

# MILLENNIALS AND GEN Z IN EUROPE

## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND LEFT-WING POLITICS

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	5
<b>1. YOUTH POLITICISATION AND THE POLITICAL PROFILE OF THE YOUTH (MILLENNIALS AND GEN Z) IN EUROPE</b> .....	7
Framing the discussion on youth political participation .....	9
Political attitudes: Political interest, trust, and ideology .....	11
Electoral politics .....	15
1. Electoral abstention: alienation, apathy or political non-participation? .....	15
2. Generation Left and the Far-Right .....	18
3. Party politics .....	19
<b>2. SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE YOUTH</b> .....	21
1. New fields, agencies, and repertoires of participation .....	23
2. Individualization and collective action .....	27
3. Organizing in a networked society .....	29
4. Protesting in the digital era .....	31
5. New claims, new frames .....	33
<b>POLITICAL SUGGESTIONS</b> .....	35
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	39

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# INTRODUCTION

**ON SEPTEMBER 15, 2021**, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen gave her “State of the Union” speech to the European Parliament. One of the visions she described for the EU’s future was to put young people in the spotlight. The EU institutions have clearly understood that young people are becoming more and more detached from the EU as a project, but also as an institution that has implications in their everyday lives. The younger generation of European citizens is made up of precarious, flexible, underpaid, and insecure workers, even though they are highly educated and skilled. In particular, the youth in the countries of the European south (people between 25 and 35 years old) are struggling to access an autonomous, adult life and the capacity to plan their own future. For this reason, young people have lost trust not only in European institutions, but also the whole European integration project. Von der Leyen heralded 2022 as the “*Year of the European Youth*”, adding that “young people should lead the debate on the Future of Europe” and characterizing the young generation as a “generation with consciousness”. Parallel to that, in March 2022, the European Commission released a report called “Youth and Democracy in the European Year of Youth” aiming to put youth at the heart of EU’s vision, as well as to prove that the main pillars of the EU are indeed harmonized with the views, the awareness and the expectations of the younger generations of Europeans.

**Angelina Giannopoulou,**  
**Editor and Coordinator of the Study**  
**March 2023**

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Nonetheless, this is not the first time that the EU’s political elites have tried to address a problem by fancy slogans and exercises in window-dressing. They talk about young Europeans and their high social consciousness, but they are not willing to present a strategy that will tackle youth unemployment in the EU, the precarious labour relations, the dogma of flexicurity, the emigration of Greeks, Croatians, Polish to the strongest European economies, permanent insecurity and impoverishment. Therefore, the left in Europe needs to respond with a radical vision for the role of the youth in shaping the EU and building a social, just, green and feminist future for the people.

**The role of the politicisation of youth — and their consequent political participation — is critical, here.**

The youth expresses the most militant and promising part of the political left, and history has proven its central role in social mobilizations and political uprisings. Parallel to that, electoral demography reveals a trend toward youth preferring to vote for the left. For this reason, the left should not treat the youth as an ancillary group of its support base. Rather, now is the time to reconsider the relation between the youth and left-wing politics. Are left-wing parties in Europe credible to Millennials and Gen Z? Why do even the radical parts of the youth, who are politicised, not see the left parties as structures and spaces through which they can fight for their rights and their vision? Could we say that the “institutionalisation” of left-wing politics is the main factor of the youth’s detachment from the parties of the left? Or does the crisis of political representation equally and indistinctly affect the

youth, too? In recent times, youth has mobilised around multiple issues, principally meaning the climate emergency, but also gender inequality and gender violence. How can we present a holistic approach to fighting capitalism and building new emancipatory projects? How can we transform the political left into an attractive and inspiring project for the youth by giving them an important role in the revitalisation of the left?

These questions can only be answered in part, in a step-by-step study. We shall start by analysing and interpreting the state of affairs in the politicisation of the youth in Europe and, afterwards, discern the paths through which we can obtain a new relation with politics and youth politics in particular. This study constitutes a first step in the analysis and interpretation of the politicisation and political participation of Millennials and Gen Z in Europe, both in terms of established indicators, such as electoral behaviour, and within the frame of a politics of conflict. Moreover, the authors move to political conclusions that, subsequently, drive them to political recommendations and strategic steps for the European Left that could overcome the mutual estrangement between the left-wing parties and the progressive youth. These recommendations could serve as a guide for the upcoming political struggle of the European left in the 2024 European Elections, a programme upon which we can build campaigns that target the youth — and are built by youth — using a new political imagination and moving beyond our familiar paths.

