experienced a downward trend in electoral participation, as well as a movement away from mainstream political parties towards fringe parties and movements. Younger voters have increasingly turned to parties that focus on *issues* (such as the various Green parties across Europe), populist parties that rail against the existing political and economic elites (including, the Five-Star Movement in Italy and Podemos in Spain),² as well as extremist nationalist parties (such as Golden Dawn in Greece).

As Pippa Norris (2002 and 2003), Russell Dalton (2009) and others have shown us, young people are not politically apathetic. In her seminal work, *Democratic Phoenix*, Norris (2002) shows how young people's *repertoires* of participation have changed – they vote less, but participate in many alternative forms of civic and political engagement. They have turned away from traditional *agencies* of political participation – such as political parties and trade unions – towards non-governmental organisations with a clear focus e.g. Greenpeace, Amnesty International. Young people have their own political views and express themselves through issue-based engagement in political causes that have meaning for their everyday lives (Marsh *et al.* 2007; Amnå and Ekman 2013). In recent years, we have witnessed the diversification of citizen politics into a kaleidoscope of political action – from the ballot box, to the supermarket, to the street, to the Internet and new social media (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). Young people are at the vanguard of this change.

Young Europeans have become increasingly disillusioned with electoral politics, which they view as distant and unrepresentative (Henn and Foard 2012). This process has taken place over several decades and, thus, represents a slow-burning crisis in representative politics. The recent financial crisis and sovereign debt crises in Europe have added fuel to the fire – in the aftermath of the financial meltdown, many young people have felt let down by, ignored, or even victimised by public policy. In austerity Europe, youth unemployment has risen to over 20 per cent (more than double the rate as for citizens over 25). Education budgets and training programmes have been slashed and youth services (such as youth centres) have been closed down (while benefits for pensioners and older workers have often been retained). These changes have impacted, in a very tangible sense, upon many young people’s everyday lives. So, it is hardly surprising that young people have turned to political protest: from the Occupy Movement against inequality and corporate greed, to marches and sit-ins opposing increases in university tuition fees (Hopkins and Todd 2015), to rallies of the ‘outraged young’ against youth unemployment, to the emergence of new political parties (Sloam 2014). In Europe, we have witnessed a *perfect storm* of young people mobilising on political issues that affect their lives through hybrid media systems and hybrid public spaces – from the mobile phone to the town square (Castells 2012; Chadwick 2013).

Nevertheless, the political participation of young people in Europe is heavily defined by socio-economic status. Just as there are large inequalities between younger and older citizens in political engagement, there are large inequalities of participation between young people with greater and lesser economic resources (Verba *et al.* 1995; Sloam 2013). And, there is evidence to show that inequalities of participation between different economic groups have increased in recent years. Sander and Putnam (2010) point to the revival of youth participation in the United States, but highlight the growing gap between students and young Americans who have not gone on to university. Indeed, it appears that an individual’s level of educational achievement is the most important socio-economic determinant of political participation.

Whilst non-participation amongst socially excluded groups is certainly a major problem, such exclusion can also feed the *dark side of political engagement*. Young people who feel socially excluded will sometimes turn to extremist parties. The anti-immigrant, anti-Islamic French National Front, for example, has been very successful in luring supporters from this social demographic.

However, it is wrong, as we have seen elsewhere in this handbook, to presume that young people are all the same (see Chapters 6 to 10). They have multiple overlapping identities (see Chapters 43 to 47), different levels of resources and exist within distinctive civic-political cultures (Almond and Verba 1963). This chapter looks at five types of political participation – two forms of electoral politics (voting and party membership) and three forms of issue-based participation (petitions, boycotts and demonstrations) – to investigate the extent to which these forms of political action are youth oriented and defined by educational achievement (as a proxy for socio-economic status) in 15 European democracies.

Young Europeans and electoral politics

Youth engagement in electoral politics has declined significantly in most established democracies over recent decades. It is well known that younger people are less likely to vote than older generations (Franklin 2004), and that the memberships of European political parties are both ageing and declining (Van Biezen *et al.* 2012). This is true for all the ‘EU15’ countries. But how big is this gap? And, to what extent do age and socio-economic status determine whether or not young people vote?

Figure 34.1 shows that older citizens were much more likely to vote than their younger counterparts. According to ESS data, well over 80 per cent of citizens over 30 (who were eligible to vote) turned out in national elections compared to less than 60 per cent of (eligible) 18 to 24 year olds. Turnout levels were higher for the older group of young Europeans – a little less than 70 per cent of 18 to 29 year olds had voted in the previous legislative election. These statistics show that young people are far less likely to vote than older generations in the EU15, which reflects the general trends in electoral participation discussed above. The results also underline the extent to which non-voting is a particular problem amongst first-time voters (the 18–24-year-old category).

