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## Meaningful youth political participation in Europe: concepts, patterns and policy implications - Research study

Boldt, Georg Mikael

Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth  
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# MEANINGFUL YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN EUROPE: CONCEPTS, PATTERNS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS



Research study

## Youth Partnership

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



EUROPEAN UNION

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

# **MEANINGFUL YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN EUROPE: CONCEPTS, PATTERNS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

## RESEARCH STUDY

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## List of abbreviations

Covid-19	<i>Strand of coronavirus that caused a global pandemic in 2020</i>
CSOs	<i>Civil society organisations</i>
DIO	<i>Do-it-ourselves politics</i>
DSA	<i>Direct social action</i>
EU	<i>European Union</i>
EURYKA	<i>Reinventing Democracy in Europe: Youth Doing Politics in Times of Increasing Inequalities was a cross-national research project which provided systematic and practice-related knowledge about how inequalities mediate youth political participation</i>
FFF	<i>Fridays For Future movement</i>
ICONS	<i>The ICONS project creates simulations and scenario-driven exercises to advance participants' understanding of complex problems and strengthen their ability to make decisions, navigate crises, think strategically and negotiate collaboratively</i>
LGBT	<i>People who have identified themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender</i>
LGBTIQ	<i>People who have identified themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or questioning</i>
NGOs	<i>Non-governmental organisations</i>
OECD	<i>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</i>
PARTISPACE	<i>Spaces and Styles of Participation project</i>
SIDA	<i>Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency</i>
UN	<i>United Nations</i>
UNHCR	<i>United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees</i>
UNICEF	<i>United Nations International Children's Fund</i>
XR	<i>Extinction Rebellion movement</i>





# Introduction

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**T**his study on youth political participation builds on long-established research interest shown by expert publications (e.g. Forbrig 2005), insights into innovative forms of youth participation (Crowley and Moxon 2017), literature reviews (e.g. Galstyan 2019), toolkits and expert perspectives (e.g. Deželan 2018, Farrow 2018) and outcomes of the symposium “The future of young people’s political participation: questions, challenges and opportunities” held in 2019 (EU-Council of Europe youth partnership 2019, Bacalso 2019). Seeking to move conversations on youth political participation forward, this theoretical study is built on an extensive literature review and highlights some less frequently debated dimensions of youth political participation, and introduces original avenues for defining meaningful youth political participation.

The first section gives an overview of the key concepts linked to political participation. It examines a variety of types of political participation in general, such as conventional, unconventional, or individualised, before turning to the specificities of youth political participation. Characteristics of a range of democratic environments are presented and linked to various mechanisms of youth political participation, underlining the importance of the context in which political participation activities take place. Meaningful youth political participation is subsequently explored in a variety of democratic environments. This serves to showcase an original methodology for defining and identifying meaningful youth political participation practices. Despite not all European countries being widely recognised as full democracies (Freedom House 2020, The Economist Intelligence Unit 2020), this publication only considers youth political participation in democratic environments. Focusing on nondemocratic political setups would require a specific approach. This is because many mechanisms described in the field of democratic theory, which constitutes a substantial contribution to today’s understanding of youth political participation, would not be valid, or would require modification.

The second section builds on this theoretical framework and specifically tackles the domain of conventional political participation, presenting some typical approaches to youth political participation and their outcomes with respect to popular inclusion. It begins by discussing the idea of political socialisation through participation and the long-standing notion that the democratic attitudes and skills needed for engaging in the public sphere can be instilled in youth by means of non-formal learning. Often, institutional youth participation is approached using methods that are normatively aligned with the ideals of representative democracy. The section goes on to argue that processes that are normatively closer to participatory democracy are more likely to trigger the kinds of transformative political socialisation that revitalise democracy. Finally, the section ends with a call to action for a more culturally sensitive strategy for youth participation, an approach that offers a plurality of ways to engage with politics.

The third section focuses on unconventional youth political participation, building on the first two sections and presenting case studies of concrete opportunities for unconventional youth political participation. Major concepts and debates on unconventional participation, social movements and youth activism – and their interplay – are discussed and linked to democratic environments. Opportunities and challenges for unconventional participation are then examined considering both contextual and individual driving factors. Patterns of inequality and exclusion are further highlighted through an intersectional lens. Finally, the section brings together some reflections and research on the latest developments in terms of future trends for youth political participation, with a focus on the context of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. The concepts and ideas explored are illustrated through the case of the contemporary climate justice movement – namely Fridays For Future and Extinction Rebellion.

The final section summarises the most important concepts introduced and explored throughout the study, presenting the reader with recommendations building on these concepts and directed at further development of the theory and practice of meaningful youth political participation. To make navigating this publication straightforward, there follows a list of sections and chapters and the main questions covered in each.

Chapter	Main questions
<b>SECTION I.</b>	
<b>KEY CONCEPTS OF MEANINGFUL YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION</b>	
1. Political participation	How can political participation be defined? How has the definition changed over the last 50 years? What are the current differences between conventional, unconventional and individualised political participation?
2. Youth political participation	What role does the definition of “young people” play in discussing youth political participation? How is youth political participation specific in terms of access, process and aims?
3. Meaningful youth political participation	What defines meaningfulness in youth political participation?
4. Types of democratic environments	What are the differences between direct, representative, participatory, deliberative and counter-democracy?
5. Reconstructing meaningful youth political participation	How can exploring intersections between the aims of youth political participation and types of democratic environments help us in defining the multifaceted nature of meaningful youth political participation?

Chapter	Main questions
<b>SECTION II.</b> <b>CONVENTIONAL YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION, TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES AND CULTURES OF PARTICIPATION</b>	
1. Meaningful conventional youth political participation and participatory democracy	What are the differences between conventional youth political participation mechanisms in representative and participatory democracy environments?
2. Conventional youth participation practices	What are the common practices for conventional youth political participation today?
3. Case study: youth councils	What are the benefits and challenges of youth participation through youth councils?
4. Case study: participatory budgeting	What are the benefits and challenges of youth participation through participatory budgeting?
5. Youth as active citizens	<p>What are “cultural toolkits”?</p> <p>How do young people determine whether conventional political participation activities serve their needs?</p>
6. Cultural sensitivity in conventional youth political participation	What factors influence meaningful conventional youth political participation of individual young people?
<b>SECTION III.</b> <b>UNCONVENTIONAL YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND YOUTH ACTIVISM</b>	
1. Unconventional youth political participation	<p>What defines unconventional youth political participation?</p> <p>What examples of unconventional political participation of young people can be identified?</p>
2. Youth activism in social movements and do-it-ourselves politics	<p>What does “prefigurative” politics bring into play?</p> <p>What concrete examples of activism and social movements of young people can be seen in today’s world?</p>
3. Socio-political contexts, conditions and resources of unconventional youth political participation	<p>What is the current state of play in the domain of unconventional youth political participation?</p> <p>What contextual and individual factors drive young people’s engagement in unconventional political participation?</p>

Chapter	Main questions
4. Intersectionality and patterns of exclusion	What is “intersectionality” and how does it influence patterns of youth political participation?
5. Case study: the climate justice movement	What developments are showcased by the example of the climate justice movement?
6. Outcomes and future trends of unconventional youth political participation	<p>What trends can be identified in contemporary youth activism and social movements?</p> <p>How is the current pandemic crisis affecting young people’s participation?</p>
<b>SECTION IV.</b> <b>CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	
<p>Always consider context when debating the meaningfulness of youth political participation.</p>	
<p>Avoid treating youth political participation activities as universally helpful.</p>	
<p>Consider the advantages of applying mechanisms of participatory democracy in conventional youth political participation practice.</p>	
<p>Consider the “cultural toolkits” of young people from a variety of backgrounds when creating conventional youth political participation opportunities.</p>	
<p>Be aware of strengthening prefigurativism and the transnational character of current unconventional youth political participation.</p>	
<p>Consider intersectionality when exploring youth engagement in unconventional youth political participation.</p>	

# SECTION I – KEY CONCEPTS IN MEANINGFUL YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

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*Ondřej Bárta*

**T**he concept of political participation has received considerable attention in various spheres of life in the last hundred years: in expert discussions, in the political and public arenas, and among young people, to name a few. This diversity of interest in political participation has contributed to the concept's evolution over time, leading in some instances to different or even contradictory understandings of political participation by various actors. Efforts to clarify the concrete meaning conveyed by the concept of political participation sometimes see it combined with adjectives: youth political participation, meaningful political participation and many others. But such additions do not ensure a clearer understanding of the concept; rather, they increase its complexity. Thus, one must first clarify and define the relevant terms to enable coherent and understandable discussion of the different aspects of political participation, youth political participation and meaningful youth political participation.

Below, the concept of political participation is described first, including a brief overview of the development of this term and the most common distinctions made between conventional, unconventional and individualised political participation. Second, youth political participation is defined and related to the overall concept of political participation, underlining the specificities of this particular term. Finally, the term “meaningful youth political participation” is explored, adding another layer of complexity, and linking this theoretical section to the rest of the present publication.

## **1. Political participation**

The EU-Council of Europe youth partnership employs a broad definition of political participation: “Political participation is any activity that shapes, affects,

or involves the political sphere.” (EU-Council of Europe youth partnership 2020) This approach is consistent with a long line of authors (van Deth 2001 and 2014, Quaranta 2012, Deželan 2015), who argue that the definitions of political participation largely focus on citizen activities seeking to influence political decisions. When comparing definitions of political participation, four features commonly appear (van Deth 2001: 5):<sup>1</sup>

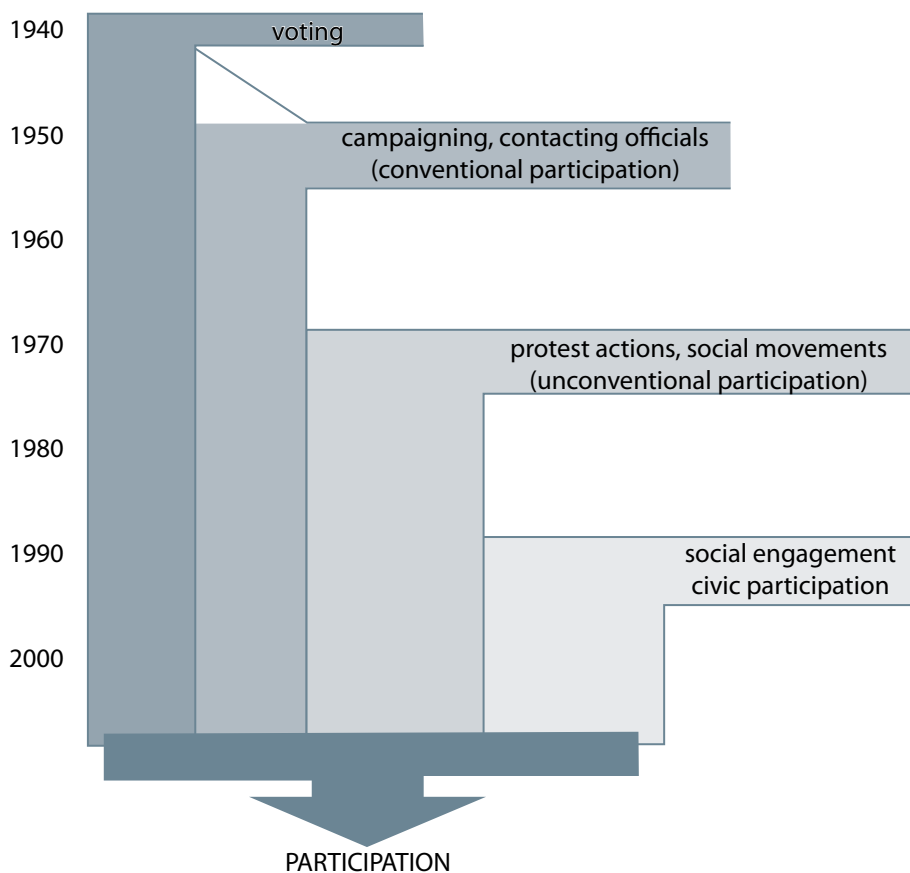
- ▶ individuals’ activities and action (as opposed to passive consumption, for instance);
- ▶ the voluntary nature of the act (as opposed to activities commanded by law, for instance);
- ▶ individuals’ roles as citizens (as opposed to the role of policy makers, for instance);
- ▶ politics and the political system as the target of the act (as opposed to personal goals, for instance).

When exploring these definitions and the aspects above in more detail, it quickly becomes apparent that such an understanding of political participation is unmanageably broad. It is necessary to note that such breadth in the definition of political participation is only a recent phenomenon and has not always been the case. Indeed, it is the result of a lengthy development in the understanding of political participation practices. The main steps along this near century-long journey towards today’s understanding of political participation were outlined by van Deth (2001) and summarised in Figure 1. This development began in the 1940s. From a rather narrow understanding of political participation limited to voting, the definition gradually came to include ever more modes of participation, ranging from the conventional to the unconventional. By the 2000s, it spanned a broad spectrum of civic and social engagement (van Deth 2001: 5; Galstyan 2019).

To capture the wide variety of definitions and understandings of political participation available while seeking a precise description of the concept’s meaning, van Deth (2014) came up with a conceptual map, later modified by de Moor (2016: 12; see Figure 2). The map uses the main aspects listed in the general definition above (i.e. activity, voluntariness, citizen or amateur approach and political aims) to determine whether concrete, real-life examples of citizens’ activities can be seen as political participation. It also allows us to determine what type of political participation these activities constitute (see Figure 3). This concept map presents a useful insight into the range of the current understanding of the term, and various activities which can be described as political participation.

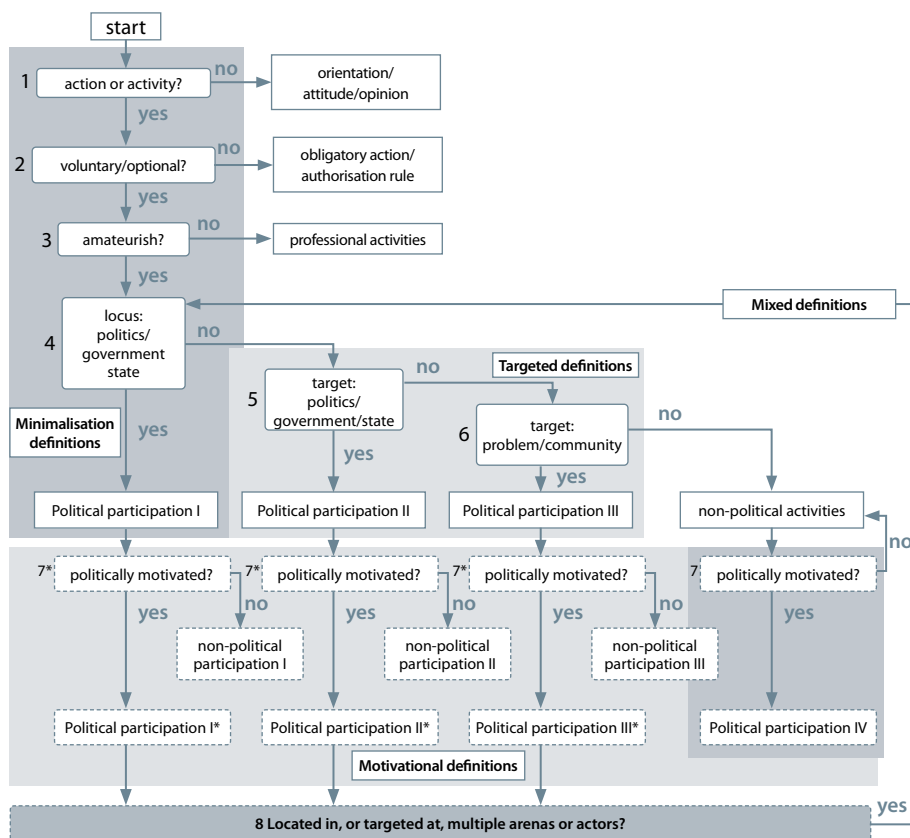
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1. For a discussion of further features of political participation, see van Deth (2001) and Brady (1998).



**Figure 1: The expansion of the political action repertoire (van Deth 2001: 14).**

For example, does engagement of a young person in their National Youth Council in itself constitute political participation? First, it requires an individual to become active and engaged, and as such it is an action. Second, it is voluntary, as the person can opt out (or never engage in the first place). Third, it is amateur in nature in that it is not conducted to gain profit (or at least not primarily so). The fourth criterion is ambiguous. On the one hand, the National Youth Council can in some instances take action directly in political processes (as advisory bodies, for example), and therefore constitutes an example of conventional political participation. In other cases, however, it does not operate directly within the political process, but targets them from outside, making it an unconventional form of political participation. This example clearly demonstrates the value of the concept map shown in Figure 2. Indeed, it excludes activities which do not comply with the definition of political participation. But at the same time, it allows for a careful examination of specific political participation processes, showcasing the complexity they may include. In this case, national youth councils can be defined as either conventional or unconventional forms of political participation, depending on the relationship between the National Youth Council and state structures.



**Figure 2: Conceptual map from van Deth (2014) modified by de Moor (2016: 12).**

Based on this approach, the key types of political participation can be identified by combining Figure 2 and Figure 3:

- ▶ conventional political participation (minimalist definition of political participation);
- ▶ unconventional political participation and civic engagement (targeted definitions of political participation);
- ▶ individualised political participation (motivational definition of political participation).

When seeking to establish the defining aspects of these types of political participation, again, the developmental perspective cannot be overlooked.

Conventional political participation (also referred to as “traditional” (Linszen et al. 2011) or “orthodox political participation” (Bourne 2010)) is the oldest defined type in the participatory domain. It includes institutionalised activities taking place in the electoral arena, such as voting, standing in elections, or becoming a member of a political party (Stockemer 2014).