**Angelina Giannopoulou,**  
**Editor and Coordinator of the Study**  
**March 2023**



**YOUTH POLITICISATION  
AND THE POLITICAL  
PROFILE OF YOUTH  
(MILLENNIALS AND GEN Z)  
IN EUROPE**

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# FRAMING THE DISCUSSION ON YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Issues of youth politicisation and political participation have increasingly preoccupied public and academic discourse, often for contradictory reasons. From the 'Youthquake' and the 'EU's Youth Strategy 2019-2027' to engage and empower young people, to a media and political discourse framing the young as irresponsible and liable for the spread of Covid-19, the youth has been in the spotlight. If we take as our premise that 'generational replacement is one of the main driving forces for social and political change in liberal democracies' (Hooghe 2004, 331), then the significance of studying the youth from the viewpoint of political science and public policy becomes clear. Being young has a significant bearing on one's political behaviour, both in terms of indicating an individual's life stage and place in the life cycle, and that of belonging to a political generation socialised in a particular context (Mannheim 1968/1952; Inglehart 1977; 1990; Norris 2004; Albacete 2014; Pantelidou-Maloutas 2012). It is well-established that political participation follows a curvilinear pattern, rising from youth until middle age where it reaches a plateau, to decrease as one gets older. However, it is the generational effect that interests us most, as it can have long-standing consequences for the future of political systems.

Within this framework, it is imperative to examine Millennials and Gen Z as comprising a 'new political generation with lived experiences and worldviews that set them apart from their elders' (Milkman 2022). European youth today are the first digital natives; a generation that is highly educated and skilled; and, at the same time, precarious in terms of labour relations,

with employment that is flexible, insecure and underpaid. This situation was exacerbated by the outbreak of the financial crisis and the harsh austerity implemented in the years that followed, especially in the countries of the European South, where the youth is also struggling with brain drain and 'waithood', i.e. the prolonged transition to adulthood. The fact that these issues are rarely addressed by national or European officials has left many young people feeling unheard, let down or even marginalised (Sloam 2016b). It should also be stressed that this generation has been socialised under circumstances of neoliberal ideological hegemony that have discredited politics and their collective character and favoured the individual route to success; a development that also has implications for their overall politicisation and political profile as adults.

During at least the past two decades, the literature on political behaviour has systematically addressed young citizens' withdrawal from politics, in terms of their reduced political interest and political participation compared to both older adults and the young people in previous cohorts. In Norris's words (2003, 2) 'political disengagement is thought to affect all citizens, but young people are believed to be particularly disillusioned about the major institutions of representative democracy, leaving them either apathetic (at best) or alienated (at worst)'. This development, although well established, has sparked a variety of explanations, entailing divergent implications for the future of politics.

**The youth disengagement from institutional or formal politics is expressed in declining levels of voter turnout, low political interest, a significant demise in party membership and identification and the electoral fluidity of young voters.**

Moreover, young citizens increasingly express disenchantment with and disappointment from the institutions of representative democracy, evident in the falling levels of trust. This phenomenon is often attributed to the apathy, alienation and cynicism of young citizens who abandon formal politics en masse (or, in some cases, never enter them), raising issues of democratic legitimacy. It has even been argued that it is indicative of a broader social malaise, caused by the erosion of social capital, undermining citizenship values relating to solidarity, the sense of community and collective action.