The differences in national youth turnout are quite large across the EU15. Between 70 and 80 per cent of (eligible) 18 to 24 year olds voted in Belgium,³ Sweden and Denmark compared to less than 40 per cent in the UK, Ireland and Luxembourg. The particularly large gap between the electoral participation of young and older adults in the UK is a cause for concern. It suggests a generational rupture as opposed to a long-term downward trend. This rupture could reflect the lack of choice in the UK's first-past-the-post electoral system. Disillusioned young people elsewhere in Europe may still vote, but have moved away from the so-called establishment parties. Youth turnout has, for example, remained relatively stable in Germany, but collective support for the main two parties – Christian Democrats and Social Democrats – plummeted from over 90 per cent in the 1970s to less than 60 per cent in 2009.

Political party membership may be a much less common political activity than voting, but we can observe a similar age effect. Only 4.3 per cent of Europeans over 30 years old were members of a political party or action group (Figure 34.1). This figure falls to 3.4 per cent for 18 to 29 year olds and 3.3 per cent for 15 to 24 year olds. The findings confirm the fact that political party membership is very low and (generationally) on a downward trend. However, there are significant variations across the EU15: over 4 per cent of 15 to 24 year olds joined a party or action group in Austria, Denmark, France, Greece and Sweden, but less than 2 per cent had done so in the UK, Finland, Italy and Luxembourg. In France, youth participation in political parties actually outstripped the participation rates of older age groups.

Socio-economic status has an important bearing on whether young people vote or get involved with political parties (Figure 34.2). In this regard, level of educational attainment is a key predictor of an individual's propensity to engage in politics.⁴ Young Europeans with university degrees had an average turnout rate of 75.1 per cent – three times the level of turnout of

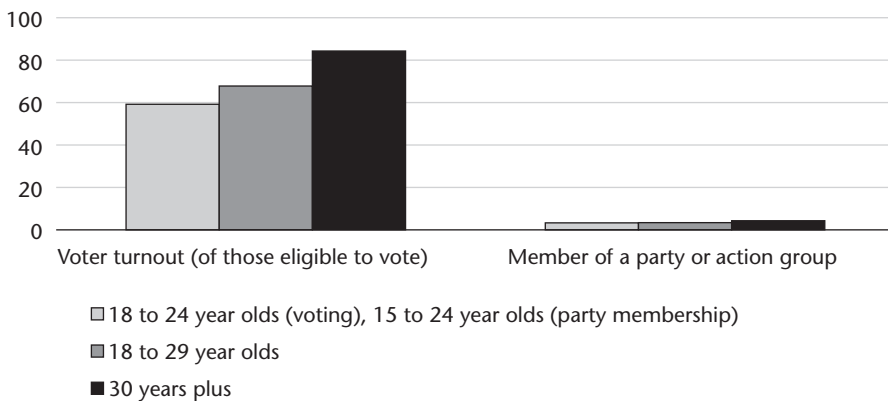


Figure 34.1 Youth participation in electoral politics in the EU15 (source: European Social Survey, Waves 1–6, 2002–2012).

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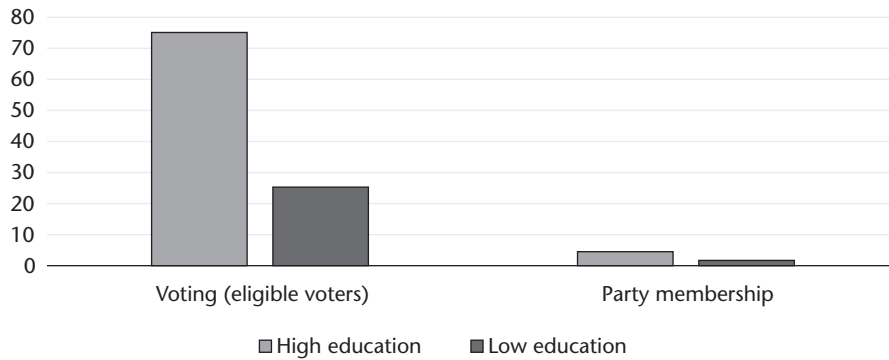


Figure 34.2 Youth participation in electoral politics in the EU15 based on (high-low) levels of educational attainment (source: European Social Survey, Waves 1–6, 2002–2012).

those who left school with no formal qualification (25.3 per cent). These figures highlight huge social inequalities in electoral participation, and emphasise the central role of social and economic resources in determining political engagement (Verba *et al.* 1995; Sloam 2013).