Operational concepts (see Figure 1):		Types and commonly used labels	Specimens of typical modes
<i>Minimalist definition</i>	Political Participation-I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ conventional political participation</li> <li>▶ institutional political participation</li> <li>▶ elite-directed action</li> <li>▶ formal participation</li> <li>▶ ...</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ voting</li> <li>▶ budget forums</li> <li>▶ party membership</li> <li>▶ contacting politicians</li> <li>▶ ...</li> </ul>
<i>Targeted definitions</i>	Target: government/ politics/state  Political Participation-II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ unconventional political participation</li> <li>▶ non-institutional political participation</li> <li>▶ protest</li> <li>▶ political action</li> <li>▶ contentious politics</li> <li>▶ elite-challenging action</li> <li>▶ everyday activism</li> <li>▶ ...</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ signing a petition</li> <li>▶ demonstrating</li> <li>▶ blocking streets</li> <li>▶ painting slogans</li> <li>▶ flash mobs</li> <li>▶ ...</li> </ul>
	Aimed at: problems or community  Political Participation-III	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ civic engagement</li> <li>▶ social participation</li> <li>▶ community participation</li> <li>▶ ...</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ volunteering</li> <li>▶ reclaim-the-street-party</li> <li>▶ ...</li> </ul>
<i>Motivational definition</i>	Political Participation-IV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ expressive political participation</li> <li>▶ individualised collective action</li> <li>▶ personalised politics</li> <li>▶ ...</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ political consumerism</li> <li>▶ boycotts</li> <li>▶ boycotts</li> <li>▶ public suicides</li> <li>▶ ...</li> </ul>

**Figure 3: Concepts, types and typical modes of political participation (van Deth 2014: 361).**

Unconventional political participation (also called “non-conventional” (Hafner Fink 2012; Zani and Barrett 2012; Pontes et al. 2018; Bárta et al. 2019), “unorthodox political participation” (Bourne 2010), or “protest activities” (Newton and Giebler 2008, Quaranta 2012) is composed of such activities that aim to influence the political domain, but which are carried out through means other than those found in the narrow avenue of conventional participation (Galstyan 2019). In contrast to conventional political participation, it can be defined as the set of activities that use non-institutionalised approaches to achieve their goals. Examples of such activities include demonstrations, strikes, boycotts, or petitions (Quaranta 2012).

Individualised political participation (also called “lifestyle politics” (de Moor 2016)) has arisen in expert and public discourse only in recent decades, and brings a key change to the participatory domain: this type of political participation often takes place on the individual level and as such does not require group, community, or mass action, as was the case in both political participation types defined above. As described by Bennett (2012: 37): “Social fragmentation and the decline of group loyalties have given rise to an era of personalized politics in which individual expression displaces collective action frames in the embrace of political causes. ... individuals are mobilized around personal lifestyle values to engage with multiple causes such as economic justice (fair trade, inequality and development policies), environmental protection, and worker and human rights.” This change shifts attention to the “politicization of everyday life choices” (de Moor 2016: 3), and to the activities of the individual that carry a political meaning in various areas, such as animal welfare (veganism), or ethical aspects of production processes (boycotting).

The historical order in which the different types of political participation started occurring in expert and public discourse is key to fully understanding certain difficulties in defining these concepts (SolaMorales and Hernández-Santaolalla 2017). Since the electoral arena was once understood as the only means of political participation, it was logical to call it conventional and link it to the institutionalised and traditional ways of affecting the political arena (van Deth 2001). For some time, the term “unconventional participation” then constituted the opposite to institutionalised political participation. In contemporary Europe, however, the line between these terms is not as clear as it once was. Signing petitions is an example of a political participation activity that went from a noninstitutionalised mode of participation to a rather well-recognised and structured one. The right to petition is now officially recognised for all EU citizens, as anchored in the Maastricht Treaty (1992; Marzocchi 2019), and continuously monitored and reported on (Heezen and Marzocchi 2019). Despite this, it is still frequently named in lists of unconventional participation practices, making the definition of such practices ambiguous and, without historical context, difficult to understand. This ambiguity leads some researchers to use lists of activities they consider to fall under the conventional, unconventional, or individualised modes of political participation, instead of providing a particular definition (Newton and Giebler 2008, Bourne 2010, Homana 2018, Pontes et al. 2018, Bárta et al. 2019).

In conclusion, it is important to fully understand the definition of political participation in each context. The example of national youth councils explored above shows

that one mechanism can easily be interpreted as falling under two different types of political participation. Therefore, care should be taken when debating different types of political participation activities, as it should not be taken for granted that everyone understands these concepts in the same way.

## 2. Youth political participation

Young people also engage in political participation activities, adding another level of complexity to political participation theory. In line with the definition established above, youth political participation can be understood as the active, voluntary engagement of young people from their citizen perspective in any activity that shapes, affects, or involves the political sphere. When exploring youth political participation, there are several key aspects which must be considered, namely:

- ▶ the definition of young people;
- ▶ the specificities of youth engagement in political participation in terms of:
  - access;
  - process;
  - aims.

Young people are, nowadays,<sup>2</sup> considered to be a distinct group to which a wide range of specific fields explicitly or implicitly relate, including youth policy and youth political participation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, young people are currently defined very differently across various fields and geographical locations. In most contexts, “biological age is the basic determinant of youth in legal and policy documents”<sup>3</sup> (Bárta 2020: 17). In line with this approach, Perovic (2016) summarised several definitions of young people in legal and policy frameworks across European countries, coming up with six distinct approaches to defining youth (Perovic 2016: 3):<sup>4</sup>

- ▶ Predominant European model – 14 to 30 years of age (23 European countries)
- ▶ Shortened youth age model – 13 to 25 years of age (5 European countries)
- ▶ Start-earlier-and-end-later youth age model – 12 to 30 years of age (5 European countries)
- ▶ Prolonged youth age model – 12 to 35 years of age (5 European countries)
- ▶ Youth age model comprising childhood – 3 to 30 years of age (3 European countries)
- ▶ Children and youth merged model – 0 to 30 years of age (6 European countries).

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2. The development of this understanding has been neither brief nor straightforward, but for practical reasons, the historical dimensions of the evolution of the concept of youth are not discussed here. For more details on this debate see Bárta (2020: 17).

3. The example of young farmers who, in the EU context, are not defined only by biological age but also by other aspects, is pointed out by Bárta (2020: 17).

4. Only extreme age limits shown in here, for the full list of details please refer to the original publication.



Similar ambiguity in defining young people exists at the international, European level (Bárta 2020). When exploring EU and UN policy documents, for example, age ranges of 15 to 29, 15 to 24, or 13 to 30 are found (Bárta 2020: 17, EU-Council of Europe youth partnership 2020).

This ambiguity in defining young people across documents and contexts has a considerable impact on the definition of youth political participation. Youth political participation can be understood differently with respect to both the lower and upper age limits of young people. Considering the lower age limit raises the question of differentiating between children's and youth participation. The upper age limit relates to the distinction between youth participation and that of the general population. These dilemmas must be addressed when defining youth political participation in real contexts to ensure all stakeholders have the same frame of reference.

Both lower and upper age limits impact young people's access to various political participation mechanisms. The legal voting age is an example of a threshold to conventional political participation mechanisms (Bárta 2020: 18). The legal voting age has varied over the course of history. A common voting age at the beginning of

the 20th century was 21,<sup>5</sup> which was lowered to 18 by the end of the 20th century, and further lowered to 16 in some countries at the beginning of the 21st century. Young people's struggle to gain voting rights as of their 16th birthday continues, as campaigns run in the United Kingdom (British Youth Council 2020) and in Ireland (National Youth Council of Ireland 2020). This has considerable implications for the reporting of young people's voting behaviour around Europe, for instance, as such widely used terms as "first-time voters" or "young voters" encompass a completely different group of young people across countries. Moreover, using different definitions of young people also has notable implications when discussing access to conventional political participation mechanisms: the percentage of young people who are eligible to vote will be strikingly different when defining the age range of youth as 0-30 as opposed to 15-24. Whereas all young people aged 0-15 (or 0-17) are ineligible to vote in the first case, it is only the 15-year-olds (or 15-17-year-olds) in the second.<sup>6</sup> These implications must be kept in mind not only in one given context, but also in the case of comparisons with other environments.

The definition of young people also plays a role when it comes to identifying the political participation processes in which young people prefer to engage. A growing body of literature suggests that young people in general exhibit low levels of political participation in conventional processes, such as voting, while showing high levels of political participation in unconventional or individualised processes, such as participation in demonstrations or lifestyle politics (Tsekoura 2016, Melo and Stockemer 2014, Wahlström et al. 2019, Gardiner 2016, Goerres 2007, Chrisp and Pearce 2019). As was the case in the previous example, the definition of youth is key to exploring these trends in detail. Young people defined by the age range 15-24 are likely to provide for a different picture than youth defined as 12-35-year-olds. At the same time, especially in the case of broader definitions of youth such as ages 12-35, analysing subsets of young people (e.g. ages 12-15, 16-18, etc.) can yield valuable insights, as youth are not a homogenous group with invariable needs and preferences. As an example, young people under 25 showed the lowest voting turnout in the UK in 2005 at 38%, in comparison to 48% of 25-34-year-olds. These values display a varying trend over the years, with under-25s' voting turnout at 65% in 2017, in comparison to 63% of 25-34-year-olds (Moxon et al. 2020; Chrisp and Pearce 2019).

To fully explore our understanding of youth political participation, let us now turn to the specificities of youth political participation in terms of access, process and aims.

The variability of the definition of young people at both national and international levels clearly outlines the specificity of youth political participation in contrast to political participation by the general population. Understanding youth political participation also requires a detailed look at its justifications and aims. In general, a justification for an action is the reason, drive, or cause for its implementation. The aims of that action then need to be in line with the justification, and lead to fulfilment of the action's justification. By and large, aims are based on justifications that

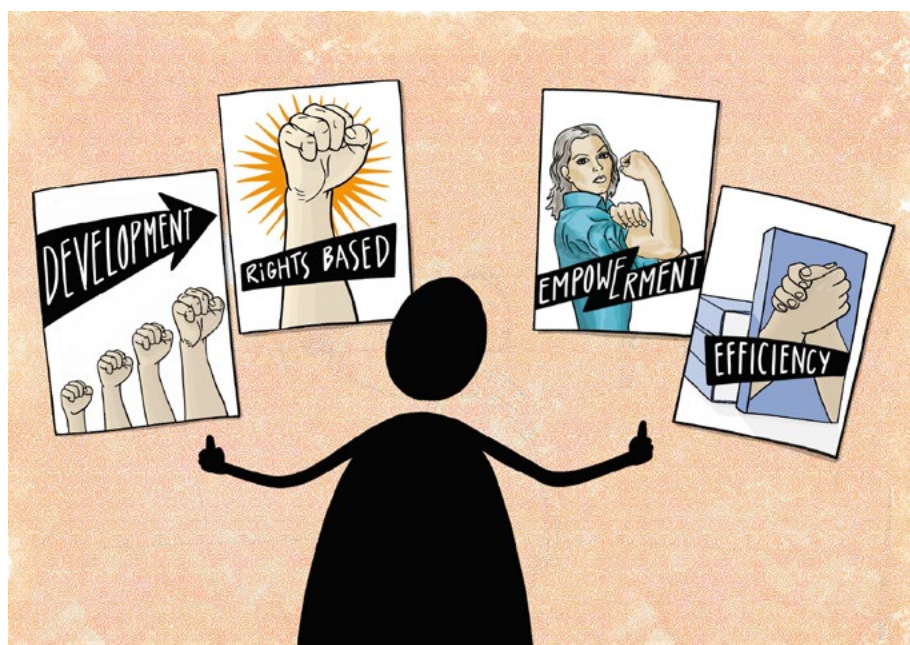
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5. Broader issues related to voting rights and suffrage struggles in the 20th century are intentionally left out for the sake of the example's simplicity.

6. For a broader discussion on the implications of youth categories in analysing voting behaviour, see Moxon et al. (2020).

make youth political participation worthwhile. As Farthing (2012) points out, the justifications for youth political participation have not been thoroughly explored. Nevertheless, four ideal-type justifications of youth political participation can be identified as follows (Farthing 2012: 77; cf. SIDA not dated, Lansdown et al. 2018, Kiilakoski 2020, Reimer 2002, UNICEF 2019):

- ▶ rights-based
- ▶ empowerment
- ▶ efficiency
- ▶ development.



The rights-based justification for youth political participation seeks to fulfil the legal obligation set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and in other policy documents (European Commission 2018). These documents clearly state that young people have the right to participate in matters that concern them (Farthing 2012: 75, Lansdown et al. 2018: 4), and in a broader sense, “[t]he right to participate is relevant to exercising all other rights – within the family, school and larger community, both locally and nationally” (SIDA not dated: 1). The aim of youth political participation with respect to its rights-based justification is to guarantee young people’s access to mechanisms that allow them to exercise their right to political participation and engage in political participation processes. Young people may need specific mechanisms to enable them to fully participate in public matters, given their (at least partially) specific legal position in most countries. When understood broadly, this aim is common to all activities which comply with the definition of youth political participation as stated above (i.e. voluntary activities of young citizens aimed at influencing political or public matters). In a narrower understanding, examples of

concrete youth political participation activities which are directly in line with the rights-based justification include:

- ▶ initiatives proposing lowering of the legal voting age to 16 (British Youth Council 2020, National Youth Council of Ireland 2020);
- ▶ quotas for young people in political processes (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2018, ACE Electoral Knowledge Network 2018);
- ▶ specific public consultations aimed at young people such as Global Refugee Youth Consultations (UNHCR not dated).

The empowerment justification for youth political participation seeks to enable young people to make changes in the world around them (Farthing 2012: 75-76). Through its lens, the main aims of youth political participation are seen to be power sharing and the inclusion of young people in decision making. Enhancing democratic processes by including as many young citizens as possible, or improving decision making by taking into consideration a wide variety of views and expertise are some of the potential positive impacts of youth political participation in line with the empowerment justification (SIDA not dated: 1). Youth empowerment can also be seen in partnership building and collaboration with various stakeholders (Lansdown et al. 2018: 5). In practice, youth-led initiatives, projects and social movements can provide room for youth empowerment, generating tangible impact in various areas (e.g. environmental protection), and youth empowerment can also be reached in the form of young people running for office, or participating in state structures in roles with clearly defined decision-making responsibilities (e.g. youth commissions and councils in local administrations (Municipal Research and Services Center 2019), student chambers of academic senates (Masaryk University 2020), etc.

Efficiency in policy, practice and services, is a justification that seeks to make use of youth political participation as a tool to create a “more informed policy or practice” (Farthing 2012: 76). Improving policy and practice is the main aim of youth political participation from the perspective of the efficiency justification. Young people are considered to be experts on the challenges they face. As such, they are best placed to influence developments in real-world situations according to their needs (Farthing 2012: 76, SIDA not dated: 1, Lansdown et al. 2018: 1). The Council of Europe’s Advisory Council on Youth is an example of such a participatory structure, enabling young people to apply their expertise in formulating opinions on various youth-related matters within internal processes of the Council of Europe (Council of Europe 2020). Similarly, advisory boards, commissions or councils linked to all levels of government in which young people are systematically engaged, are further examples of youth political participation influenced by the efficiency justification (Municipal Research and Services Center 2019).

The developmental justification argues that youth political participation seeks to provide young people with real-life experience, thereby contributing to their personal and professional development (Farthing 2012: 76; cf. Lansdown et al. 2018: 4). According to this justification, youth political participation aims to engage young people in activities that help them learn, explore and master new skills. “[A]bilities to debate, communicate, negotiate, prioritise, consult and make decisions” should be enhanced in youth political participation processes in line with the developmental



justification (SIDA not dated: 1). This justification for youth political participation must be understood, in combination with the overall definition of political participation, as an activity which “shapes, affects, or involves the political sphere” (EU-Council of Europe youth partnership 2020). Thus, even youth political participation structures aimed primarily at the development of young people must influence real-life situations, conditions, or issues (e.g. school parliaments). If this is not the case and youth political participation structures are designed solely for training purposes with no influence on public affairs, then such structures cannot be referred to as youth political participation opportunities, but should be clearly identified as learning and training environments (e.g. simulations of the UN Security Council (ICONS 2020)).

Each of these aims relates to a distinct purpose of youth political participation activities. At the same time, they can be combined and bring together a variety of justifications within a single youth political participation activity. For example, the key objectives of the EU Youth Dialogue are to support the right of young people to participate in the political domain, to promote efficiency in policy shaping, and to facilitate the development of young people (Council of the European Union 2018).

### **3. Meaningful youth political participation**

Having defined political participation in general and identified the specificities of youth political participation, we must now focus on activities that are meaningful. Put simply, a meaningful activity has a purpose, is significant (Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2020), useful, serious, important, or valuable (Cambridge Dictionary 2020). This basic insight explains why various authors use different terms which, in principle, refer to the same concept: “effective practice or participation” (Frank 2006, Reimer 2002), “good-quality participation” (Lansdown and O’Kane 2014) and most commonly “meaningful political participation” can all be found in the literature (Arunkumar et al. 2018, Bell et al. 2008, Chau et al. 2016, Council of Europe 2015, Evelo not dated, Fletcher 2005, Kellet 2009, Kiilakoski 2020, Mushtaq et al. 2016, Global Consensus Statement on Meaningful Adolescent and Youth Engagement 2018, Ndayala et al. 2016, Sinclair 2004, Singh et al. 2016a and 2016b, van Reeuwijk and Singh 2018).