This interpretation has been challenged by scholars belonging to the 'transformational school of thought', who claim that the aforementioned analyses only focus on one dimension of youth participation. They counter that the modernisation of Western societies has resulted in the transformation of citizenship norms, subsequently changing the preferred patterns of political participation. Particularly, according to Dalton (2008), 'duty-based citizenship', linked with institutional participation is in decline, giving prominence to 'engaged citizenship', favouring the development of noninstitutionalised, elite-challenging types of participation. For Norris (2003) we are experiencing the transition from the 'politics of loyalties' to the 'politics of choice', while a new model of 'critical citizens' has emerged. They are citizens who remain committed to democratic ideals, but express increasing dissatisfaction with

the performance of democratic institutions. Other terms like 'lifestyle politics' and 'individualised' or 'self-expressive' acts have also been employed to denote this expansion of citizens' repertoire of action (Theocharis et al. 2018).<sup>1</sup>

For Bang and Sorensen (1999), this mode of engagement constitutes an alternative for citizens who feel their voice is not heard in the formal political arena to participate in their own terms, in their preferred political projects, away from 'grand narratives', through flexible and often ad hoc organisational structures. This also means acting directly, taking responsibility for (collective) problem-solving themselves, instead of delegating it. The youth is always at the forefront of these developments.

Furthermore, more recent approaches are critical even of the idea of young people's non-participation (Amna et al. 2012; O'Toole et al. 2003; Hey 2007). Here, the lack of participation is not necessarily a synonym for apathy, as it may instead stem from a narrow definition of participation that excludes or marginalises young citizens or the dominant model of politics, equating politics with parliament and the state, which holds back the youth from recognising their participation as such (Giugni et al. 2021). Finally, politics might seem unattractive or even irrelevant to the lives of young people, as Henn and Weinstein (2004) have shown.

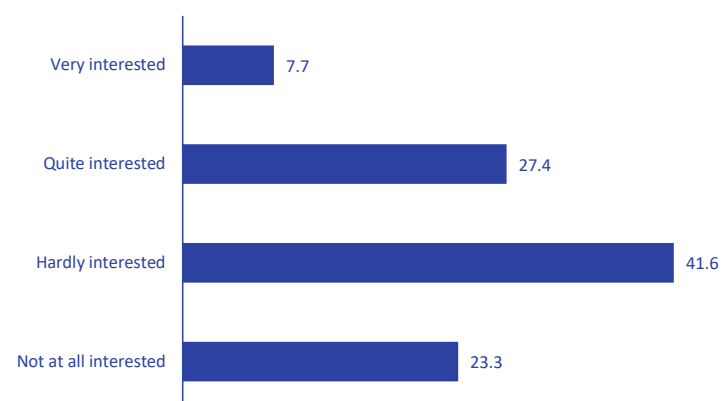
<sup>1</sup> According to de Moor (2017, 182), 'lifestyle politics refers to the politicization of everyday life, including ethically, morally or politically inspired decisions about, for example, consumption, transportation, or modes of living'. Examples of these lifestyle, individualised or self-expressive acts range from urban interventions, flash mobs, deliberative experiments, to individual political podcasts, and participatory theatre (Theocharis et al. 2018).

# POLITICAL ATTITUDES: POLITICAL INTEREST, TRUST, AND IDEOLOGY

The first part of the report addresses the youth's overall political composition and, more specifically, their fundamental political attitudes and ideological placement. These constitute significant determinants of participation and define the tone of their political engagement (Pantelidou-Maloutas 2012). In this study we will primarily employ data from the European Social Survey (ESS), an academically driven, cross-national multi-country study that takes place every two years and covers approximately thirty European countries. Specifically, we will use data from ESS round 9 that was conducted in 2018, since the most recent tenth round data are still being published.<sup>2</sup>

For reasons of brevity, in most cases the average for young citizens, aged 15-29 will be included in this report, but it must be highlighted that European states are very heterogenous regarding their institutional framework, political culture, transition to democracy, party systems, political cleavages and inequality; factors that have a

**Figure 1 - Political Interest**



European Social Survey (ESS) Round 9, 2018, <https://ess-search.nsd.no/en/study/bdc7c350-1029-4cb3-9d5e-53f668b8fa74>, accessed 20 Dec. 22.

significant impact on their citizens' political behaviour (Kitanova 2020).

The first aspect of youth politicisation that will be discussed is political interest. It is considered one of the strongest predictors of political participation, with higher levels of political interest resulting in higher probabilities for engaging in some type of political action. However, political interest only constitutes a predisposition for participation, and can conceal very different conceptualisations of politics (Pantelidou-Maloutas 2012).