We can observe similar results for party membership. Even though this form of political activity is relatively rare across the population, young people with high levels of educational achievement are much more likely to get involved with a party or action group (4.5 per cent) than those who left school with no qualification (1.7 per cent).

Young Europeans and issue-based political engagement

We saw in the previous section that young Europeans are much less likely to vote or join a political party than older cohorts, and that this is particularly the case for young people with low levels of educational attainment. To what extent is this true for other forms of political participation? Here, the chapter focuses on three prominent modes of issue-based engagement: signing a petition, joining a boycott and participating in a demonstration. These three political activities have been characterised as important non-electoral forms of engagement that are popular amongst young people (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Dalton 2008). But to what extent do young people participate in these forms of engagement at higher rates than older citizens? And, to what extent does educational attainment make a difference?

It is clear from Figure 34.3 that age has a quite different bearing on political participation across these three activities. Over one-quarter of 15 to 24 year olds in the EU15 had signed a petition during the previous 12 months (26.1 per cent). This figure rises to 28.3 per cent for 18 to 29 year olds and falls to exactly one-quarter for those over 30. So, although signing a petition is often portrayed as a youth-oriented form of political engagement, there is no great variation in participation between younger and older cohorts.

The likelihood of joining a boycott or participating in a demonstration can, on the other hand, be predicted by age. A total of 19.1 per cent of those over 30 had boycotted a product during the previous 12 months, compared to 17.6 per cent of 18 to 29 year olds and 14.9 per cent of 15 to 24 year olds. So, joining a boycott is not a youth-oriented activity.

The reverse is true for demonstrations. Of the three issue-based forms of engagement, participating in a demonstration is the least common but also the most youth-oriented political activity. Almost twice as many 15 to 24 year olds as those over 30 participated in this form of political action (13.1 per cent to 6.9 per cent). These findings appear to confirm the results of

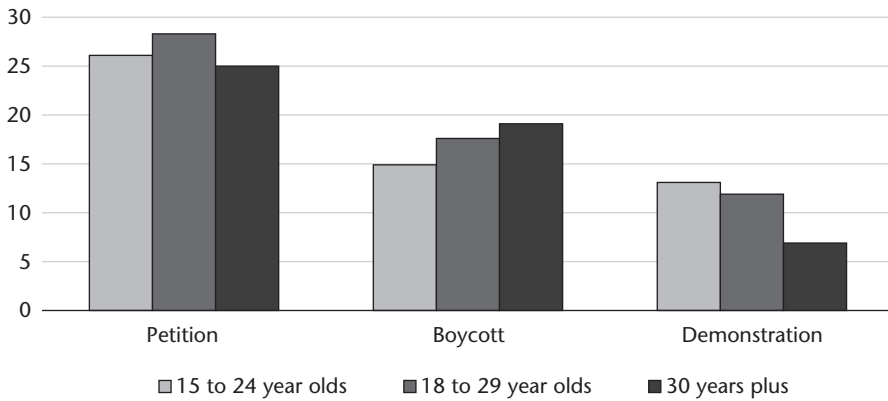


Figure 34.3 Youth participation in petitions, boycotts and demonstrations in the EU15 (source: European Social Survey, Waves 1–6, 2002–2012).

previous research that *overt* forms of political protest – such as participating in a demonstration, displaying a badge or sticker for a political cause, and various forms of direction action e.g. occupations – are particularly common amongst the young (Sloam 2013).

Youth participation across the EU15 mirrors the patterns of participation for older citizens in each country. Whilst *rates of youth participation* vary significantly from country to country, *ratios of youth participation* (of young people to adults of all ages) are very similar. In this sense, the civic-political culture of a country defines the contours of young people’s politics (Almond and Verba 1963). In the three Scandinavian democracies issue-based engagement (in petitions, boycotts and demonstrations) is generally very high, whilst in Portugal and Greece it is comparatively speaking very low. However, the picture is more nuanced than this might suggest. Countries appear to specialise in particular modes of participation. Thus, (young) Spaniards are particularly likely to participate in demonstrations (compared to their peers elsewhere in the EU15), but are relatively unlikely to sign a petition. In Sweden and the UK, the reverse is true.

A number of scholars have argued that issue-based forms of political participation are more common amongst citizens of high socio-economic status (Schlozman *et al.* 2010). It is supposed that these forms of political participation are more demanding of citizens’ civic skills and knowledge (Dalton 2004) and social networks, and therefore are better suited to the well-educated and the well-off. However, Figure 34.4 paints a more complex picture.