There exist different approaches when it comes to clarifying this term. Meaningful youth political participation is at times not defined at all (i.e. where no distinction from the term “political participation” is provided and all political participation is thus seen as meaningful; Sinclair 2004, Arunkumar et al. 2018, Chau et al. 2016, van Reeuwijk and Singh 2018, Kiilakoski 2020, Council of Europe 2015). It is sometimes defined in a circular way (“participation is purposeful when it is linked with decisions that will have meaningful impacts on young people’s lives” (Bell et al. 2008: 65)), or it may be defined using a list of key aspects which a meaningful youth political participation should contain (Ndayala et al. 2016, Kellet 2009, Fletcher 2005).<sup>7</sup> While authors refer to different lists of aspects they consider to be vital for meaningful youth political participation, there is some overlap. Analysing various

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7. Some authors also use combinations of these approaches when referring to meaningful youth political participation (Singh et al. 2016a and 2016b, Global Consensus Statement on Meaningful Adolescent and Youth Engagement 2018, Mushtaq et al. 2016, Evelo not dated).



sources reveals the most common aspects considered key to defining meaningful youth political participation to be:

- ▶ **Information and communication.** Young people need up-to-date information for their political participation to be meaningful. Ideally, a channel of communication should be open between young people and adults in the relevant area, allowing information to flow smoothly in both directions. Meaningful youth political participation activities must also include capacitybuilding opportunities for youth, as these also contribute to increasing youth knowledge (Ndayala et al. 2016, Evelo not dated, Mushtaq et al. 2016, Global Consensus Statement on Meaningful Adolescent and Youth Engagement 2018, Singh et al. 2016a and 2016b, Kellet 2009, Fletcher 2005). In other words, youth-friendly information should be available on all matters that concern young people, with youth-focused conferences, workshops and other capacitybuilding formats implemented in line with the needs of young people.
- ▶ **Authority and voice.** Young people must have the authority to voice their opinions and suggestions. Their voices must be heard and respected by other stakeholders in political participation processes, an aspect promoted well by horizontal working structures. Young people must be considered responsible citizens with the right to make a choice (Evelo not dated, Mushtaq et al. 2016, Global Consensus Statement on Meaningful Adolescent and Youth Engagement 2018, Singh et al. 2016a and 2016b, Kellet 2009, Fletcher 2005). In other words, young people and their counterparts should either have the same competences and responsibilities, or the responsibilities should be clearly set out, with the young people occupying such positions that are afforded appropriate attention.
- ▶ **Power sharing.** Young people need to be able to make decisions, either on their own or jointly with other stakeholders, under transparent conditions known to all concerned agents. Different forms of partnerships between youth and other stakeholders can be established to support and anchor power sharing (Evelo not dated, Singh et al. 2016a and 2016b, Kellet 2009, Fletcher 2005). In other words, a clear division of competences, allocation of votes, or rules for accepting decisions should be in place. Young people can then see what conditions govern their involvement, and under what conditions their voices count.
- ▶ **Transparency and accountability.** All processes should be transparent and clear to all stakeholders, including young people. Accountability processes should be established to support transparency and establish the trust of all stakeholders in political participation processes (Global Consensus Statement on Meaningful Adolescent and Youth Engagement 2018, Kellet 2009, Fletcher 2005). In line with several aspects mentioned above, young people should be informed well in advance about the processes and mechanisms taking place and involving them. They should know what roles they play and what other actors are involved, and in what capacities. The explicit responsibilities of the various actors should be communicated to all stakeholders, with contingency planning in place (e.g. what processes apply if no consensus is reached or if certain stakeholders do not fulfil their obligations, etc.).

- ▶ **Material and non-material support.** Young people should have the necessary support available to safely engage in youth political participation activities regardless of their background, status, or identity (Singh et al. 2016a and 2016b, Ndayala et al. 2016, Global Consensus Statement on Meaningful Adolescent and Youth Engagement 2018). All aspects of youth political participation in a given context must be considered. For instance, young people may not be able to cover their own travel expenses when engaging in youth political participation activities. At the same time, young people should feel welcome and appreciated when engaging in youth political participation activities, with other stakeholders acknowledging their contributions to the process.

It is important to note that the aspects considered key for meaningful youth political participation listed above result from an analysis of expert sources, and that they summarise the areas referred to by different authors (who at times use different terms). Numerous other aspects were also found in the literature examined. But these were not included as they were cited uniquely by different authors. The heterogeneity of the lists available from different authors suggests that the perception of meaningfulness of a given participatory process or activity differs widely from one context to another, depending on the exact setup in which these aspects were explored. As an example, key aspects of meaningful youth political participation in the conventional domain will likely differ from the ones identified in the unconventional area. Youth political participation opportunities which are considered highly meaningful in one context can even be perceived to be useless and tokenistic in another. For this reason, the above list of key aspects is not intended to be, and indeed cannot be, a definitive solution to the problem of defining meaningful youth political participation. Meaningful youth political participation can only be defined in terms of the contexts and aims of a given participatory process, as well as the democratic environments in which these aims are pursued. The aims of youth political participation processes have already been discussed in the previous chapter. Now, an exploration of different types of democratic environments is needed. Once both aims and environments of youth political participation have been understood, a context-based discussion on meaningful youth political participation can be carried out.

#### 4. Types of democratic environments

Democracy is generally defined as a form of government in which people living in a given territory and bound by its laws (i.e. citizens of a given country) are presented with a set of rights to contribute to the government of said territory (Lundström 2004). Democracies, despite being based on the same foundational ideas, can vary widely as a function of their practical application in given contexts. To gain further insight into democracy, exploring types of democratic environments found in the current worldwide socio-political climate can be helpful. All in all, five types of democratic environments can be identified in contemporary democratic countries (Gretschel et al. 2014, Kiilakoski 2020, Crowley and Moxon 2017):

- ▶ direct
- ▶ representative

- ▶ participatory
- ▶ deliberative
- ▶ counter-democracy.

Before elaborating on each type of democratic environment, it is important to note that, as was the case with the aims and justifications of youth political participation, even these categories represent “ideal types” in the Weberian sense (Oxford Reference 2021). As such, these categories strive to describe the essences of the phenomena in question to facilitate their understanding in a wider context, and they are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they can frequently be found in combination with each other. Defining these types can be used to probe the nature of a specific democratic setup and identify typical realworld youth political participation activities that are related to the given environment.

Direct democracy “describes those rules, institutions and processes that enable the public to vote directly on a proposed constitutional amendment, law, treaty or policy decision.” (Bulmer 2017: 3;) Also described as “democracy by the people” (Linder 2007: 1), this type of democratic environment enables citizens to participate directly in decision-making processes by casting votes or signing binding petitions aimed at achieving a concrete goal. While different types of activities can take place, referendums, popular initiatives, recalls and town (hall) meetings (Fiorino and Ricciuti 2007, Svensson 2007, Beedham 2006, Field 2019) are the most common and established tools of direct democracy (cf. Altman 2010). Whereas the referendum is a direct vote by citizens on a given topic, the popular initiative gives citizens the right to propose their own ideas to politicians (Fiorino and Ricciuti 2007). The right to recall, on the other hand, allows citizens to remove a politician from office before their term is up “if they do not think [they are] doing the job well enough” (Beedham 2006: 4). A town meeting,<sup>8</sup> also called a town hall meeting, “is an annual assembly where the citizens of that town elect officials, vote on a budget for the upcoming year, and take up any other matters that may come before the town. ... Participation and voting are open to all residents of the town who are legal voters.” (Field 2019: 13) Given the importance of casting votes in the direct democracy approach, universal suffrage is a critical issue (Studer 2003). Despite the term “universal suffrage”, both historical and current developments of the right to vote show that the aggregate of those citizens deemed eligible to vote changes over time as it further encompasses new citizen groups, as mentioned in previous chapters (e.g. voting rights extended to 16-year-olds in some European countries at the beginning of the 21st century,<sup>9</sup> Bárta 2020).

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8. For an example of town meetings held in contemporary USA, please see the website of the Town of Cambridge, Vermont ([Town Meeting 2021](#)), which features a short introduction to the method and videos of past town meetings.

9. Despite these changes being most commonly associated with elections in representative democracy processes, direct democracy suffrage usually covers the same electorate as in representative democracy. In other words, once a person is eligible to vote, this right is then usually universally valid for both parliamentary elections and referenda.



In contrast to direct democracy (also called “ideal democracy” by Dahl (2004: 57-58)), in representative democracy (also called “actual democracy” by Dahl (2004: 58-60)), popular votes are not held for decision-making purposes, but rather to elect representatives to whom the power of decision making is entrusted (Gutiérrez-Peris and Margalef 2019, Urbinati and Warren 2008, Gretschel et al. 2014). For representative democracy to work, citizens are bestowed with a set of rights which include, but are not limited to the right to vote, the right to run for office and to the “rights to any other freedoms and opportunities that may be necessary for the effective operation of the political institutions of large-scale democracy” (Dahl 2004: 59). In practical terms, citizens at all levels (local, regional, national, supranational) vote in free and fair elections to select political representatives. The latter subsequently take office for a period of time agreed upon in advance and assume decisionmaking powers associated with the particular office (e.g. village mayor, regional representative, member of a national government, member of the European Parliament, etc.). They then peacefully pass on the office to the next elected official when the mandate comes to an end and (or) new elections are held. In connection with elections, universal suffrage is widely regarded as an instrument for establishing political equality among citizens (cf. Mattila 2017: 39-40). Representative democracy mechanisms

face the same issues in defining the term “universal suffrage” as described above in the case of direct democracy. Another dimension of participatory democracy is based on the responsiveness of elected officials to citizens’ opinions between elections. This relates to the balance between two extreme positions: policy changes introduced in line with the will of the people, on the one hand; and the adaptations of popular preferences to the decisions of the elected officials, on the other (Mattila 2017, Svensson 2007, Urbinati and Warren 2008, Esaiasson and Narud 2013). In other words, a crucial question facing representative democracies is whether policies are introduced according to the desires of the people, or whether people’s aspirations and views are influenced by the policy goals of their elected representatives.

Participatory democracy “is a process of collective decision making that combines elements from both direct and representative democracy: Citizens have the power to decide on policy and politicians assume the role of policy implementation. The electorate can monitor politicians’ performance simply by comparing citizens’ proposals with the policies actually implemented.” (Aragonès and Sánchez-Páges 2009: 56) Also described as operating at the “intersections between [state] institutions and social movements” (Subirats 2008: 9), the aim of participatory democracy is to “increase these institutions’ legitimacy and ability to respond” (ibid.: 8). When it comes to specific mechanisms, “participatory budgeting, citizen councils, public consultations, neighbourhood councils, participatory planning” (Bherer et al. 2016: 225) and e-democracy (Rodean 2011) can all be catalogued. Since these mechanisms are all similar to one another, an example of participatory budgeting may help to understand the principles at play. Participatory budgeting became a symbol of participatory democracy, with the Brazilian town of Porto Alegre becoming the most famous example of the practical application of this mechanism (Aragonès and Sánchez-Páges 2009, Ganuza and Francés 2012, Pateman 2012). Participatory budgeting has also been reproduced with varying degrees of success in other parts of the world, including Europe (Jacobsen 2008, Allegretti and Herzberg 2004, Pasic 2018). In practice, a proposed budget is created by citizens, for which approval by the elected bodies is subsequently sought for it to come into force. Approval can be given to the whole budget or a revised version, or it can be turned down altogether (despite the political costs of such a decision; Aragonès and Sánchez-Páges 2009). Overall, there is obvious similarity between participatory budgeting (a mechanism of participatory democracy) and, for example, town meetings (a mechanism of direct democracy). The main difference, however, lies in the decision-making authority, which in the case of participatory budgeting remains with the elected officials, while in the case of direct democracy is fully in the hands of the citizens. Participatory budgeting serves as a good example of how mechanisms of participatory democracy operate. While citizens are given the opportunity to come up with ideas, policy makers may take them into consideration as they see fit. Depicting participatory democracy as a borderline instance between direct and representative mechanisms of democracy encapsulates its uniqueness as well as its connections to both aforementioned approaches to democracy (cf. Subirats 2008, Aragonès and Sánchez-Páges 2009; for a mapping of direct and participatory mechanisms used across European countries, see Best et al. 2011). Finally, it is important to note that participatory democracy has contributed to the development of participative approaches in many other domains, not only the political: social movements, NGOs, unions and private companies have

all started “using certain forms of participation as an internal management mechanism” (Bherer et al. 2016: 225).

Another type of democratic environment is called deliberative democracy and it can be defined “as a form of government in which free and equal citizens (and their representatives), justify decisions in a process in which they give one another reasons that are mutually acceptable and generally accessible, with the aim of reaching conclusions that are binding in the present on all citizens but open to challenge in the future” (Gutmann and Thompson: 2004: 7). Criticising the inadequacy of counting votes as the only measure of taking decisions in direct and participatory democracies, proponents of deliberative democracy “suggest that in order to improve the democratic process of decision-making, reasons not votes should be the most important factor” (Pietrzyk-Reeves 2006: 45). In other words, deliberative democracy presents a shift from a decision-making process based on individual preferences (voting, stating opinions), to one based on public discussion (deliberation). This confers advantages on both the process itself (citizens engaging in constructive debates, developing and showing mutual respect; Gutmann and Thompson 2004, Gretschel et al. 2014) as well as on the outcomes (reasons provided for and against a given decision, or a compromise solution; Rostbøll 2001, Gutmann and Thompson 2004). Deliberation can take place among citizens (an approach similar to the principles of participatory democracy) as well as among elected officials (building on the principles of representative democracy; Gutmann and Thompson 2004). Example mechanisms of deliberative democracy include Deliberative Polls<sup>10</sup> and citizens’ juries (Kim et al. 2018, Fishkin and Luskin 2005). “Deliberative polling is a method that combines public deliberation with opinion polling, by first polling a representative sample of a population, inviting them to deliberate with their fellow citizens, and finally polling their opinions again at the end.” (Kim et al. 2018: 7) Citizens’ juries constitute a similar method, in which “a group of 12-24 randomly selected citizens ... attend a series of meetings in order to learn about and discuss a specific issue ... and make their recommendations public” (Huitema et al. 2007: 294). As technology has evolved, online mechanisms to support deliberative democracy have been explored. This is the case of the Stanford Online Deliberation Platform (Fishkin et al. 2019) which enables the online holding of debates, with an “automated moderator” arranging the order of speakers as well as other aspects of the debates (automatic transcription of inputs, detection of offensive inputs, etc.). Other online debating platforms are also available, seeking to provide spaces allowing balanced and open discussions (e.g. Kialo.com or DebateHub.net).

Counter-democracy in the sense of introducing a balancing power to representative democracy was introduced by Rosanvallon (2008; cf. Gajdziński 2016). This type of democracy, to put it simply, encompasses all forms of popular activism and participation which exist as a counterweight to established democratic processes. “By ‘counter-democracy’ I mean not the opposite of democracy but rather a form of democracy that reinforces the usual electoral democracy as a kind of buttress, ... which complements the episodic democracy of the usual

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10. This method was developed by and is the copyright of the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University in the USA.

electoral-representative system.” (Rosanvallon 2008: 8) Three principal elements of counter-democracy are named by Rosanvallon (Dean 2018):

- ▶ prevention, the power of citizens to obstruct decisions taken by elected officials;
- ▶ oversight, the power of citizens to take up positions as watchdogs of public policies and public matters in general;
- ▶ judgment, which “concerns the capacity of citizens to constrain institutional action by testing it against community norms of governing” (Dean 2018: 185).

In practical terms, Dean (2018) elaborates on each of the three main categories. In the case of prevention, industrial strikes, civil society protests, parliamentary opposition, call-ins (a mechanism for “calling-in” decisions of executive bodies for further scrutiny before being confirmed, adjusted, or banned from taking effect),<sup>11</sup> and petitions are mentioned (Dean 2018: 183-184). Oversight mechanisms include media coverage of public policies, engagement of social movements and NGOs, various forms of citizen denunciation (online and offline “anonymous mechanisms for informing on corrupt city officials” (Dean 2018: 184)) and engagement of citizens as either scrutiny co-optees or experts-by-experience in inspection processes (in both cases, members of the public are invited to become actively engaged in controlling public policy design and delivery).<sup>12</sup> As for judgment, it features mechanisms of deliberative democracy, such as recalls, citizens’ juries or citizens’ assemblies (panels of citizens who, while undergoing a deliberative process, generate recommendations regarding a specific public matter).<sup>13</sup> The role of civil society in counter-democracy mechanisms is considerable and apparent (Kalm et al. 2019). This underlines the importance of the attention paid by citizens to the policy domain, leading to greater demand for transparency in policy-making processes. Despite many of the above-mentioned mechanisms overlapping with the ones used in deliberative democracy approaches, the emphasis lies on the potential for these mechanisms to be used in defiance of policies proposed by elected officials (Dean 2018). The ability to “contest institutional power” (ibid.: 185) is central to the counter-democracy approach, as is the balance between representative democracy and counter-democracy mechanisms (Resmini 2012).

Table 1 summarises the main aspects of each of these democratic environments by listing their key commonalities and differences. Overall, it bears repeating once again that, in reality, these types of democratic environments often occur in combination. This is important to remember because there are often several ways of achieving a given aim through different political participation mechanisms. Where young citizens cannot vote directly on a matter (direct democracy), they can instead engage in election processes and lobby for their interests (representative democracy), generate their own ideas and agendas and reach out to their representatives (participatory democracy), engage in public debates where their ideas are presented

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11. For an example of a call-in procedure, see two examples from the UK, Monmouthshire (Call-in Mechanism not dated), and London Borough of Merton (Merton Council 2021).

12. For an example of a scrutiny co-optee, see Kirklees Council (not dated), UK. For an example of an experts-by-experience scheme, see Care Quality Commission (2020), UK.

13. For an example of a citizens’ assembly, see The Citizens’ Assembly (not dated) from Ireland.

and defended (deliberative democracy), or hold peaceful demonstrations to attract media attention and push for their goals (counter-democracy).

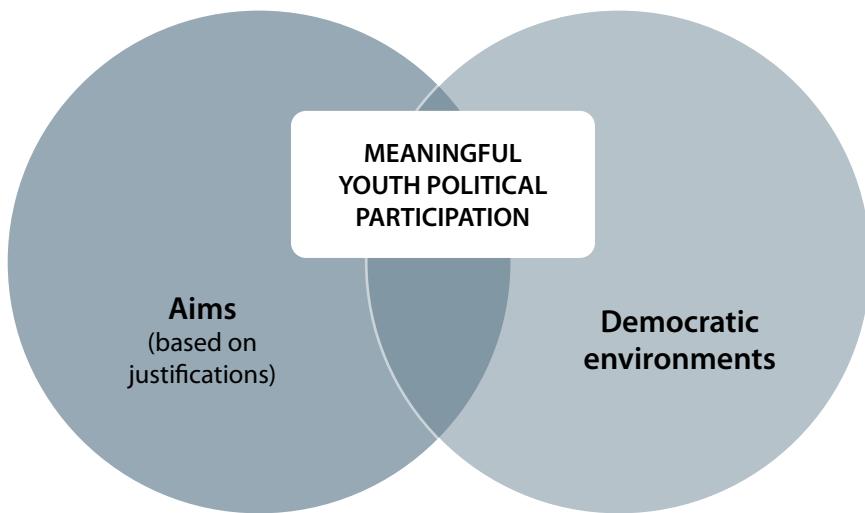
**Table 1: Key features of different democratic environments.**

Type of democratic environment	Decision making is done by...	Decision making is dependent on...	Participatory mechanisms are based on...
<b>Direct</b>	... all citizens.	... the preferences of all citizens.	... direct voting by all (concerned) citizens on concrete policy issues.
<b>Representative</b>	... elected representatives.	... the preferences of elected representatives.	... elections of public representatives.
<b>Participatory</b>	... all citizens. or ... elected representatives.	... concrete policy suggestions generated by active citizens.	... public participation platforms.
<b>Deliberative</b>	... all citizens. or ... elected representatives.	... recommendations based on public debates.	... public discussion platforms.
<b>Counter-democracy</b>	... all citizens. or ... elected representatives.	... public pressure.	... the actions of civil society.