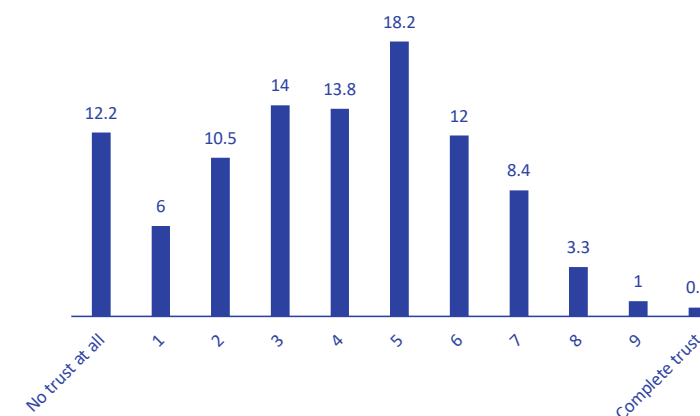
Figure 1 shows that the majority of young Europeans (65%) are hardly or not at all interested in politics, in line with the relevant literature.

<sup>2</sup> The European Social Survey (ESS) is an academically driven multi-country study. In the ninth round, the survey covers thirty European countries. Universe: All persons aged 15 and over resident within private households, regardless of their nationality, citizenship, language, or legal status. Time period: 30-08-2018 - 27-01-2020. 15-29 in 2018.

Institutional trust constitutes one of the most discussed aspects of politicisation. It has been argued that low trust towards institutions is an indication of alienation and a fragile democratic legitimacy, while combined with high levels of political efficacy it increases probabilities for engagement in non-institutional modes of action (Kaase 1999; Norris 1999). Generally, low levels of trust in institutions have been systematically corroborated in empirical research across European countries during the past decades, with the youth at the forefront of this trend (Quaranta et al. 2021; Ellison et al. 2020; Nicos Poulantzas Institute 2022). Political parties, especially, are the least trusted among a series of institutions, and this development has been exacerbated by the outbreak of crisis and the implementation of harsh austerity (Quaranta et al. 2021).

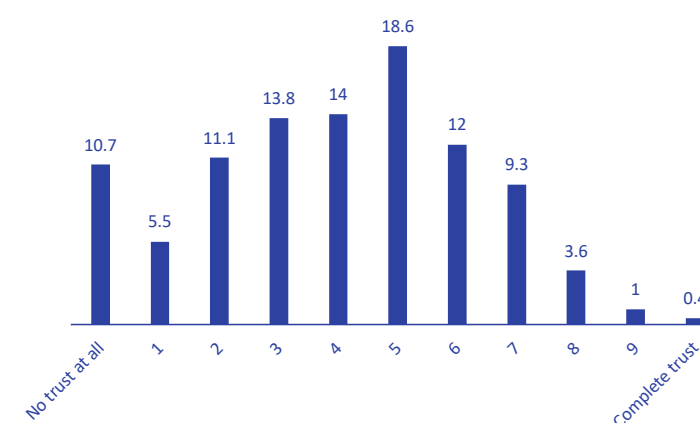
Nevertheless, young citizens on average tend to support democracy as a political system (Ellison et al. 2020) but are critical of politicians and the party-political system (Cammaerts et al. 2014),

**Figure 2 - Trust in politicians**



European Social Survey (ESS) Round 9, 2018, <https://ess-search.nsd.no/en/study/bdc7c350-1029-4cb3-9d5e-53f668b8fa74>, accessed 20 Dec. 22.

**Figure 3 - Trust in political parties**



European Social Survey (ESS) Round 9, 2018, <https://ess-search.nsd.no/en/study/bdc7c350-1029-4cb3-9d5e-53f668b8fa74>, accessed 20 Dec. 22.

resembling Norris' definition of 'critical citizens' or 'dissatisfied democrats', who adhere strongly to democratic values but find the existing structures of representative government to be wanting' (Norris 1999, 3).

Political parties, government officials and party cadres are seen as guilty of not serving the public interest but rather their own personal agendas (MYPLACE 2011-2015). ESS data also point to the low levels of institutional trust among the youth, with 56.5% and 55.1% of young Europeans distrusting politicians and political parties respectively (they are placed in positions 0-4 on the following axes).