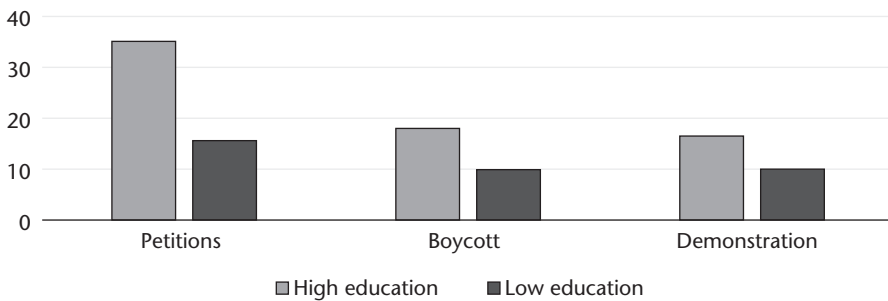


Figure 34.4 Youth participation in petitions, boycotts and demonstrations in the EU15 based on (high-low) levels of educational attainment (source: European Social Survey, Waves 1–6, 2002–2012).

Young Europeans with high levels of educational achievement are about twice as likely to sign a petition or join a boycott as those with low levels of educational achievement (35.1 per cent to 15.6 per cent, and 18 per cent to 9.9 per cent, respectively). With regard to demonstrations this gap is somewhat smaller (16.6 per cent to 10 per cent).⁵ However, for young people at least, the social inequalities of issue-based political participation are actually less than they are for voting. The reverse is true for older citizens.

Discussion and conclusion

Young people in Europe vote significantly less than older generations. Some of these differences are attributable to the life-cycle effect – citizens voting more as they get older. However, there is clear evidence to show that if an individual does not vote in their first (coming-of-age) election, they are unlikely to do so at subsequent elections. Therefore, low levels of youth turnout (and miniscule rates of party membership) are symptomatic of falling levels of electoral participation for all ages over time. Given these participatory trends and the demographic reality of ageing European societies, mainstream political parties have become less able (and, perhaps, less willing) to represent young people’s interests.

The pressures on public spending in the aftermath of the global financial crisis and European sovereign debt crises have only sharpened this disconnection. In this political vacuum, we have witnessed the rise of ‘anti-politics’ (Hay 2007). Populist, nationalist and extremist parties and groups have targeted disaffected young people by arguing that they are against the political establishment. The far-right in particular has, in many European countries, preyed on young people from poorer backgrounds by trying to scapegoat various groups – immigrants, Muslims and so on – for very real social problems.

As the recent wave of youth protests has shown, young people are interested in politics and politically active in many different ways. The issue-based forms of engagement examined in this chapter only provide a narrow snapshot of the many and varied non-electoral modes of participation, which are constantly emerging and reinventing themselves. Signing a petition, for example, is hardly a new political activity, but was once quite rare. E-petitions, on the other hand, have become a regular feature of many people’s lives in a digital world. In this sense, young Europeans continue to, in Pippa Norris’ (2002) terms, ‘reinvent political activism’ through hybrid media systems, and across hybrid public spaces.

Whilst it is important to emphasise that young people continue to be politically active, it is also clear that participation is not socially equal. In previous generations, voting was a relatively socially equal act. Research shows that voting is more socially equal amongst older generations than amongst the 18- to 24-year-old cohort (Sloam 2013). Conversely, signing a petition, joining a boycott and participating in a demonstration are more socially equal for young people than they are for older citizens. It seems that, over the past few decades, many issue-based forms of engagement have become normalised: they have diffused across different age groups and socio-economic groups over time.

Although the EU15 countries share many of the same problems, clearly some countries are better than others at fostering youth engagement. Why is it that the political participation of young people is so high in Sweden and Denmark and so low in the UK? It is interesting that levels of political interest are quite similar in these three countries. It would seem that, for whatever reasons, mainstream politicians are doing a better job of representing (young) citizens’ interests in the Scandinavian democracies.

Notes

- 1 This chapter uses cumulative data from rounds 1 to 6 (2002–2012) of the European Social Survey available to download at www.europeansocialsurvey.org/.
- 2 Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement scored a major electoral success when it dramatically emerged to become the largest single party in the 2013 Chamber of Deputies election. Podemos, set up in the wake of mass youth protests against government austerity (by the 'Spanish *indignados*') rose to become a major force in the 2015 Spanish general election.
- 3 The figures in Belgium are artificially high due the existence of compulsory voting.
- 4 Educational achievement is linked to social background (university education is most common amongst young people from privileged backgrounds) and future achievement. Education can also help young people to develop their democratic skills and build confidence in their ability to make a difference (Kisby and Sloam 2012).
- 5 Interestingly, age is more important than socio-economic status for this form of political engagement.

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