## 5. Reconstructing meaningful youth political participation

As outlined above, context is of utmost importance when seeking to define and identify examples of meaningful youth political participation. The context of youth political participation is defined by its aims and democratic environment. While the aims of a given activity are connected to the underlying justifications of youth political participation, the democratic environment is linked to the socio-political realities in which the youth political participation activities in question take place. The meaningfulness of youth political participation can be determined by analysing the activity's aims and its democratic environment, and considering whether the aims are achievable in the given environment. When its aims are achievable within its democratic environment, a youth political participation activity can be considered meaningful. As shown by Figure 4, meaningful youth political participation activities occur when their aims overlap with mechanisms and opportunities provided by the democratic environment.





**Figure 4: Defining meaningful youth political participation as an intersection of aims and democratic environments.**

In practical terms, a four-step algorithm helps identify meaningful youth political participation activities:

- 1) Determine whether the activity is in line with the definition of youth political participation:
  - a. Is the activity voluntary?
  - b. Is it a citizenship activity (i.e. conducted without seeking financial gain as the primary outcome)?
  - c. Does the activity require engagement of young people?
  - d. Does the activity shape, affect, or involve the political sphere?

If all of 1)a-d are fulfilled, then the activity fits the definition of youth political participation.

- 2) Define the activity's aims:
  - a. What are the aims of the activity?
  - b. What underlying justifications are linked to these aims?
    - i. rights-based
    - ii. empowerment
    - iii. efficiency
    - iv. developmental
- 3) Define the prevailing democratic environments:
  - a. Who is the decision-making authority in the specified domain?
    - i. all eligible citizens
    - ii. elected representatives

- b. On what does decision making in the specified domain depend?
    - i. the preferences of all citizens
    - ii. the preferences of elected representatives
    - iii. concrete policy suggestions generated by active citizens
    - iv. recommendations based on public debates
    - v. public pressure
  - c. What mechanisms are used in the domain targeted by the activity?
    - i. direct voting by all (concerned) citizens on concrete policy issues
    - ii. elections of public representatives
    - iii. public participation platforms
    - iv. public discussion platforms
    - v. actions of civil society
- 4) Determine the meaningfulness of the activity:
- a. Are the aims achievable in the given democratic environment (i.e. taking into account the decision-making authority, determining factors and typical mechanisms)?

If the answer to 4.a is “yes”, then the activity can be considered a form of meaningful youth political participation.

Table 2 showcases typical examples of meaningful youth political participation activities as defined by the intersection between justifications (the bases of aims) and types of democratic environments. A local school parliament in a specific town, for example, would not be a suitable mechanism to broaden the participatory rights of young people in general, but it can be considered a meaningful youth political participation tool for the purposes of youth development (at the intersection between representative democracy and the developmental justification). Similarly, giving young people the right to vote in referendums does not increase the level of public debate among youth on various topics that interest them: public discussion platforms by and for youth would be an example of a meaningful youth political participation practice in this case (at the intersection between deliberative democracy and the efficiency justification). Nevertheless, youth voting rights in referendums are an important youth political participation tool. But they map to a different aim and a different type of democratic environment. As shown, this approach must be applied individually to each youth political participation mechanism to determine whether it can be considered meaningful.

The table cannot and does not contain all possible meaningful youth political participation activities and structures which may exist at a given intersection. Instead, it seeks to illustrate the differences in meaningfulness across different contexts. As repeatedly mentioned above, it also highlights that different meaningful youth political participation activities are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and that they are indeed often found alongside one another, complementing each other, or intertwined with each other. This is true for youth political participation activities which, in themselves, combine different aims and operate in and towards different democratic environments at once.

**Table 2: Meaningful youth political participation activities defined by an intersection of aims (based on justifications) and democratic environment types.**

		Democratic environments				
		<i>Direct democracy</i>	<i>Representative democracy</i>	<i>Participatory democracy</i>	<i>Deliberative democracy</i>	<i>Counter-democracy</i>
Justifications	<i>Rights-based</i>	Voting in referendums, recalls and other direct democracy mechanisms	Voting in elections	Official/ state bodies representing youth	State-run consultations	State-led structures for dialogue between social movement representatives and officials
	<i>Empowerment</i>	Initiating referendums, recalls and other direct democracy mechanisms	Running for office	Decision-making bodies representing or directly involving youth	Youth-led consultations	Youth-led structures for dialogue between social movement representatives and officials
	<i>Efficiency</i>	Youth advisory bodies supporting referendums, recalls and other direct democracy mechanisms	Youth advisory bodies supporting elected officials	Youth advisory bodies suggesting and monitoring (youth) policies	Youth advisory bodies supporting public discussions on (youth) policies	Youth-led independent advisory bodies suggesting and monitoring (youth) policies
	<i>Developmental</i>	Structures enabling youth referendums, recalls and other direct democracy mechanisms with a limited scope	Structures enabling youth representative structures with a limited scope	Structures enabling youth advisory structures with a limited scope	Structures enabling youth consultation processes with a limited scope	Youth-led NGOs and youth-led projects

It bears repeating that, using this approach, the meaningfulness of youth political participation is treated as an objective quality of a given activity. Meaningfulness defined subjectively in terms of participants’ individual goals, wishes, or expectations is not considered here but should be explored separately, as such subjective aims are not necessarily in line with an activity’s overall aims. For instance,

if a young person joins youth-led consultations in a deliberative democracy environment solely to meet other young people, that is not necessarily in line with the overall aims of the activity, but at the same time it does not influence the objective meaningfulness of the political participation activity as such.

Moreover, the meaningfulness of an activity depends exclusively on whether its aims are achievable in the given democratic environment, with no regard as to whether the aims are in fact achieved when the activity is implemented. Meaningful activities can be fully or partially successful or can, of course, fail to fulfil their aims.

This approach to defining meaningful youth political participation has the advantage of remaining open to activities which may be meaningful in some contexts, yet decried as useless in others. Given this approach, the meaningfulness of youth political participation can only be defined within a given context. So, to push for a (more) universal definition of meaningful youth political participation is not worth pursuing further. This finding explains the absence of different typologies of youth political participation in this publication. Despite the frequency with which such typologies are debated, they must always be understood with respect to the key component towards which they are oriented. For example, in the case of the well-known and widely used Hart's ladder (Hart 1992 and 2008), the key component of several political participation activities is the empowerment of young people. Using Hart's ladder to elucidate this, one is faced with an important question: To what extent do different youth political participation activities empower young people? This example is but one of many. It illustrates that, while youth political participation typologies can be useful, they cannot be treated as universally valid because they are usually limited to one or a few factors considered to be vital by a given author.

This approach to identifying meaningful youth political participation has another implication. Namely, that citing particular features of an activity to define it as meaningful or useless youth political participation can only be helpful in certain contexts, but would not be applicable across all potential forms of youth political participation. It may well be possible to identify key aspects of meaningful youth political participation when it comes to the intersection of, for instance, a rights-based justification and the direct democracy environment type. However, listing a set of aspects which universally characterise any given form of youth political participation activities as meaningful appears to be an impossible task. This finding is in line with the outcome of the analysis of key aspects of meaningful youth political participation presented above, as experts themselves widely differ when it comes to listing these key aspects, given the context of their work. In summary, the key aspects listed above that frequently appear in expert reports simply cannot guarantee that a youth political participation mechanism is a meaningful one without further exploration of the activity's aims and democratic environment.

The reconstruction of the term "meaningful youth political participation" brings up an important point (also raised by Farthing (2012) and Cahill and Dadvand (2018)): youth political participation is not a panacea. As repeatedly shown above, even well-established youth political participation mechanisms are only meaningful in certain contexts and can be considered tokenistic or nonmeaningful in others. The meaningfulness of youth political participation tools, mechanisms and activities

should never be taken for granted, but should always be explored in terms of aims and democratic environments. Lowering the voting age to 16 is a meaningful youth political participation mechanism in direct and representative democracy environments, but it cannot be considered meaningful in deliberative democracy environments as it does not help young people debate or carefully consider public matters. Similarly, youth advisory bodies with no decision-making powers in participatory democracies can be considered meaningful when enhancing efficiency in a given area but are nonmeaningful when it comes to increasing youth empowerment.

This approach also filters out political participation mechanisms that are intended to benefit young people, but fail to further a youth agenda by only considering justifications that support young people directly (e.g. development of young people, efficiency of policies for young people, empowerment of young people). This eliminates all mechanisms which are introduced only to “bring [young people] under more social control” (Farthing 2012: 85), or to merely serve as a training ground for young people to accept and reproduce inequalities already in place. Any such youth political participation mechanisms are revealed as non-meaningful, since they are necessarily not in line with any of the justifications related to the wellbeing of young people.

Lastly, it is important to emphasise that being able to identify meaningful youth political participation mechanisms helps to eliminate activities which are non-meaningful and in principle only blur the overall field of youth political participation. Giving regard only to meaningful youth political participation helps avoid the realm described by some as “the study of everything” (van Deth 2014), where “[t]he concept [of] political participation has lost its clear meaning ” (van Deth 2001: 11). Limiting discussions to meaningful youth political participation mechanisms can keep them contextualised and focused, instead of generalised and unclear.



# SECTION II – CONVENTIONAL YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION, TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES AND CULTURES OF PARTICIPATION

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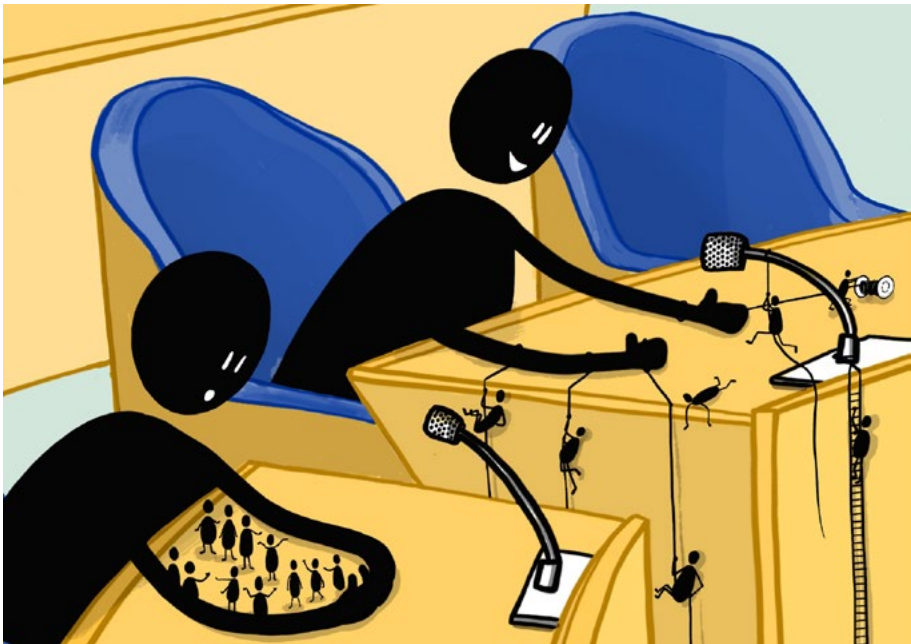
*Georg Boldt*

**T**his section of the present study deals with institutional political participation by young people. This type of participation is also commonly referred to as “conventional political participation” (van Deth 2014, de Moor 2016) or “formal political participation” (Ekman and Amnå 2012). These terms encompass a broad range of practices. The common characteristics of such practices are that they are politically motivated, voluntary actions, carried out by amateurs, within the sphere of political state actors. Modes of engagement within formal political participation range from voting and party membership to contacting politicians and involvement in forums of participatory democracy organised by public authorities. These forms of participation are distinct from extraparliamentary modes of participation such as protests, social movements, or strikes. They also differ from other forms of civic action and social involvement such as veganism, volunteering at shelters for refugees or the homeless, charity work or other activities with community-based organisations. This section mainly considers institutional arrangements that have been specifically tailored to promote youth political participation.

Developments over the last 50 years have cast an increasingly long shadow of doubt on whether the current dominant model of representative liberal democracy can be sustained (Ferree et. al. 2002, Fung and Wright 2003). Voter turnouts are low, interest in civic engagement through political parties, labour unions and other traditional advocacy organisations is decreasing, and populist political discourse is attracting increasing support. Moreover, current research points towards an erosion of democratic ideals worldwide (Ziblatt and Lewitsky 2017, Mounk 2018). Consequently, many have turned their gaze towards participatory democracy and its promise of strengthening democracy by including marginalised groups, revitalising democracy by giving participants the skills and means to influence political decision making, and giving citizens a sense of ownership over political decisionmaking processes

(e.g. Baiocchi and Ganuza 2017, Barber 2009, Fung 2006, Habermas 1984, Irvin and Stansbury 2004, Pateman 1970, 2012, Talpin 2011).

From day-care and schools to zoning and healthcare, citizens are increasingly being offered opportunities to bring their insights and experiences to bear when decisions are being made. Once limited to radical social movements, participatory democracy and its associated practices have now entered the lexicon of public governance practices. At present, participatory democracy is being promoted as a means of strengthening the societies' democratic character by intergovernmental institutions as diverse as the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations (UN) (Baiocchi and Ganuza 2017).



Meanwhile, the perception of children and young people has evolved. They have gone from being considered a group that must merely be protected from harm, to one with a legitimate claim to political influence. From having often been referred to as the leaders of tomorrow, children and young people are increasingly understood as citizens of today. This shift in the public perception of youth is not taking place without friction. It challenges a deeply rooted notion of childhood dependence by acknowledging the freedom of minors to exercise their citizen rights and responsibilities (Larkins 2014: 18). To understand this change, it is useful to consider the definition of minorities given by Louis Wirth (1945) as a group of people with certain physical or cultural characteristics that are given differential and unequal treatment. While youth does not constitute a minority in the typical sense of the word, Wirth's definition reinforces the framing of youth used by institutions advocating for minors and young people to be offered more opportunities to participate in public decision making.



Youth participation has been on the policy agendas of intergovernmental institutions such as the European Union and the Council of Europe since the early 1990s. These policies have been developed in the spirit of Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, giving children the right to be involved in decisions that affect them. Since the EU white paper on youth was adopted in 2001 and the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life was passed in 2003, most European countries have created opportunities for young people to hone their citizenship skills by participating in decision making on some level. Some countries, such as Austria, Greece, Estonia, Malta and parts of the UK, Germany and Switzerland have chosen to lower the voting age to 16 in local and/or general elections. However, it is more common for young people to be offered opportunities to participate through specific institutional mechanisms. These practices form the main avenue for political participation by young people within the world of formal politics, and as such constitute the focus of this section of the present study.

If the intention of youth participation policies is to bring about the engaged, active citizenry that is required for sustainable, healthy democracies, policy makers should consider the circumstances under which youth participation currently takes place. This text describes some of the contemporary institutional approaches to conventional youth participation and discusses their benefits and shortcomings in terms of normative standards of participatory democracy. Furthermore, it argues that to achieve the objectives of political socialisation (empowerment and development; see previous section), youth participation must be useful for its participants. This quality, operationalised here as resonance, does not only refer to the instrumental benefit of participation (i.e. affecting decisions). Instead, it is argued that the usefulness of conventional youth participation is dependent on a match between the institutional approach to participation and individuals' conceptions of appropriate engagement.

## **1. Meaningful conventional youth political participation and participatory democracy**

Participatory democracy has its roots in the defence of direct democracy formulated by Rousseau in *The social contract* (Bertram 2018, Rousseau 1998[1762]). As established in the previous section, however, the term is often used indiscriminately for any form of citizen engagement in public decisionmaking processes ranging from consultative gatherings to avenues of direct democracy. Participatory democracy can be defined as a normative model for a democratic public sphere, distinct from other forms of democracy. Generalising slightly (see previous section for a more in-depth review), the objective of participatory democracy is to include as many people as possible in matters concerning them. A central understanding of this theoretical tradition is that participation is an empowering experience that transforms individuals into active citizens (Ferree et al. 2002: 295-297). The discursive ideal of democracy ushered in by Jurgen Habermas (1984) nuanced this notion by highlighting deliberation, a process of justifying opinions and reasoning about benefits and drawbacks, as an important part of democratic decision making (Cohen 1997), while retaining popular inclusion as the basis for who participates.

Participation holds the promise of establishing what James Bohman (1997: 324) calls adequate public functioning, by giving citizens access to and use of political

opportunities and civic liberties such as making their concerns known and initiating public debate about them (ibid.: 325). Pateman (1970: 42), argues that the main function of participatory democracy is an educational one. Participants gain practice in democratic skills and procedures, and develop a democratic personality involving autonomy and resistance to hierarchy (ibid.: 64). In this way, asserts Pateman, participatory democracy develops political efficacy, a sense of co-operation, commitment to collective decisions and democratic character. These developmental and empowering qualities of participation arguably offer the most long-lasting effects on individual engagement with politics.

The understanding that participation makes for better citizens is regularly cited as a reason for public authorities to offer opportunities for citizens to participate in public decision-making processes (Mansbridge 1999). It appears logical to conclude that engaging young people in political processes will thus revitalise democracy. However, conventional youth participation is typically not a form of participatory democracy in the normative sense of the term. Rather, select groups of young people are offered a chance to participate within a representative democratic environment. Moreover, many youth participation practices are not political in the sense of having the capacity to change societal norms. Instead, youth participants remain in their roles as subjects or consultants, as explained in the previous section.

A fundamental aspect to consider when evaluating any kind of political participation is its democratic legitimacy. Indeed, participatory structures without democratic legitimacy are tokenistic. A common conjecture is that democratic procedures guarantee a fair outcome. Therefore, legitimacy has been linked to technical aspects such as who gets to participate, how information about the opportunity to participate is distributed, and what the political influence of those participating is (for examples see Fung 2006, Irvin and Stansbury 2004). Advocates of a more substantive approach have challenged this understanding by underlining that democratic procedures can lead to undemocratic decisions. They also point out that deliberation preceding decisions is crucial to legitimising said decisions in the eyes of those affected by them. In deliberative processes, participants offer reasons for their positions, listen to the views of others and consider their preferences given new information and arguments as a means of achieving a refined public opinion (Fishkin 1997). Ideally, deliberating individuals make informed decisions based on facts rather than answering at random or ignoring competing opinions or issues not affecting them personally. This raises two main schools of thought: whether deliberation has only instrumental merit as a way of reaching a decision, or whether there is also an expressive benefit in publicly deliberating decisions (Ercan 2014).

