

European democratic politics in crisis?

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We are becoming quite familiar with (if not somewhat de-sensitised to) repeated warnings that young people in Britain are increasingly disillusioned with democratic politics, rejecting the institutions of national government, and leaving British democracy in a state of relative crisis as a consequence. In particular, this youth generation is often singled-out for critical attention – condemned either for their declining presence at the ballot booths, or for their active participation in recent high-profile student protests and youth-led occupations of public spaces in major cities across the country.

But the apparent rupture between citizens and the institutions of democratic governance is not an exceptionally “British” issue, and nor is it a uniquely “youth” one. Recent trends across Europe indicate that people of all ages and in all countries seem less committed to national political systems and mainstream political parties, and increasingly susceptible to radical parties and to their rhetoric. They also appear to be deeply sceptical of governments and of the political classes in general (Norris, 2011). The recent European Assembly elections are a case in point. In May of this year, nearly 400 million EU citizens in 28 countries were invited to vote for candidates to represent them, yet only 42% opted to do so – the lowest turnout rate since direct elections were first held 30 years ago.

Furthermore, in many countries, significant numbers of people turned their backs on traditional and mainstream parties, choosing instead to vote for anti-EU/anti-system parties (European Parliament, 2014). Close to home, the anti-EU *UKIP* topped the poll with 27% of the UK vote. Across the continent, anti-immigration and far-right parties made significant advances in countries like Greece and Denmark, while the *Front National* in France claimed victory over its rivals. Meanwhile, left and leftist anti-system parties rejecting austerity and neoliberalism scored impressive results in countries such as Greece, Spain and Portugal.

Europe’s youth turning its back on democratic politics?

So what about Europe’s youth? To what extent are young people disengaging from national and European democratic processes and institutions? There is much evidence suggesting a decline in the participation of Europe’s youth in traditional forms of political engagement such as voting and joining political parties, and in their strength of feeling concerning those politicians who have been elected to positions of power ostensibly to represent them in national and European parliaments (Bruter and Harrison, 2009). However, while there has been a decrease in the engagement of youth in “traditional” democratic practices, further analysis of youth participation unveils a complex landscape of different types of informal and formal participation and civic engagement. For example, there is emerging evidence that young people’s engagement in participation activities contributes to their sense of being European and their connection with Europe. A survey of participants of the EU’s Youth in Action Programme (YiA) (2007-2013) found that 73% of youth participants felt more European because of their involvement in YiA activities. Over 500,000 young people were involved in YiA activities, so this could potentially have a significant impact on the experiences of young people and their sense of European citizenship. Additionally, a cross-European study with eight different study sites of 18-24 year olds found that a link between active citizenship at local and national level had a positive impact on young people’s self-identification as European citizens (Jamieson and Grundy, 2005).

Furthermore, the decline in traditional political participation is more complex than a simple rejection of traditional participatory practices; it could also illustrate the growing centrality of new forms of participation that are “less institutionalised and more flexible” such as anti-globalisation protests and boycotting activities (Forbrig, 2005:141). Additionally, there are many different spaces in which youth participation occurs. These range from *formal participatory spaces* such as youth parliaments and youth councils, through to *demanded participatory spaces* in which people act in their own right. Formal participatory spaces may be limited in that they are often based on adult democratic institutions; they may therefore have the effect of inhibiting the involvement of young people who do not, or will not, conform to adults’ expectations of behaviour or interactions. Furthermore, the most active young participants are not representative of the general youth population, and tend to be those from higher socio-economic groups and with higher levels of education attainment. However, benefits of such provided participatory spaces include greater access to policy-makers for involved young people, increased dialogue and relations between adults and young citizens, and a perception of youth as “part of the solution and not part of the problem” (Kirby and Bryson, 2002: 21).

Elsewhere, some young Europeans are engaged in non-traditional forms of political participation in demanded spaces (such as activism, boycotting and protests), and many are moving towards new forms of civic engagement rather than the complete rejection of traditional democratic practices. In recent years, young people from Europe and beyond were actively engaged in creating or re-thinking democracy. In many regions, young people share a widespread feeling of alienation from politics and exclusion from society which leads to either well-argued protests such as the 15-M Movement or riots driven by anger and despair.

This participation of young people in what might be perceived as anti-establishment actions (such as anti-war rallies and anti- or alter-globalisation movements) demonstrate that young people are not apathetic about political participation and civic responsibility. Instead, these participatory actions can form the basis of new cultures of political participation and the reinforcement of civil society. Recent demonstrations and street protests can also be understood as a form of dissident citizenship where young people register their anger with the state outside of formal democratic practices - as in recent protests (May 2014) concerning the presence of a strong right-ist element in the newly elected European Parliament.

Conclusion

European democracy is in a relatively poor state of health. Citizens of all ages, and young citizens in particular, are clearly disenchanted with the formal institutions, practices, performance and outcomes of European democracy. But it is too simplistic to take from these trends that young Europeans are politically apathetic, with no interest in democratic politics. They may not vote in large numbers at national and European assembly elections – and where they do vote, they be more interested in anti-system parties rather than in the mainstream traditional parties – but they are active observers of the democratic political scene. And in many cases they are interested in seeking ways to participate in different forms of political action that match their democratic means, needs and aspirations.

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