This finding is consistent with their modest participation in formal/institutional politics and their preference for more direct and localised types of political action.



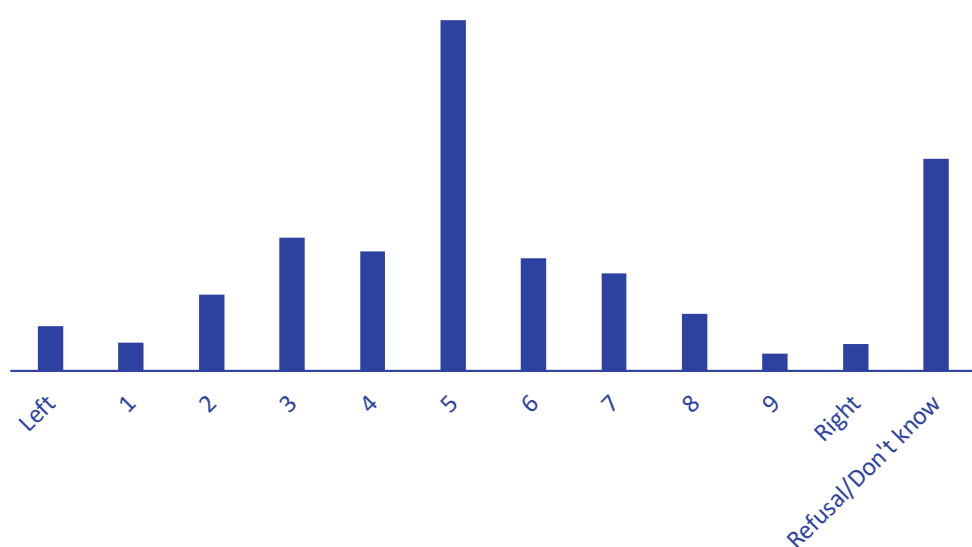
As for the youth's ideological formation, findings from many countries suggest a left-wing — or more accurately-leftish — orientation (ESS 2018; EURYKA 2017-2020; Eteron 2022). According to ESS data, the majority of young Europeans self-identifies to the left of the political spectrum, with the mean being 4.75 and the mode 5 on the 0-10 left-right scale of political ideology. However, there are significant variations among the countries, with young people in post-socialist countries placing themselves as the most right-wing on average, followed by the Nordic countries (Pilkington et al. 2018).

Moreover, maybe the most alarming finding is that a significant number of young citizens (amounting to 16.6%) refuses to place itself on this spectrum, claiming they find this distinction pointless. If we also take into account the particularly high number of answers concentrated on the middle position (5), which might not denote the centre, but rather an indirect refusal or inability for self-placement, questions arise regarding this axis's classificatory function and interpretative power. Data from other research corroborate this finding (MYPLACE 2011-2015; Nicos Poulantzas Institute 2022), although it is considered less pervasive than in the US (Pilkington et al. 2018). Another issue is that the 'content and dimension that determines young people's left-right self-placement—

economic conservatism, cultural conservatism or their position on the issue of inequality—varies depending on context (Pilkington et al. 2018, 39). Ergo, the content of the axis as well as the way young people interpret the notions of 'right' and the 'left' are not one-dimensional and consistent across the countries, which are also shaped by their particular historical trajectory and political culture.

Even when a left turn (either in electoral, protest politics or both) is observed, in-depth, qualitative research has indicated that the picture is more nuanced (Pantelidou et al. 2021; Pilkington et al. 2018). Empirical findings point to a socially progressive rather than politically radical generation, which is mostly characterised by a diffuse disappointment and cynicism, a turn to 'realism', and the absence of a coherent political vision of the left. At the same time, and in line with the fluidity of the ideological field, references to the Left do not seem to be necessarily linked to a corresponding structured worldview, particular values and a different vision for society. Thus, although the left-right distinction remains the major political cleavage it looks like it has lost part of its explanatory capacity, especially for the young, 'defining citizens' correspondence of preferences and values less than it used to' (Moschonas 2016).