Research into the political socialisation of youth highlights how formative the years of adolescence are for the development of civic skills, political repertoires and modes of engagement in the public sphere (Neundorf and Smets 2017). While political socialisation typically takes place through informal learning “of social patterns corresponding to [their] societal position as mediated through various agencies of society” (Hyman 1959: 25), much effort has been invested in developing methods of formal and non-formal civic education. Nevertheless, while research has shown that “civics training in schools indeed compensates for inequalities in family socialization with respect to political engagement” (Neundorf and Smets 2017: 8), results

are still inconclusive as to whether the causality is linked to the instruction itself or the experiences participants have of expressing themselves and having their opinions respected and discussed (ibid.). Recently, Cammaerts and colleagues (2016), conducting a Europe-wide survey, found that if a person votes at the first few polls after coming of age, then they will be more likely to do so throughout their lives than someone who did not. They argue that the cause of low youth voter turnout, a troubling trend in contemporary liberal democracies, is not a generational effect but a cohort-defined one. That is, a group of people with a shared characteristic – in this case corresponding to not voting. If early experiences of civic engagement are consequential for future civic action, one could argue that our repertoires of engagement, the way we do citizenship, are shaped by the experiences we have during our teens and adolescence. Therefore, interpreting the factors shaping these experiences is necessary to better understand the empowerment and developmental aspects of both conventional and unconventional youth participation.

## **2. Conventional youth participation practices**

Conventional youth political participation can take many different forms. Young people vote in elections and referendums, join political parties, run for office, sign petitions and engage in institutional mechanisms tailored for youth participation. These are all important channels for civic engagement. Efforts should thus be made to improve their accessibility to young people by identifying and lowering critical thresholds. Much can be done simply by evaluating the structural obstacles faced by youth in their political engagement, such as age limits for voting or running for office, or the availability of participatory opportunities that double as sites for non-formal training in citizenship skills such as youth parliaments, e-participation, local and national youth councils, or student unions.

The focus here is on institutional mechanisms that have been established for youth political participation. These range from ultra-local school councils to international co-operation, such as in the Council of Europe's co-management structure, the Advisory Council on Youth. This council is composed of 30 youth representatives chosen for a two-year mandate from a diverse range of organisations. Together with representatives of youth ministries from the 50 signatories of the European Cultural Convention, they make decisions regarding the Council of Europe's youth sector. This model of co-management is promoted as a method of best practice, and with good reason. There are few comparable institutional opportunities for youth political participation on the level of intergovernmental policy making.

The Advisory Council on Youth is a typical example of youth participation in a democratic environment that closely approximates representative democracy. Such structures allow participants to hone their practical skills in doing politics, but a certain capacity for public functioning tends to be a pre-requisite to access these opportunities (Bohman 1997). In other words, participants in these types of democratic environments, whether they are members of the local youth council at 15 or attend meetings in Brussels at 22, have the necessary combination of knowledge, attitudes, skills and resources to reach these positions. Consequently, youth participation through representative structures tends to favour the accumulation of social, cultural and political capital among privileged

groups instead of deepening democracy by empowering groups that have previously been excluded for one reason or another.

It is important to understand the limitations and potential of different democratic approaches to participation. Only then is it possible to comprehend the plurality of approaches that are needed to provide conventional political participation that is accessible to all kinds of young people. Representative forms of youth participation often require specific skills, capacities and connections, but one of the central justifications for youth participation is that it develops these very competencies. So how can youth participation reach young people who lack this adeptness? Participatory democracy, a practice underlining popular inclusion and the development of participants' social and political capacities (Pateman 1970), seems to be a strong candidate with the transformative potential to equip individuals with political efficacy and turn them into manifestly active citizens.

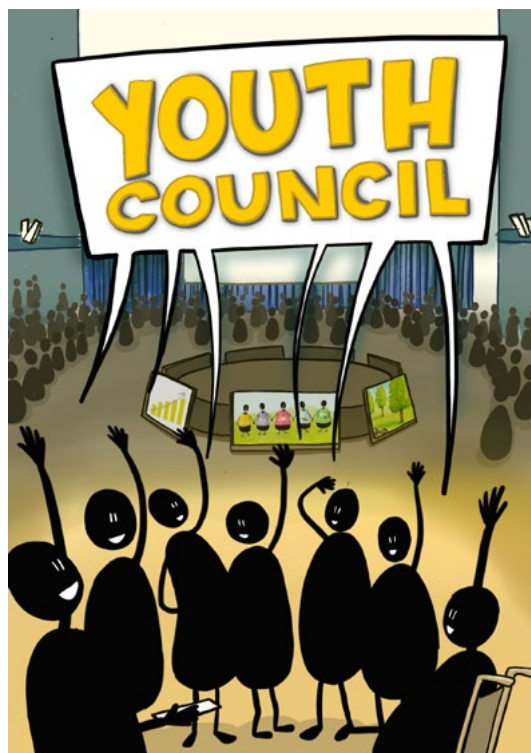
To describe the opportunities and challenges associated with different approaches to youth participation, the following chapter presents empirical research findings on local youth councils, probably the most common form of institutional youth participation in Europe today. This is followed by a description of participatory budgeting, a practice of participatory democracy that is being implemented within public governance worldwide with increasing frequency.

### **3. Case study: youth councils**

Youth councils are a form of civic engagement that approaches participation through formal political and governmental institutions (Checkoway and Aldana 2013: 1896). They feature among the practices of conventional youth participation recommended by the Council of Europe (2015), which states that the effective participation of young people in local and regional affairs requires a permanent representative structure such as a youth council. Youth councils, youth parliaments or youth forums are structures provided by local and regional authorities for the participation of young people. They allow young people, regardless of whether they belong to organisations or associations, to express their opinions and present proposals on the formulation and implementation of policies affecting them. Youth councils are composed by election, by appointment from within organisations of young people, or by open participation. Ideally, young people assume direct responsibility for projects and play an active part in related policies. In this way, youth councils are thought to support the aims of empowering young people by:

- ▶ developing the capacities of young people;
- ▶ providing for better-informed and more efficiently implemented policies;
- ▶ guaranteeing young people's right to participate in matters that affect them.

Nearly 20 years have passed since the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life was adopted in 2003. Since then, local youth councils have become widespread, with 400 youth councils in the United Kingdom (Matthews 2001), 4000 in France (Siurala and Turkia 2012), and hundreds of examples in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden (Arensmeier 2010, Gretschel and Kiilakoski 2015, Paakkunainen 2004, Ødegård 2007).



The establishment of local and regional youth councils is an important signal from public authorities, showing their commitment to including young people in decision making. Considering the high average age of elected officials in Europe and the limited voice and influence of young people in the public sphere, all attempts to increase youth participation are laudable. However, youth councils have been criticised for targeting a select audience of active youth, reproducing social inequality and failing to offer an adequate participatory platform for the majority of young people (Gretchsel and Kiilakoski 2015, Ødegård 2007, Matthews and Limb 2003, Augsburg et al. 2018, Taft and Gordon 2013). Despite her criticism, Ødegård (2007) also found Norwegian youth councils to have a positive effect on the political socialisation of those who did participate, lamenting, however, that any broader impact on society was impossible since the option to participate was only open to a select few. These findings were foreshadowed by Hill and colleagues (2004: 86), who remarked that processes and methods of participation often require participants to have certain skills in expressing themselves, understanding institutional languages and reading cultural codes of interaction. This automatically excludes many of those with the most to gain from participation, such as migrants, young people or those who are functionally impaired (ibid.: 91).

Taft and Gordon (2013: 93-97) have studied the reasons why some politically active youth chose to leave youth councils or not to join them in the first place, including their “distrust of youth councils as potential spaces for meaningful engagement”. According to Taft and Gordon (ibid.), these youth criticise youth councils’ only

offering a single “interpretation of democratic citizenship: participation as a voice, as an elite practice and as managed by the state.” These young activists have ideas about participation that align with those put forward by feminist and anarchist social movements, including critical perspectives that advocate for much broader forms of participatory democracy that emphasise impact, collective engagement and contentious politics. Likewise, Laine (2012) describes a plurality of political repertoires used by youth in political participation, making a distinction between “everyday-makers” and “expert citizens” with their political repertoires (2012: 46). Everyday-makers are described as those engaging in performative acts that contest power relations, while expert citizens use their positions to influence the political system. An important lesson emerges from these observations: reaching out to young people in traditional “political” ways may banish more imaginative ways of doing politics to the field of unconventional participation. To engage all kinds of young people through avenues of participatory democracy in formal political institutions, a full repertoire of participatory forms, including those that challenge the conventions of adult political structures, must be developed and made available (Matthews and Limb 2003: 190).

In her research on the Norwegian *Porsgrunn* model of institutional youth participation, once touted as a model of best practice in the Nordic countries, Ødegård (2007) notes that this participation structure occupies an unclear position in the democratic process, since its participants lack executive power. She notes (ibid.: 274) that most councils are initiated by local authorities, not by young people, and that they are commonly administered by secretaries employed by the municipality, acting as an additional link in the chain of communication between the administrative and political authority visàvis the youth councils. Consequently, the youth councils are, practically speaking, controlled by the city councils and the potential power available to youth council members is limited to members fluent in the repertoires of formal politics and the communication competencies expected by the political elite. Matthews and Limb (2003: 175) echo these sentiments in their study on British youth councils. According to Matthews, youth councils are often established by adults “because they are perceived to provide tangible opportunities to enable ongoing participation rather than because of demand from young people”. He suggests, however, that many youth councils are “flawed and inappropriate participatory devices, often obfuscating the voices of those whom they are meant to empower.” Further, he (Matthews 2001: 307) points out that to be truly inclusive, forums for youth participation must be found outside of existing organisations such as schools and youth centres, so that they can draw from several sources without being based on any single one. This is also reiterated by Gretschel and Kiilakoski (2015: 192-193) in their description of how youth centres in Finland can be exclusive and unsafe places for young people from outside of a youth centre’s community. They (ibid.: 195) sum up the problems associated with youth participation as those related to youth centres, municipal youth work, municipal governance culture and difficulties in power sharing. While their study was limited to Finland, these findings are consistent with much of the research reviewed above. In conclusion, as Matthews (2001: 316) argues, changing local decision-making structures without changing social and political values will achieve little. Indeed, an institution’s values must change at all levels before participation by young people becomes routine.

The common thread in these studies is how typical certain issues are when institutional youth participation is carried out in a democratic environment akin to representative democracy. In summary, youth councils and similar structures for political youth participation tend to recruit members with specific skills, abilities and competences. Therefore, instead of increasing political pluralism, they often end up reinforcing social inequality by not being sufficiently inclusive. Despite their resemblance to representative democratic processes, many of these structures have unclear positions with respect to decision making and often lack executive power, limiting their potential for influencing political decisions. Moreover, many young people distrust them because they lack confidence in the organising authorities or because they cannot relate to the mode of participation that is expected from them. Representative forms of youth political participation can also be inefficient means of empowering participants and developing their capacities if the selection procedure favours those who already have a high capacity for public functioning (relative to their peers). Moreover, to give young people tangible influence on matters regarding them and to benefit from the lay expertise of youth representatives in these structures, organising authorities must have clear and transparent rules defining the role of the youth council within the relevant decision-making structures.

#### **4. Case study: participatory budgeting**

Participatory budgeting has become a best-practice method of citizen involvement around the world over the last 30 years. In its original form, it is closer to participatory democracy than many contemporary forms of youth participation, which mainly acquaint participants with representative democracy. Participatory budgeting was introduced in Porto Alegre, Brazil in the late 1980s to curb corruption and clientelism in local politics and to determine the spending of public funds in a more egalitarian way. It is based on the premise that citizens should get to influence public spending (Baiocchi and Ganuza 2017: 19, Gret and Sintomer 2005). The Brazilian case exemplifies a notable reversal in public spending priorities resulting from letting local inhabitants make decisions regarding their surroundings (Cabannes 2004, Gret and Sintomer 2005). Participatory budgeting brings a new approach to popular inclusion by offering a low-threshold opportunity for participation without the need for formality, communication abilities, or the burden of preconceptions associated with formal representative structures. Since the first participatory budgets were launched, the practice has been globalised as hundreds of municipalities around the world have copied and adapted the method for their own needs (Sintomer et al. 2008, Baiocchi and Ganuza 2017: 19).

Participatory budgeting was not originally designed as a method for institutional youth participation, but in the 1990s several Brazilian cities expanded their budgeting processes to include children and young people, along with making other changes such as equal gender representation in an attempt to become more inclusive of groups previously excluded from political processes (Cabannes 2004: 38). Since 2014, participatory budgeting has become a central feature of the European Youth Capital and several former youth capitals have chosen not only

to maintain participatory budgeting, but to develop and expand these processes. Whereas local youth councils typically engage tens or sometimes hundreds of young people, 50 000 young people voted in the participatory budget when Cluj Napoca, Romania, was European Youth Capital in 2015 (Pasic 2018).

Once participatory budgeting spread outside Brazil, various adaptations were developed to suit local situations and objectives. Some variations, such as bringing together private and public interests or the consultation of citizens on public finances, have not always supported the emergence of empowered participatory governance and the addition of citizen power to the traditional *trias politica*, in the spirit of the original Porto Alegre model (Sintomer et al. 2008). Pateman (2012: 13), commenting on the adaptation of participatory budgeting to new social contexts, calls attention to the fact that much of what is called participatory budgeting today is merely consultative provision of information. She (ibid.: 14) insists on a distinction between the latter and participatory budgets that imply a significant measure of municipal budget democratisation. She adds that many forms of participation on offer today are closer to the Schumpeterian conception of citizens as consumers evaluating services than to the ideal of participatory democracy, in which “[c]itizens have the right to public provision, the right to participate in decision-making about their collective lives and to live within authority structures that make such participation possible” (ibid.: 15).

In terms of the aims of conventional political youth participation discussed in the previous section, participatory budgeting meets all the criteria with far less trouble than typical representative forms of youth participation. A multitiered approach consisting of large-scale events and focused interaction in small workshops coupled with a citywide vote can engage large groups of people. It does not require sustained commitment from participants, while still making it both possible and worthwhile to engage in several consecutive steps. This keeps the threshold for engagement low while giving participants the option to immerse themselves in the process, increasing the likelihood of personal development and political empowerment. This mode of engagement is completely different from the parliamentary style of representative democracy. Finally, participatory budgeting has a direct bearing on how public spending is directed at a local level. Since the recipients of these provisions are included in the decision-making process, tailor-made local solutions become a real possibility and less money is wasted on unwanted and unnecessary investments.

Overall, the two methods for organising civic participation outlined here speak different languages. On the one hand, youth councils see consultative participation of lay stakeholders who express their preferences. On the other, participatory budgets are open invitations to deliberate and negotiate in a structure of co-governance with civil servants and decision makers. These differences emphasise how dissimilar the two are in terms of democratic participation. Accordingly, the two methods also appeal to different sets of people. The reasons why a youth council may be useful to one person could be the exact reasons why someone else would prefer to engage in a participatory budget. Offering engaging opportunities for participation using different methods, whether they be representative, participatory, empowering, deliberative, or something else altogether is a good way to build social cohesion and decrease polarisation. Participation strengthens trust in public authorities and



brings together people who would otherwise rarely meet, exposing them to opinions and circumstances different from their own.

## 5. Youth as active citizens

A common argument in favour of participatory democracy is that the experience of participation transforms individuals into engaged citizens (Ferree et al. 2002: 296-297, Barber 2009: 30-32, Mansbridge 1999, Pateman 1970: 22-44). By contrast, when participation fails to engage and empower, participants – it is argued – will likely experience apathy, growing cynicism and disenchantment (Berger 2015, Fung and Wright 2003: 33-39, Talpin 2012). For some, conventional youth participation turns out to be an empowering experience, transforming them into manifestly engaged active citizens while leaving other participants in the same setting untouched. What are these experiences, and what explains why some people have them and others do not, despite their participating simultaneously within the same structure? According to philosopher L. A. Paul (2014), transformative experiences offer radically new insights that change individuals in deep and fundamental ways. Paul argues that these experiences are personally transformative in that they bring about fundamental changes in core preferences or how one sees oneself as a person. Further, Paul claims such experiences are epistemically transformative in the sense that they teach something one could not have learnt without living through them. Accordingly, many life-changing decisions involve choosing to have experiences that teach us things we cannot learn in any other way.

Returning to the four central institutional objectives of conventional youth participation, one could argue that to produce empowerment and individual development, a participatory opportunity must hold some transformative potential. Recent research into transformative experiences reveals some clues towards understanding when these turning points occur in people's lives and helps us understand how this development of the faculties might be realised more consistently in conventional youth participation.

Alice Goffman (2018: 52) argues that occasions that thrust usually disparate people together into special settings, in which emotional energy and collective effervescence is built and participants publicly rank their relations in a complex choreography while others watch and judge, are more likely to become unexpectedly influential in changing individuals' bonds, habits, thinking and plans. Goffman also (ibid.: 69) asks the following questions.

- ▶ If transformative experiences come about as conclusions to sequences of earlier turning points, what are the background variables that grant people access to these occasions?
- ▶ How do different kinds of people fare when they attend them?
- ▶ How can we understand patterns in their consequences?

One answer to all these questions can be found by observing how actors use resources that are available to them to make sense of a given situation. This conception of how political culture affects agency is notably defined by Clifford Geertz (1973: 312): "Culture, here, is not cults and customs, but the structures of meaning through which

men [sic] give share to their experience; and politics is not coups and constitutions, but one of the principal arenas in which such structures publicly unfold." Accordingly, to understand why youth participation turns out to be transformative for some but leaves others unaffected, it is necessary to determine the connection between politics and culture, or why participatory processes can make sense to some participants but leave others untouched. This suggests that the transformation of citizenship skills through youth participation is a causal function of a culturally resonant process of participation. The resonance of a participatory process is thus dependent on the cultural tools and resources available to the individual. These resources come about as the cumulative outcome of past experiences and form a lens the individual uses to make sense of their experiences.

There is a commonly expressed dichotomy between engaging, quality deliberation with visible results, leading individuals on a path of active citizenship and loyalty to the democratic ideal on the one hand, and tokenistic exploitation resulting in cynicism and disillusionment on the other. However, this division does not acknowledge that participating individuals have access to differing sets of cultural "tool kits" (Swidler 1986). These tool kits are collections of symbols, stories, rituals and worldviews that people use to solve various kinds of problems and construct strategies of action (ibid.: 273).

Acknowledging that these cultural tool kits will affect the way a participant makes sense of their opportunity to participate shifts our focus from power relations, legal rights and procedural legitimacy to "routines, rituals, norms and habits of the everyday through which subjects become citizens" (Isin 2008: 17). That is, under certain conditions, scenes of youth political participation might trigger deep, life-changing experiences, given that the participant has the resources needed to gain this insight. When these circumstances and background variables align, the scene of participation resonates with the participant.

Youth participation can be a transformative experience in terms of instilling participants with political efficacy, democratic values and the competencies and attitudes required for a life of active citizenship. However, to achieve the circumstances that are consequential for changing the bonds, habits, thinking and plans of those participants, one must look beyond the attributes that make a participatory process democratically legitimate. Instead, attention should be turned towards cultures of participation and how they affect inclusion and exclusion, whether a participant buys into versus challenges the process, and how different forms of political action appeal to different people.

Empirical research into youth participation practices has revealed a multitude of outcomes in terms of political socialisation that nuance the typical dichotomy of empowerment versus disenchantment. Fieldwork excerpts from a recent study on institutional youth participation in Finland (Boldt 2021) may help to illustrate this argument. If resonance describes a process that a participant perceives as relevant in their own cultural frame of reference, the transformation of civic skills can be described as the result of a culturally resonant experience of youth participation. The following quote from a participant in a local youth council exemplifies such experiences: "Before joining the youth council I really didn't know anyone. Now I have so

many friends. Because of the youth council I decided to go to a school with a focus on economy and politics. I have learnt so much, for instance speaking to groups. A couple of years ago I would have been so nervous speaking in front of a group of people, I couldn't have spoken boldly like this." However, when an individual with the necessary competence for adequate public functioning is engaged in culturally resonant youth participation, their personal-level outcome is primarily an accrual of privilege. A member of the youth council described the group in the following words. "It's apparent in what we do that our socio-economic status is upper middle-class. Our lot is well off. Even all the members with a migrant background are born here [in Finland]."

By contrast, when participation is culturally non-resonant or irrelevant to a participant, the outcome of the experience is a sensation of externality, a failure in instilling the necessary capacities for public functioning. Examples range from participants dropping out of the processes, to verbalised disappointment like that of a participant who, after voting in her local participatory budget, remarked: "The café proposal was already there last year, and it didn't lead to anything." Ranciè (2007: 271-272) notes that the essence of spectatorship is uninvolved externality. A spectator is separated from the capacity of knowing just as they are separated from the possibility of acting. Thus, an experience of participation in the role of a spectator reinforces, rather than alters, political passivity.

Finally, a participant in possession of the prerequisites for participation, attending a culturally non-resonant scene of participation, will leave the experience still loyal to the general idea of democracy, while continuing their search for a mode of participation that reflects their preferred repertoires of political action. The following quote from a youth council member explaining their choice to leave the youth council demonstrates this fourth category: "I got interested in a kind of politics that youth council members don't care about. I joined the youth wing of the Finns Party.<sup>14</sup> Already before that my opinions were quite different. I might be prejudiced but I expected that I wouldn't be welcome any longer."

As this chapter and its predecessor have established, transformation is a central policy objective of institutional youth participation. But what about these three other outcomes: accumulation, exit and entrenchment? In more ways than one, they all represent an alienation of participants from the spirit of democracy. When young people cannot find relevant and meaningful outlets for their civic engagement, or their attempts to bring about change appear pointless, radicalisation and political polarisation are close at hand. One of the principal objectives of conventional youth political participation is to prevent marginalisation and strengthen social cohesion. Unfortunately, the accumulation of influence and positive experiences of conventional youth political participation tends to benefit already privileged groups. Consequently, youth participation paradoxically sometimes strengthens elite dominance in representative democracy and furthers the dissatisfaction that is a driving force behind many contemporary populist and anti-democratic movements.

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14. Populist and nationalist right-wing party.

The inclusion of young people in decision-making processes on matters that affect them is essentially a question of power sharing. A variety of practices can be used to give young people a voice and a chance to develop their capacities for public functioning. However, the challenge that must be addressed is how youth participation policies can support the empowerment and development of the capacities needed for public functioning in young people, without bolstering the abovementioned negative externalities.

## **6. Cultural sensitivity in conventional youth political participation**

This section has attempted to improve the understanding of two interrelated notions pertaining to institutional youth participation. The first is the normative question of what kind of participation is most meaningful. Most forms of conventional youth participation today have been designed according to the logic of representative democracy and parliamentary procedure. By developing alternative approaches based on participatory democracy, youth participation policies could become more effective in reaching their objectives and most of all, young people. The second notion, that participation makes better citizens, is approached by discussing how the likelihood of having a transformative experience through participation is a result of both having the relevant cultural resources available and finding a style of engagement one can relate to.

Research into the political attitudes of young people tends to show that interest in politics has not decreased. Rather, it is the interest in participating in traditional representative forms of democracy that has dwindled. The reasons behind this change are beyond the scope of this study, but it is safe to say that offering repertoires of engagement that differ from traditional representative forms of youth engagement appears to solve many of the problems inherent in contemporary practices of institutional youth participation. Participatory forms of democracy are open to everyone instead of limiting participation to a group of representatives. Participation in large-scale events does not require the courage needed to run for public office; reducing the expected length of commitment from years to hours lowers the threshold for engagement; and focusing on tangible, local issues, rather than the general and abstract, all increase the population that can imagine themselves participating in a project within its given framework.

Although much criticism has been directed towards representative forms of youth participation here, it is essential to note their value in bringing together groups advocating organised interests. This is beneficial for the quality of decision making, establishing bonds between civil society organisations and public authorities, as well as for developing the capacities and skills of those involved. The caveat is that individual engagement in these forms of youth participation should ideally come in response to a call for collective action, and representatives should have the support of affinity groups. However, as the previous chapter alluded, a common motivator for participation today comes from a shift towards individualised political participation in which political participation has become a choice within the broader context of life aspirations. When structures such as youth councils consist of individuals instead

of representatives of organised interests, the motivation to participate often lies in the subsequent opportunities for individual benefit. As a result, the emergence of Rawlsian public reason, wherein decisions are justifiable to all young people represented by the youth council, can be dubious.

Globally, calls to make democracy more participatory are increasing. Many countries are now taking measures to include citizens at all levels of decision making. Youth participation has been a buzzword in European political institutions for more than 20 years, and much has been achieved. However, some approaches which used to represent the vanguard in terms of citizen inclusion in any age group are starting to look a little dated in comparison to deliberative forums, participatory budgets and other democratic innovations that are being put into practice around the world. Considering this global moment of popular democracy, now would be a good time to define what the next 20 years of youth participation should look like.



# SECTION III – UNCONVENTIONAL YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND YOUTH ACTIVISM

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*Anna Lavizzari*

**B**uilding on the framework provided in section I and complementing section II on conventional forms of youth political participation, this section provides a comprehensive account of unconventional forms of participation, which do not only include protests, demonstrations and “postmodern” participation types (Galstyan 2019), and of how they feed into the conceptualisation of meaningful political participation. In particular, the role of young people’s individual and collective action within social movements has steadily and noticeably grown in recent years. Even under the challenging and critical circumstances brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, the year 2019-20 has been labelled by many observers as the “year of protests” (Press and Carothers 2020; Rachman 2020). Young people proved themselves – once again – protagonists and directors of grassroots mobilisation and initiatives in a broad range of fields all over Europe and the world, spanning climate change, gender equality, students’ rights and racial justice. To understand why and how young people increasingly engage in these forms of unconventional youth participation and which elements make it meaningful, this section critically reviews unconventional youth political participation from the perspective of young people, providing real-life examples of youth activism initiatives. At the same time, it is essential to acknowledge and understand how and where unconventional participation positions young people within existing democratic environments (cf. section I), namely the contextual factors that foster or hinder this type of participation. Furthermore, according to the framework presented in section I, the key aspects of youth political participation are also taken into consideration in the context of unconventional participation – namely, the specificities of unconventional forms in terms of access, process and aims.

## **1. Unconventional youth political participation**

As underlined in section I, unconventionality in political participation is defined by a significant criterion, namely its noninstitutional, nonelectoral character. As clearly shown in the literature on youth and political participation, there is extensive

evidence that citizens, and young people in particular, have changed their modes of participation, now preferring activist (i.e. noninstitutionalised) rather than institutionalised forms (Wattenberg 2007, Dalton 2007, Norris 2002). Among the main reasons underlying this trend, the literature suggests that the demands and needs of young people characterised as “monitorial”, “post-materialist” and “critical” are more easily met by non-institutionalised, and particularly non-electoral, forms of politics (Marien et al. 2010: 188).

In classic studies of political science and sociology (Norris 2001, Verba et al. 1978), the concept of unconventional participation is introduced to define “non-institutionalised direct political action that does not aim to disrupt or threaten the stability of liberal democracies” (Barnes and Kaase 1979: 27), such as signing petitions, traditional marches and demonstrations, boycotting, disruptive actions, occupation of public property, etc. The concept has been used in either its “purist or narrow” meaning or more “vague” interpretations (Pitti 2018: 10-17). The purist version includes only a narrow list of unconventional practices: petitions, demonstrations, boycotts and occupation of buildings. Yet, as acknowledged in the literature from the early 1990s onwards, attention has increasingly been paid to collective and individual activities that feature a political dimension, but fall outside the governmental sphere. These include volunteering, art, culture, sport, social media and new technologies, along with “latent forms of civic and social engagement” (Ekman and Amnå 2012).

In line with this, as mentioned in section I, unconventional participation has become increasingly fluid, individualised and personalised in the sense of “individual lifestyle choices”. Such participation can take the form of political consumerism, artistic performances, or online activism (Micheletti 2003, Mosca and Della Porta 2009). Many have described this fluid engagement as issue- or cause-oriented, informal and spontaneous (Batsleer et al. 2020). As for “vague” interpretations, recent studies have argued for the need to bypass the term “unconventional” and include the broadest possible range of nonelectoral practices and activities, to which they link a variety of additional concepts such as everyday-makers, namely unaffiliated individuals ordinarily engaged in concrete political and civic actions, reflexivity and self-actualisation and subpolitics (Pickard and Bessant 2018 Pickard 2019). More importantly, these studies advocate for the overcoming of binary distinctions such as “conventional and unconventional”, as they are value-laden and side-line the significance of youth political engagement. However, others (Pitti 2018, Raniolo 2008) warn against such a catch-all approach, in which diverse phenomena are grouped together under the label of unconventionality.

For these reasons, debate remains over the concept of unconventional political engagement. There may indeed persist confusion concerning the types of practices, behaviours and actions to which this label applies. However, such confusion does not arise from the notion of unconventionality per se, but rather from restricting its use to underline a dichotomous distinction between conventional and unconventional forms of participation. On this premise, we argue here that the concept is valid and sound as a tool for understanding political practices as a means of expression preferred by youth to voice their claims and grievances outside existing institutional channels (Pitti 2018, Della Porta 2015).



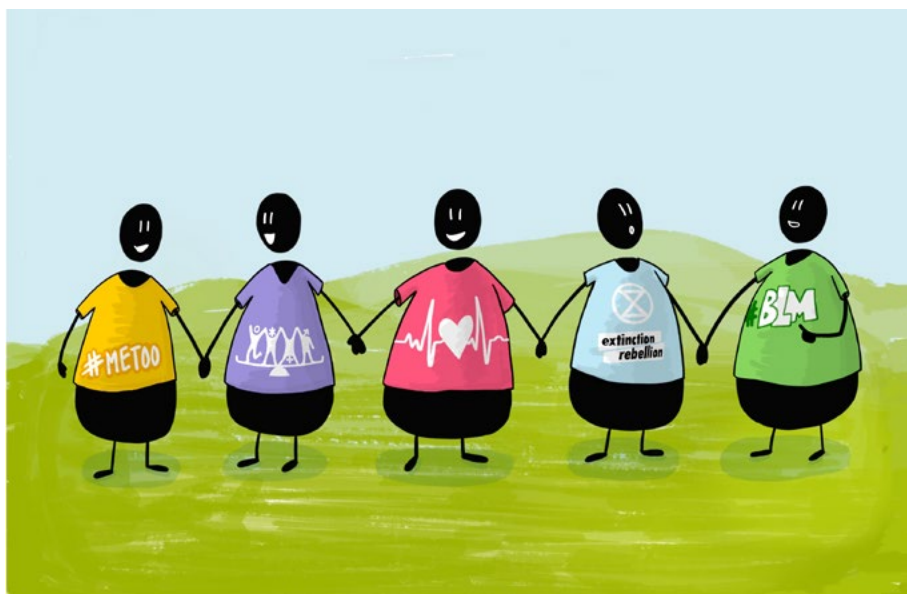
As shown by established research (i.e. Delli Carpini 2000, Dalton 2015, Schlozman et al. 2010) youth engagement has thus increasingly and steadily shifted towards unconventional practices as a result of distrust of and distaste in institutional political actors. Nonetheless, unconventionality does not imply a complete detachment from institutions, as these may very well be the direct or indirect targets of unconventional forms of participation – such as protests and marches – notably when the state and other governmental bodies represent these institutions. Also, unconventional youth political participation may arise within formal and institutionalised arenas, such as the market – through boycott or “buycott” practices.

Unconventionality is therefore defined not only on its own terms, but also in relation to (political) authorities, the law, normativity and broader power relations in society, namely the democratic environment (cf. section I). In this sense, unconventional types of action mostly unfold in ways that are not illegal or that adopt positions explicitly conflicting with the law (Pitti 2018, Raniolo 2008). Given this, it is important to note that conflict is often central to unconventional types of youth participation, notably within social movements. For these reasons, in radical democracies or counter-democracy environments, conflict and antagonism are not suppressed – in contrast to hegemonic practices aiming at building and organising consent – but, rather, allowed (Mouffe 2005). Previous studies on youth political participation have underlined how “hegemony by consent” (Walther 2018) practised at the level of youth policies may be problematic. Notably, the creation of participation opportunities and spaces in which engagement is institutionalised, and conflict avoided or foreclosed, can be perceived as policing and exclusive, rather than inclusive: “[i]f policies aim at fostering participation and democratic experience, they need to develop paradoxically. They need to create spaces without institutionalising and defending them but to allow for struggles and conflict, which means a constant process of building, creating and opening – and then of leaving, withdrawing, watching and listening” (ibid.: 9). Movements such as Occupy and Indignados have shown that decision-making processes based on horizontal relations, selfmanagement and democratic deliberation – in contrast to institutional and formal settings based on representative mechanisms – are more accessible, inclusive and equal, creating spaces for young people to participate and voice their opinions, concerns and criticisms. Critical for these movements and for young people participating in unconventional forms is not to create a political project, agenda, or inform policies. Instead, they should seek to establish spaces for conversation and the expansion of democratic values through lived experience in schools, communities and workplaces.

## **2. Youth activism in social movements and do-it-ourselves politics**

While the realms of youth activism and unconventional participation, as mentioned above, cover many different forms – including civic and social engagement, such as volunteering – several types of unconventional youth participation remain poorly explored. These include social movements and more recent, increasingly significant phenomena such as do-it-ourselves (DIO) politics (Pickard 2019) and Direct Social Actions (DSAs) (Bosi and Zamponi 2015) – building on prior notions of personalised politics and “do-it-yourself” activism (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Bennett 2012).

Social movements are based on “networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organisations, engaged in a political and/or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity” (Diani 1992: 3). The premise of the study of young people’s participation in social movements is that most contemporary social movements have a vital youth component, even when they are not youth-led. As mentioned, young people in recent years have shown a high capacity for mobilisation in comparison to other population groups, as shown by their involvement in multiple movements with different and cross-cutting causes – Occupy, Indignados movements against austerity measures, climate change movements such as Fridays For Future and Extinction Rebellion, gender equality and feminist movements such as *Ni Una Menos* and #MeToo, and social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter. This growing and visible involvement of young people in social movements forces us to reconsider their role, forms for meaningful political participation, and relation to social change.



There are two significant aspects to consider with respect to young people’s current involvement in social movements. The first refers to the increasingly transnational character of youth movements, particularly on issues that are global and transnational, such as climate change. A corollary to this trend is the crucial role of social media in connecting young people across countries, inspiring each other’s actions through virtual encounters (see below). The second aspect concerns the increased tendency – as made evident during the current Covid-19 crisis – for young people in social movements to engage in “prefigurative” politics, often pushing for innovative and radical solutions that may challenge norms. Prefigurative politics is defined by a relation between the state and collective action whereby “a political action, practice, movement, moment or development in which certain political ideals are experimentally actualised in the ‘here and now’, rather than hope to be realised in a distant future” (van de Sande 2013: 230).

In the following, emphasis is placed on two significant current lines of research into youth activism: the first analyses the position of young people within social “movement societies”, while the second focuses on the role of DSA and DIO politics as practised by youth in contemporary movements.

The idea of a movement society has been used in various research publications as a complementary explanation to the known trend among young people for switching from institutional and conventional political activities to unconventional participation (Dalton 2015, Bennett 2012). Studies on social movement societies show that, in contemporary democracies, “forms of unconventional political participation are accepted, institutionalised and, therefore, included in many citizens’ repertory of political engagement” (Quaranta 2016: 234, Tarrow 2011). This strand of research highlights that the growing institutionalisation of protests or protest politics, intended to become a normalised practice of political engagement across Western democracies, in particular, forces us to reconsider its use among young people. In this sense, protest actions are no longer a synonym of turmoil and political instability, but an alternative way of expressing political opinions and dissent, making political claims and promoting social change (Quaranta 2016: 234, Dalton 2008). Moreover, the diffusion of political protest as a normalised form of political engagement implies that its structure and repertoire have expanded over time, and that the characteristics of people who engage in such activities are less well-defined (Quaranta 2016). For these reasons, the increasing use of protest activities by young people is attributable to its changing form – as a “go-to, modular, flexible tool for displaying a desire to change” (Earl et al. 2017: 6). Moreover, unconventional participation is increasingly taking the shape of a “common problem-solving heuristic” for young people (Earl et al. 2017). As seen in section I, young people engaged in these participatory mechanisms take up the role of directors and creators.

Along these lines, DIO politics further underlines the potential of such mechanisms for political participation. Although it involves social movements to some extent, DIO politics falls more squarely in the realm of youth activism, meaning “entrepreneurial political participation that operates outside traditional political institutions through political initiatives and lifestyle choices, about ethical, moral, social and environmental themes with young citizens being at the forefront of such actions” (Pickard 2019: 390-91). Including a remarkable range of non-electoral forms, DIO politics involves the role of collective action through social movements, or at the individual level, through lifestyle politics along with the enabling role of digital technologies. The focus is on the entrepreneurial nature – that is, young people taking the initiative – of multiple non-electoral/non-institutional forms of political participation. For instance, young girls and LGBTIQ youth around the globe are tackling sexual harassment and catcalling in the streets through several initiatives that aim to raise awareness about gender-based street harassment, create solidarity and foster cultural change around these issues. The international youth-led movement Chalk Back is one example – through digital media and public chalk art they “write stories of harassment word-for-word in the posts where they happened alongside the hashtag #stopstreetharassment using sidewalk chalk and then post on social media to spur dialogue and story sharing” (Chalk Back 2019).

**Table 3: Non-electoral forms of DIO politics.**

*Keeping informed about non-electoral political news and issues*  
*Liking, sharing, posting non-electoral political information online*  
*Signing a petition offline or online*  
*Recycling, using public transport and other environmentally friendly actions (continued)*  
*Boycotting and buycotting brands/products/retailers/countries (political consumerism)*  
*Being a vegetarian or going vegan*  
*Volunteering in an NGO, association, community group or network*  
*Informing and mobilising within a leaderless-horizontal political network*  
*Performing politics through artistic and cultural actions*  
*Taking part in a protest march, demonstration, or rally*  
*Carrying a placard and/or banner during a march, demonstration, or rally*  
*Flash-mobbing*  
*Occupying a public space, public square*  
*Camping out in a peace/climate camp*  
*Squatting a private building or space*  
*Carrying out other acts of civil disobedience and direct action*  
*Refusing to co-operate with the police and/or being offensive to police*  
*Computer hacking, culture jamming, guerrilla communication*  
*Participating in urban disturbances, disorder and/or riots*

(Adapted from Pickard (2019: 62-63))

Related or encapsulated in certain forms of DIO politics are direct social actions (DSAs) (Bosi and Zamponi 2015), which are “forms of collective action that aim at directly changing, by means of the very action itself, some specific aspects of society without being primarily oriented towards securing the mediation of public authorities or the interventions of others actors” (ibid.: 373-374). Following what has been mentioned above concerning the “normalisation” of certain unconventional practices, it is important to stress that most of these actions are not new, but they tend to resurface repeatedly over time (ibid.). The socio-economic and political context is therefore a much more relevant factor influencing the extension (and visibility) of unconventional repertoires (see below). Most importantly, “[t]he ways in which social movements select particular tactics instead of others are intrinsically linked to their views of society, the critique they wish to put forward,

and the changes they aim to bring about” (ibid.: 371). For example, the Fridays For Future movement uses school strikes to put moral pressure on policy makers to take action in favour of climate justice. Their vision is based on “building a better future” by taking care of Earth and hoping that humanity can change (Fridays For Future 2020). As mentioned above, the Occupy and Indignados movements promote a vision of social change based on radical democratic values and practices, against the so-called 1% of the rich, the powerful, corporations and corrupt elites – through public citizens’ assemblies, camping in public squares, experimenting with new and direct democratic practices, in contrast to and as a critique of representative democracy. In general, various forms of resilience to the 2015 economic crisis emerged as daily practices capable of transforming social support – that is DSA – such as reappropriation of spaces, mutual assistance networks and forms of collective action outside and in contrast to the logic of the neoliberal model of development (Bosi and Zamponi 2015). Emphasis is placed, in this case, on the actions being direct – i.e. they are non-mediated – and social, namely that they target society rather than the state. A common example is the creation of free services for citizens and young people, such as gyms, recreational and cultural activities, or remedial education, among others.

To sum up, when referring to young people’s unconventional political participation, and contemporary social movements in particular, we should take into consideration the following main factors:

1. their fluid, structureless and horizontal nature;
2. the normalisation of protest politics as a heuristic tool;
3. the role of prefigurative politics and a more comprehensive range of DSA and DIO politics, their forms and expressions;
4. the interplay (instead of mutual exclusivity) of collective and individual actions, and their different positions relative to institutions and political authorities (as opposed to their exclusion);
5. the constructive (rather than destructive) character of dissent, antagonism, and conflict of youth political engagement in the context of radical democracies;
6. the entrepreneurial nature – as personal initiatives – of many forms of young people’s participation.

### **3. Socio-political contexts, conditions and resources of unconventional youth political participation**

Unconventional political participation through social movements, for the most part, tends away from formal and institutional settings and is shaped more by cultural dynamics. Nonetheless, it is also highly dependent on large-scale contextual factors – mobilisation structures; political contexts; social, economic, educational conditions – that might hinder or foster young people’s opportunities to actively participate in unconventional politics. Structural approaches have investigated how major political institutions and more informal alignments

of relevant actors can influence challengers' opportunities for political action (Smith and Fetner 2009: 16). State policies, state bureaucracies and repressive capacities are a critical component of the political context and can channel and influence the action of social movements (Giugni et al. 1999, Kriesi 1995, Della Porta 1998, Tarrow 2011). For instance, a series of surveys has shown that the political attitudes of young people are influenced by contextual factors such as elite discourse about young people and state and police repression (EURYKA 2020). It is crucial to consider the role of political institutions, politicians and political context to understand why, eventually, young people prefer to engage in noninstitutional and unconventional forms of political participation, distancing themselves from traditional politics. Moreover, inequalities influence young people's opportunities to participate in collective action (see below). At the intersection of political and organisational contexts, a few primary conditions that characterise young people's preferences of spaces for meaningful participation can be identified (Zani et al. 2011):

- ▶ accessibility
- ▶ the required level of commitment
- ▶ the perceived efficacy of the actions carried out in that space/context.

As outlined in section I, these conditions also arise from the intersection of the activity's aims and the democratic environments in which youth participation takes place. In this case, social movement activism is often modulated by empowerment aims, in which young people are directors and creators of their own actions, within counter-democratic and participatory environments. For instance, informal spaces and networks may be more easily accessible to young people, especially for "first-timers". A protest, a demonstration, or a smaller event such as a book presentation may already constitute an opportunity to enter these networks and begin a recruitment or mobilisation process. Assemblies of many informal groups are public and open to everyone. They do not require formal membership, specific skills or knowledge to take part. Similarly, the required level of commitment is adjustable according to individual preferences and motivation. There are no formal commitments: while some young people may easily become "super-activists", dedicating a large proportion of their time to political engagement, others may remain only loosely involved, participating in major events and initiatives.

In counter-democratic and participatory environments, contextual factors linked to the political system and institutional politics – and, notably, discontent towards them – have shown how young people are far from being indifferent and apathetic, opting instead for spontaneous, mass reactions to voice their disagreement. For instance, the political youth movement *Le Sardine* ("The Sardines") appeared spontaneously in 2019. This was an example of extrainstitutional participation in a context of institutional politics, namely during the regional elections in Emilia-Romagna, Italy, in January of the same year. The movement gathered over 6 000 people in a massive flash-mob against the surge of right-wing populism in Italy, particularly Matteo Salvini's League party. The popularity of the movement grew rapidly across the country, spawning similar flash-mobs organised

by young citizens in multiple cities, embracing The Sardines' collective identity. In other cases, specific policies are directly connected to one or more of the dimensions above and influence opportunities for unconventional activities. The level of openness of the public sphere is crucial to providing or restricting opportunities (Deželan et al. 2020). Examples include bureaucracy and fees for registering protest events, prohibition of face coverings during collective actions, fines for graffiti and restrictions on public assemblies to prevent the erection of tents or sleeping equipment. More broadly, freedom of assembly and processes of criminalisation and stigmatisation of activists, including arrests and detention, are determining for any type of unconventional activity. Frequently, legal restrictions on unconventional activities at the domestic level also lack support from international stakeholders, including international civil society organisations (CSOs), other states and other protest movements. Recent or current cases of repression on behalf of authorities, ruling parties and security forces include, among others:

- ▶ LGBT people, women and migrant activists in Poland;
- ▶ members of the National Youth Council in Belarus;
- ▶ Yellow Vest activists in France.

At the same time, this type of violence and repression may also function as a catalyst for mobilisation. Another example of young people's participation in the fight for social justice is the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States following the murder by police of African-American citizen George Floyd on 25 May 2020. The movement spread all over the world during the month of June 2020, with thousands of young activists gathering all over Europe under the slogan "I can't breathe" to protest the use of excessive force by law enforcement.

At the organisational level, the mobilisation of resources – such as money, time, knowledge, media and networks – is key to involving and recruiting individuals into social movement organisations (McAdam et al. 2001). The unequal distribution of resources in societies and the willingness of social movements to overcome resource inequality are also questions of accessibility. Indeed, one of the more significant areas hindering the further development or even the survival of young people's participation in smaller initiatives or organisations is the mobilisation of such resources. Often, young people cannot mobilise funding due to a lack of connections, experience or because of age-based discrimination. At the core of this issue, "two long-standing debates about resource access centre on whether social movements obtain their support primarily from internal or external sources and the closely related question about the extent to which external supporters constrain movement goals and activities" (Edwards and Gillham 2013: 2). In this sense, through self-production (Edwards and McCarthy 2004) and the agency of existing participants, movements can produce their own resources, whether in terms of legitimacy and networks, or physical objects such as badges, T-shirts, posters, banners, etc. Young people have proven to be extremely innovative and proactive in this direction, employing a wide range of practices to craft the items and material they need. In the digital space too, creativity abounds in producing

resources for issue-based campaigns or using social media to organise events, recruit young people and spread information across communities. However, challenges may nonetheless arise for youth movements, particularly in terms of material resources.

Public institutions, other CSOs and even older activists can provide networks and resources that would be otherwise unavailable to young people, particularly marginalised ones. These are vital for the success of social movements' activities (Earl et al. 2017, Taft 2015). The literature on social movements gives due regard to the challenges faced by young people because movements' organisational structures are adult-dominated activist environments (O'Donoghue and Strobel 2007, Earl et al. 2017), where young people's agency and opinions may be dismissed or instrumentalised. Jennifer Earl and colleagues explain that "adult-directed political socialisation is incongruent with how youth perceive themselves, leading some to start their own youth-centred organisations" (ibid: 4). Furthermore, although intergenerational dynamics may always run the risk of becoming particularly problematic in informal settings, there are some actions that adults can initiate to support youth participation within social movements. Among these, adults within social movements themselves may function as mentors and role models, empowering youth in their political development, namely in their political identities. This aspect is particularly important when considering that meaningful political participation initiatives should seek to establish, among others, political self-determination (Hart 1992).

Finally, at the individual level, several factors shape the opportunities for groups of individuals to engage in politics, including unconventional activities (Dalton et al. 2010, Schussman and Soule 2005, Quaranta 2015, Grasso and Giugni 2016). When examining what makes some individuals engage in action while others remain inactive (McAdam 1986), drivers to political participation can be divided into three broad categories (Lavizzari and Portos 2021):

- ▶ biographical availability, meaning all those individual attributes and resources that affect the costs of participation;<sup>15</sup>
- ▶ political engagement, which includes an individual's capital in terms of political interest, knowledge, values and access to information;
- ▶ structural availability, which refers to interpersonal networks, organisational membership and development of human capital, civic and socio-political skills (Dalton 2004).

Overall, education, income, political interest, progressive values and organisational membership are among the most significant predictors of political involvement (Schussman and Soule 2005). Each of these factors varies greatly for young individuals across and within countries.

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15. This usually includes measures of marital and employment status, family background, income, age, education and gender/sex (see McAdam 1986).





#### 4. Intersectionality and patterns of exclusion

A critical issue to address and understand is the assumption that only the extent of young people's desires to participate in politics is determined by their varying social backgrounds. However, such variety is just as important in influencing the range of activities in which young people may wish to participate. Historically, politics and conventional participation in general have been targeted at adult, male, heterosexual citizens. Thus, the effects of overlapping sources of inequalities with respect to participation, such as gender and age, can reinforce each other.

The discussion presented above helps us understand how essential factors with an impact on political participation – such as resources, social capital, or political skills and knowledge – can vary according to gender, race, sexual orientation and legal status, and contribute to the reinforcement of multiple inequalities. They directly and differently affect opportunities and challenges for participating across all these dimensions (i.e. time, access to education and leadership). In addition, (political) socialisation and lifecourse experiences are significant predictors of the existing patterns of inequalities in youth engagement, as well as other cultural and historical factors. These factors particularly affect “those individual resources, such as [young people's] self-esteem, motivations, skills, and opportunities, which are essential to a full, active, and informed participation” (Sartori et al. 2017: 224).

Complementary factors have been raised, with a particular focus on socialisation contexts in which specific stereotypes are confirmed (Eagly 1987). Taking the example of gender stereotypes, gender expectations and role confirmation may impact young women's and men's perceptions of political efficacy and knowledge, based on the

opportunities they have been provided to gain specific types of political skills (Jost and Kay 2005; Lavizzari and Portos 2021). Both family and friends, particularly during highschool years, may play a role in such a process of gender role confirmation. Young males are more often encouraged by family members to engage in a higher number and more varied activities, especially competitive ones. Parents tend on the contrary to be more protective towards young females, granting participation in more adult-controlled and caring organisations (Cicognani et al. 2012).



Moreover, “involvement in civic and social participation is associated with greater political engagement and participation among all youths and more strongly among boys ... Such finding supports an explanation in terms of social capital: male adolescents, more involved in a larger network of formal and non-formal community organisations and groups, have greater opportunities to learn and practice skills and play significant roles ...” (Cicognani et al. 2012: 574). In terms of unconventional activities, we find again a gender gap reflecting the traditional private/public gender divide, according to which men engage in some activities that are more explicitly public (i.e., taking part in political discussions and meetings, engaging in collective actions), while women tend to prefer private forms of protest such as signing a petition or boycotting products (Pfanzelt and Spies 2018). Thinking about how this interacts with other inequalities, we find that lower levels of socio-economic resources usually associated with young women, may have a negative effect on political participation in time-consuming, expensive, or highly skilled activities, such as campaigning (Burns 2007, Coffé and Bolzendhal 2010).

When it comes to social movements, a specific focus should be placed on intersectionality, or “intersectional mobilisation”. The concept of intersectionality stems from feminist theory, a methodology for research and a social justice agenda. It

starts from the premise that all people live multiple, layered identities along with the assumption that people are members of more than one community at the same time and can simultaneously experience discrimination in different ways (Crenshaw 1989). Intersectional analysis aims to reveal multiple identities, exposing the different types of discrimination and disadvantages that occur because of the combination of identities. On a practical level, intersectionality here focuses on the inclusion of the different experiences of young people who are marginalised and discriminated against.

In trying to give voice to marginalised groups, social movements encounter a significant problem: in fact, “[b]ecause social movements typically make salient a single identity to promote a unified collective identity, they can minimise internal group diversity, avoid difficult discussions regarding diversity, or treat minority group identities as secondary” (Terriquez 2015: 346). Diverse examples show how some movements have successfully adopted an intersectional approach, notably through discourse and practice. The assumption needed to achieve this is that “attention to the interests, needs, and unique experiences of and by groups who experience multiple identity-based hardships at these three levels [movement, organisational and individual] can not only assist these groups in overcoming barriers to political activism, but also inspire high levels of commitment and activism” (ibid.: 359). Finally, even if not necessarily always identity-based, young people who have mobilised across different social movements in recent years have come to understand how different “issues” that can be a source of different inequalities are linked to one another. In this sense, we find several examples of contemporary movements – such as climate justice movements and most importantly, feminist movements – that link issues of gender inequalities to sexual orientation, migration, or ecological issues (see for instance the case of ecofeminism).<sup>16</sup> Politically engaged young people are fully aware nowadays of the intersections between racial and social justice, climate change and gender equality. They support each other across campaigns, protests, and different types of actions: in contrast to institutional politics, they do not aim to merely save or preserve the current state of things (from destruction), but rather to fundamentally change it for the better.

## 5. Case study: the climate justice movement

The re-awakening of climate justice movements since 2018, led by young people around the globe, represents a historical turning point. This is due to the scale of its capacity for mobilisation, global scope, media coverage, and political attention. Greta Thunberg and the international movement #FridaysForFuture (FFF) (also known in various countries as Youth for Climate, Climate Strike or Youth Strike for Climate) are certainly a major driving factor of this upsurge, leading the wave of climate protests with impressive numbers: over 1.6 million school students mobilised during the first global school strike in March 2019 (Wahlström et al. 2019), and more than 6 million during the Global Week of Climate Action from 20 to 27 September 2019.

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16. See Carolyn Merchant (2005), “Ecofeminism”, *Radical Ecology*, Routledge, pp. 193-221.

Researchers surveying young FFF activists and participants have already identified certain key features that distinguish this movement from others (ibid.: 2019): the majority of protesters in Europe are between 14 and 19 years old, with an exceptionally high share of young women; they rely heavily on social media and peer networks; they have limited commitment to formal environmental organisations; and they have an extensive involvement in lifestyle politics. A significant proportion of FFF protesters were newcomers to demonstrations (between 22.6% and 50.6%) and had little involvement in conventional politics either (this was also due to their young age). According to the ideas presented in this section, we know that political participation at a young age can have biographical consequences, so “part of the broader importance of the FFF movement lies in its ability to mobilise so many young people who are – through their climate activism – becoming engaged citizens” (ibid.: 11). The movement builds on a series of tactics that have been used by social movements for decades to attract attention and raise public awareness of their demands, such as sit-ins to occupy public spaces during protests, strikes, and increasingly common “die-ins”, where activists simulate their own deaths. However, and importantly, research has found that social movement organisations that aim to cultivate long-term activism and engagement, such as Friends of the Earth, are not as effective at mobilising young people as adults (Fisher 2019). Furthermore, FFF participants have been found to communicate without ties to more traditional and established social movement organisations (ibid.). These findings are consistent with established challenges encountered in more formal movement organisations, particularly with respect to adult-centrism.

The FFF movement has proven to be a notable examples of innovation and adaptation to the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. With the launch of its Digital Strike on 24 April 2020, the movement claims “every Friday – due to the CoronaCrisis – we strike online, giving voice to those unable to strike ... Digital strike is a social media movement ... FFF Digital provides a way for those who cannot physically strike to raise their voice on the Internet, making the movement more accessible to those in the Global South, during outbreaks like COVID-19, etc.” (FFF Digital 2020). The movement began promoting tactics through social media such as having people take a photo of themselves to share on their social media channels with a common visual element, the hashtags #ClimateStrikeOnline and #DigitalStrike or, innovatively, with a location tag corresponding to the place where the physical protest would have taken place under ordinary circumstances (i.e. in front of government buildings, major squares, etc.). Organisers could then compile and display the posts and share them in creative ways. Yet more creative approaches were included under #Art4Climate, physically fastening art creations to apartment doors and windows. Young people also engaged in *cacerolaza*, banging on pots and pans at a set time outside their windows and balconies, or on the street with their communities. Other social media tactics included barrages of posts in co-ordinated efforts to negatively impact various famous products and brands. Finally, the movement trained many new activists through online meetings, series of talks, and working groups. This was achieved via a dedicated platform, Actionnetwork.org, which provided training, office hours for support, and downloadable materials – another prominent example of international resource-sharing.

A second climate justice movement featuring increasing youth involvement is Extinction Rebellion (XR), which started in 2018. XR was not born as a youth movement per se, since it was initiated by scholars and academics working in science. But it has attracted increasing numbers of young people. The basis of their repertoire is a series of non-violent direct actions and civil disobedience that are deliberately disruptive to the public and political authorities:

Extinction Rebellion activists often go beyond simply demonstrating against climate change. Their tactics can range from attending XR and XRyouth meetings and being part of an 'affinity group' to handing out leaflets and marching, to camping out in public spaces. The movement's direct action includes swarming (forming a temporary blockade across a road or bridge), staging die-ins with fake blood, and activists super-gluing themselves to an object or building. Here, being arrested is a deliberately disruptive strategy to attract attention. (Pickard 2019: 6)

Another characteristic of XR is the stress they put on prefigurative politics. Indeed, their actions are fuelled by calls for a radical change of the prevailing system, for which they claim to go beyond politics: "Governments must create and be led by the decisions of a Citizens' Assembly on climate and ecological justice", and their aims include "[m]obilising 3.5% of the population to achieve system change – such as 'momentum-driven organising'" (XR 2020). As in the case of FFF, young people in this movement are also highly involved in DIO politics at the individual and collective level, but the focus, in this case, is put on "rebellious against the system" – as movement participants call themselves "rebels" as opposed to "activists", with a responsibility to act immediately, here and now. Moreover, XR explicitly claims to be a "do-it-together" movement, based on autonomy and decentralisation, where structures to challenge power are created collectively.

Although some differences persist between the two movements, they both clearly possess many features of unconventional political participation discussed in this section. Such features also illustrate young people's motivations to engage in these forms of political engagement. Yet, as mentioned in chapters 2 and 3 of the present section, unconventional participation of this kind may also encounter several challenges. In 2018, during the UN Climate Conference in Poland, the local government took several measures to limit activists' participation. Several were denied entry into the country, while those who could attend saw their intervention time limited to 30-minute slots. Protests were restricted to designated areas, and the wording of signs was subject to guidance: "The denials of entry follow the adoption of a Polish law earlier this year that restricts protest rights and increases surveillance powers during the climate conference" (Human Rights Watch 2018). In 2019, French police used tear gas against XR activists during a protest in an environment of increased police and government repression against demonstrators and protesters (Human Rights Watch 2019). In Germany, the government deployed large police forces to arrest climate activists occupying Hambach forest (Russell and Wecker 2018). According to Climate Action Network, several of its activists were abducted and detained during peaceful protests in Belarus in September 2020. These are some examples of contextual factors that can significantly hinder youth political participation, primarily through criminalisation.

Moreover, examples abound of stigmatising attacks by high-level political figures against young climate activists, notably with sexist and patronising comments. Indeed, young people's different expressions of dissent in the realm of climate activism do not challenge the status quo in the same way:

By introducing new concepts, ideas, methods, or tactics for achieving desired change, disruptive dissent can represent an important strategy with far-reaching impacts. However, the alternative forms of citizenship and participation expressed by youth are typically resisted, rejected, or ignored by the political elite and establishment. This approach also introduces risks, particularly the risk of being co-opted by prevailing agents and institutions that constrain the autonomy of youth, especially within the context of globalisation and neoliberal reforms. When disruptive dissent truly threatens key economic interests or postpolitical formal politics, it may lead to silencing, exclusion, repression, or criminalisation (O'Brien et al. 2018).

## **6. Outcomes and future trends of unconventional youth political participation**

The impact of social movements on social change may be more direct when, for instance, authorities respond to movements' demands, either directly or as mediated by other actors such as, among others, political elites, the media, or public opinion (Andrews 2013). Research has also shown that movements can influence policy processes at different stages. These notably include the agenda setting and policy adoption and implementation stages, although their influence is usually stronger on the former (Andrews 2013, Soule and King 2006). Furthermore, at the cultural level, social movements may bring about greater consequences by introducing and diffusing new frames and collective identities in societies, challenging existing cultural norms, or pushing for changes at the legislative level that will influence the cultural sphere in the long term.

At the biographical level, participation in movements may have long-lasting consequences in the lifecourse of activists by creating transformative experiences (see section II). Such participation can be particularly powerful in terms of political socialisation processes: "this can help young people to develop social networks and social capital ... and contribute to changes in young people's attitudes and behaviours toward others" (Holtom et al. 2016: 20). Finally, and importantly for contemporary youth movements, movements can have effects on each other – through so-called spillover – in terms of diffusion and cross-fertilisation of claims, tactics and strategies.

This closing chapter takes stock of recent works on youth participation in the digital sphere and provides an analysis of the most recent trends in mobilisation dynamics during and after the current pandemic crisis. The crisis offers an interesting standpoint from which to forecast future opportunities and challenges for youth political participation. It also allows for mapping of the most urgent issues activists have been seeking to address in the past months. In addition, it informs us about experimental ways of doing activism and of thinking about participation (notably through prefigurative politics).

An important point is highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. Namely, that although social movement activities have been highly constrained due to the necessary confinement, social distancing and security measures – on top of the mental health pressures that have made any type of activity particularly challenging – they have not halted altogether. On the contrary, in several ways, including innovative ones, social movements have continued to monitor governments and, importantly, to build horizontal solidarity (and even survival) networks. Direct social actions (offline) have been particularly manifest during lockdown periods and their respective aftermaths, notably through mutual help groups. At the same time, DIO politics mediated through social media has demonstrated its full potential thanks to the actions of many young people around the globe. Digital participation, in general, has seen a peak during lockdown phases, as many social movements have moved their initiatives online in creative ways. Finally, an important role is to be found in prefigurative politics in times of crisis: “in the most dramatic way, the crisis demonstrates that change is needed, a radical change that breaks with the past ... If in normal times, social movements grow with the opportunities for gradual transformation, in times of deep crisis movements are spread instead by the perception of a severe and deep threat, contributing to cognitive openings” (Della Porta 2020). Activism, in this context, is changing as movements and groups are learning to adapt to the new situation.

Young people have been involved in global online campaigns, such as Greta Thunberg’s #ClimateStrike becoming #Climatestrikegoingonline (see above) or the “*Ghen Cô Vy*” dance challenge on TikTok to promote handwashing. Small-scale online and offline actions are also proving popular, including:

- ▶ online tutorials by activists to teach viewers to produce homemade environmentally friendly products;
- ▶ engagement in community kitchens;
- ▶ grocery shopping for elderly people;
- ▶ delivering food and basic supplies to vulnerable groups;
- ▶ providing socio-emotional support to young girls who are victims of gender-based violence through Instagram, Telegram, and WhatsApp chat.

Even in-person protests have continued, and they resurface with increasing frequency every time new restrictive measures are put in place. In Poland, young women marched and drove in April 2020 against the ban of sex education in schools, and organised massive protests in October after a court decision to ban abortion in the country. According to Amnesty International (Valls 2020), a crowdsourced research project documented over 140 methods of non-violent action on display during the pandemic. Importantly, the digital world provides a dynamic infrastructure where youth can “exercise their citizenships and create frameworks for activism” (Ito et al. 2013: 10); therefore, the creativity and humour with which young people have engaged in these actions have proven to be important in re-establishing their legitimacy (to counter their frequent labelling as “slacktivism” or “clicktivism”). In addition, social media and networks can facilitate activists to strengthen connections and build social capital (Mundt et al. 2018). For example, many young activists have been involved in the creation of online guides, webinars, and tutorials about how



to engage politically in pandemic times, but also on the topic of self-care for activists and volunteers. Other examples of digital activism, in addition to digital strikes, have been mass tweet and e-mail campaigns to put pressure on policy makers and stakeholders, or to call on politicians to hold virtual meetings and town halls. Young people should indeed be considered experts on their own digital participation and play an active role in its evaluation, notably through participatory evaluation and knowledge cocreation (Pawluczuk et al. 2017).

In conclusion, the pandemic is providing both new opportunities and challenges for young people. The opportunities that can be seized and facilitated by youth social movements and policy makers are represented, for instance, by the fact that young people who have recently been mobilised online might also be willing to continue their engagement offline. Incentives for such a transition would be significant. The challenges, meanwhile, relate to the risks associated with digital participation or the digital sphere more broadly, such as online safety, fake news, and disinformation, as well as the exacerbation of inequalities caused by the digital divide.

To enhance both the sustainability and the impact of youth movements, supportive policies and affirmative actions can be implemented by national and international stakeholders. Based on the content discussed so far, such policies and actions should focus on:

- ▶ the need for safe spaces – physical and virtual – where young activists and other members of civil society can meet and organise, share practices to facilitate cross-fertilisation and transnational coalitions, and enhance impact;
- ▶ the specificities of political contexts, local experiences, and cultural norms and traditions in which each youth movement operates, avoiding blueprint policies;
- ▶ the impact and survival of social movements being enhanced if legal and extra-legal restrictions at the domestic level were to be removed or eased: stigmatisation and criminalisation processes against young activists should be condemned at any time, while solidarity actions and campaigns should be introduced;
- ▶ the inclusion of youth movement actors into broader forums for discussion and sharing, and the cocreation of knowledge at different levels: domestic, transnational, non-institutional and institutional;
- ▶ listening to young activists' opinions and getting to know their strategies and vision;
- ▶ avoiding patronising and confrontational discourse and actions when young people engage in disruptive forms (protests, strikes, etc.) of unconventional politics.



# SECTION IV – CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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**T**his study has sought to showcase angles that are not frequently emphasised when considering meaningful youth political participation. Section I provided an overview of basic concepts, while sections II and III reviewed the debates surrounding conventional and unconventional youth political participation, respectively. This final section summarises the study's key points via a series of recommendations.

## **Always consider the aims and democratic environments when debating the meaningfulness of youth political participation**

The first section of this study explored in detail why it is not possible to establish a universally valid definition of meaningful youth political participation. Despite many attempts to create lists of criteria to ensure the meaningfulness of youth political participation, or to invent typologies comparing various qualities of youth political participation processes, none of them can be applied universally. Context is of utmost importance when contemplating the meaningfulness of youth political participation, and section I of this publication gave details of two basic variables that must be considered: the aims of youth political participation based on several broad justifications, and the democratic environments in which youth political participation takes place.

Justifications of youth political participation (developmental, efficiency, empowerment and rights-based) provide the basis for contemplating its concrete aims. The typology of democratic environments (direct, representative, participatory, deliberative and counter-democracy) provides for a socio-political context of youth political participation. Combining these two factors by naming the aims of a given activity and identifying the democratic environment(s) in which the activity takes place enables one to consider their synergies. In cases where such synergies are found, the youth political participation activity in question can be considered structurally meaningful. A major advantage of this approach is its universal applicability to youth political participation activities across divergent democratic setups, as well as its capacity to evaluate the meaningfulness of a given youth political participation mechanism across different environments.

## **Avoid treating youth political participation activities as universally helpful**

There are activities whose aims do not align with the democratic environments in which they operate, and vice versa. Such activities, despite being in line with the

general definition of political participation, do not stand a chance of fulfilling their aims, and therefore cannot be considered structurally meaningful. Taking part in such activities not only does not help young people to achieve their goals, but it also consumes energy better invested elsewhere. Such activities also confound the general discussion on youth political participation by creating examples of malfunctioning practices which technically can be considered as political participation opportunities for young people, but which in practice are set to fail from the start.

Youth political participation is not a panacea. Limiting discussions to meaningful youth political participation mechanisms helps keep the debate focused on activities that contribute to reaching goals young people set for themselves. Considering only meaningful youth political participation also supports efforts to map mechanisms and topical areas that are well-covered, as well as to share examples of good practice in a responsible, context-conscious manner.

### **Consider the advantages of using participatory democracy mechanisms in conventional youth political participation practice**

Building on the section detailing types of democratic environments, the section on conventional forms of youth participation underlines that, currently, youth participation is mostly based on the principles of representative democracy. Such mechanisms usually take on various forms of parliamentary procedures, mirroring existing structures of public governance. Realising institutional youth participation according to principles of participatory democracy would, however, make it more accessible to young people. Representative forms of youth participation are inherently exclusive of many young people. Embracing popular inclusion would likely attract and engage more diverse groups of young people, and better fulfil the objectives of institutional youth participation as defined in the first section.

Nonetheless, approaches rooted in representative, participatory, and discursive democratic traditions all have their merits. It is not the intention of this study to argue in favour of some specific normative approach to democracy. Instead, it underlines that people have different reasons and repertoires for engaging in politics. Institutional youth participation opportunities should reflect this diversity by offering young people a variety of options for expressing and developing their political positions. Otherwise, one risks strengthening the polarising and alienating tendencies in representative democracy that democratic participation is intended to alleviate.

### **Consider the “cultural toolkits” of young people from various backgrounds when creating conventional youth political participation opportunities**

Participatory opportunities are ascribed meanings by their participants. On the individual level, these meanings are shaped by the cultural toolkits available to young people. Youth participation becomes resonant when these meanings are in line with aspirations and convictions. Alas, the resonance of youth participation can

be described as its perceived usefulness. For institutional youth participation to be engaging, it must be resonant. However, what is resonant or useful for one group is not necessarily so for another. Consequently, both excessive and insufficient resonance can alienate participants from democratic ideals. In the first case, this occurs through exclusive strengthening of one group of people's capacities, while in the second this is due to a reinforcement of the sensation of externality.

The key message is that empowerment and the development of skills and capacities through youth participation only occurs when that participation is useful. Given that people have distinct needs, different ways to participate are called for if the intention is to offer participatory opportunities to all young people. Moreover, it is not always useful to sustain measures aimed at capacity building and empowerment for participants that have attained a high level of aptitude in public functioning in the first place. Instead, there should be other participatory opportunities available that make more sense to them. Different forms of institutional youth participation build different types of capacities and differ in their societal utility. Those planning and implementing youth participation policies should be aware of these distinctions and do as much as possible to reduce negative externalities such as alienation from democratic ideals or the accumulation of privilege. Ideally, a range of opportunities for conventional youth participation should be offered, letting young people develop their capacities for public functioning regardless of their initial abilities and without limiting the methods of participation to the single repertoire of parliamentary procedure. Public authorities have a responsibility to support the political socialisation of young people. Institutional youth participation can indeed fulfil the right of young people to have a say, leading to better-informed decisions, all while empowering young people and developing their capacities for public functioning in democratic societies. However, it is not reasonable to assume that public authorities should decide how young people should aspire to change the world.

### **Be aware of strengthening prefigurative politics and the transnational character of current unconventional youth political participation**

The third section of this study outlined how today's interconnected world influences the domain of unconventional youth political participation: allowing activists from different corners of the world to inspire each other, get in touch with each other, and support each other through face-to-face and digital activism.

Unconventional youth political participation mechanisms are also increasingly engaged in prefigurative politics: a trend for activists to implement desired solutions immediately, in the hope of bringing about change without the need to wait for modifications to policy. The inclusion of youth movement actors in broader forums for discussion, sharing, and the co-creation of knowledge is crucial to listening to young activists' opinions and getting to know their strategies and vision of the world and social change. Equally important is the sharing of resources and knowledge which they can also learn from and use in their own activities. In a context of increasingly shrinking spaces for civil society and youth activism, stigmatisation and criminalisation processes against young activists should be condemned at all times, and this should be accompanied by solidarity actions and campaigns. Democratic

environments should facilitate the unfolding of unconventional youth participation by easing restrictions, policing practices, and confrontational discourses on different forms of engagement, such as protest politics and civil disobedience.

### **Consider intersectionality when exploring youth engagement in unconventional youth political participation**

Intersectionality describes how layers and combinations of identities influence the everyday lived reality of youth, including the various ways in which young people can simultaneously experience discrimination. Approaching young people's participation in intersectional terms means acknowledging how the overlap of multiple and different situations – age, gender, sexual orientation, race, etc. – can see them reinforce each other and impact on the opportunities and the forms in which young people participate. Affirmative actions to tackle marginalisation and inequality should expand the horizon of inclusivity in the aims, access and processes of youth political participation mechanisms.

This approach helps prevent young people who face different hardships from being discouraged from engaging in unconventional youth political participation. It can indeed also, by contrast, help them to become highly motivated and mobilised. An intersectional approach is commonly used today in various forms of unconventional youth political participation by consciously and explicitly tackling multiple issues at the same time: social justice, climate change, gender equality, and many others. Crucially, young people can discern how these issues are intrinsically linked to each other. Fighting for one implies fighting for all of them, through alliances between different youth movements as well as individualised participation.

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Young people's political participation has many diverse forms – it can be conventional and unconventional, including activities such as voting, being members of political parties, serving on a local youth council, engaging through a youth organisation or taking part in online political activism, boycotts or a protest movement. Contemporary engagement of young people in political processes is taking place within the context of a shrinking space for civil society, rapid digitalisation, advancement of populist ideologies, increased inequalities, a rise of global youth movements and a health pandemic.

The study "Meaningful youth political participation in Europe: concepts, patterns and policy implications" examines young people's participation within this changing context, by reflecting on the key concepts of political participation, types of democratic environments within which young people engage with the system and various mechanisms of participation.

Both conventional and unconventional types of participation are covered in this study. Avenues for conventional participation are explored through a reflection on the idea of political socialisation and learning democratic values through participation and non-formal learning. It follows with the presentation of concepts, examples, opportunities and challenges related to unconventional participation, and in particular the examination of inequality and exclusion. The study concludes with the reflections on the latest developments and future trends for youth political participation, with a focus on the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and recommendations for facilitating young people's political participation.

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