**Figure 4 - Placement on left right scale**

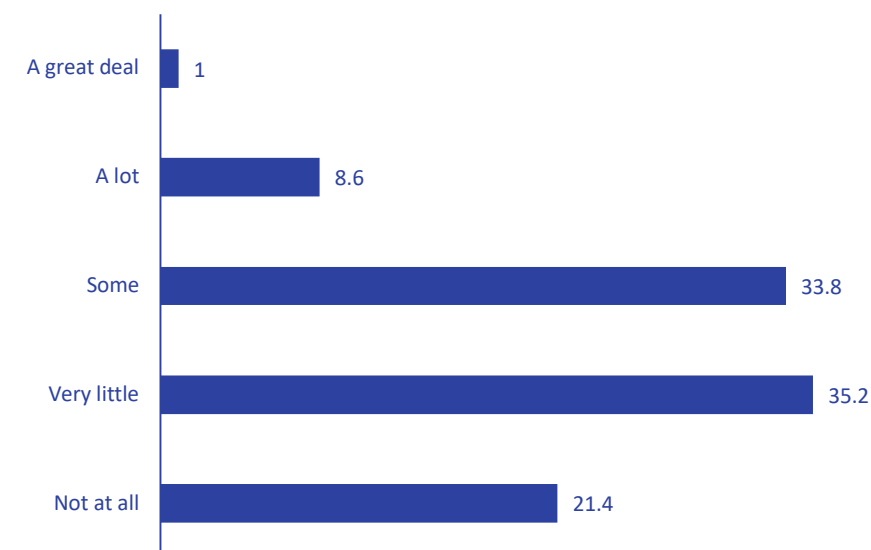


European Social Survey (ESS) Round 9, 2018, <https://ess-search.nsd.no/en/study/bdc7c350-1029-4cb3-9d5e-53f668b8fa74>, accessed 20 Dec. 22.

Finally, a significant finding that political parties and organisations should pay close attention to is the diminishing sense of political efficacy. This term refers to the 'feeling that political and social change is possible and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change' (Campbell et al. 1954, 187). Multiple research findings attest to younger citizens' feelings that their voice is not heard, their

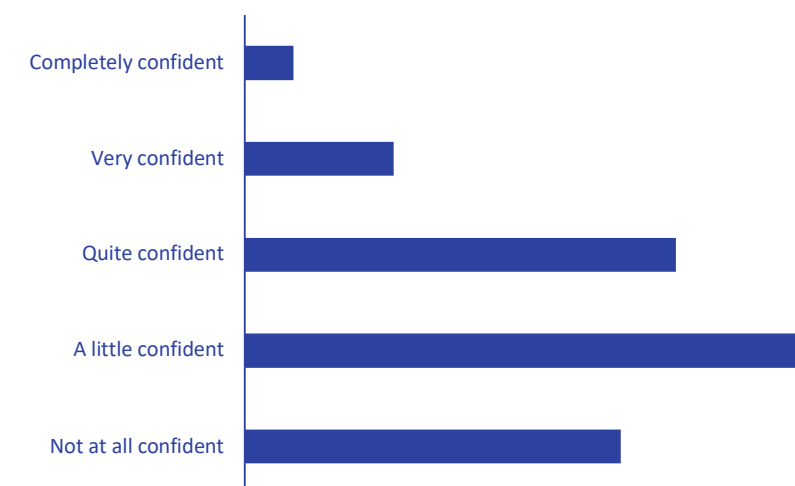
influence on politics is little or none (ESS 2018), they don't have much, or any, say over important decisions, laws and policies affecting their country (ranging from 63% to 85% across European countries) (European Parliament 2021), while 60% of European citizens aged 15-29 are only a little confident or not at all confident in their own ability to participate in politics.

**Figure 5 - Political system allows people to have influence on politics**



European Social Survey (ESS) Round 9, 2018, <https://ess-search.nsd.no/en/study/bdc7c350-1029-4cb3-9d5e-53f668b8fa74>, accessed 20 Dec. 22.

**Figure 6 - Confident in own ability to participate in politics**



European Social Survey (ESS) Round 9, 2018, <https://ess-search.nsd.no/en/study/bdc7c350-1029-4cb3-9d5e-53f668b8fa74>, accessed 20 Dec. 22.



# ELECTORAL POLITICS

## 1.

### Electoral abstention: alienation, apathy or political non-participation?

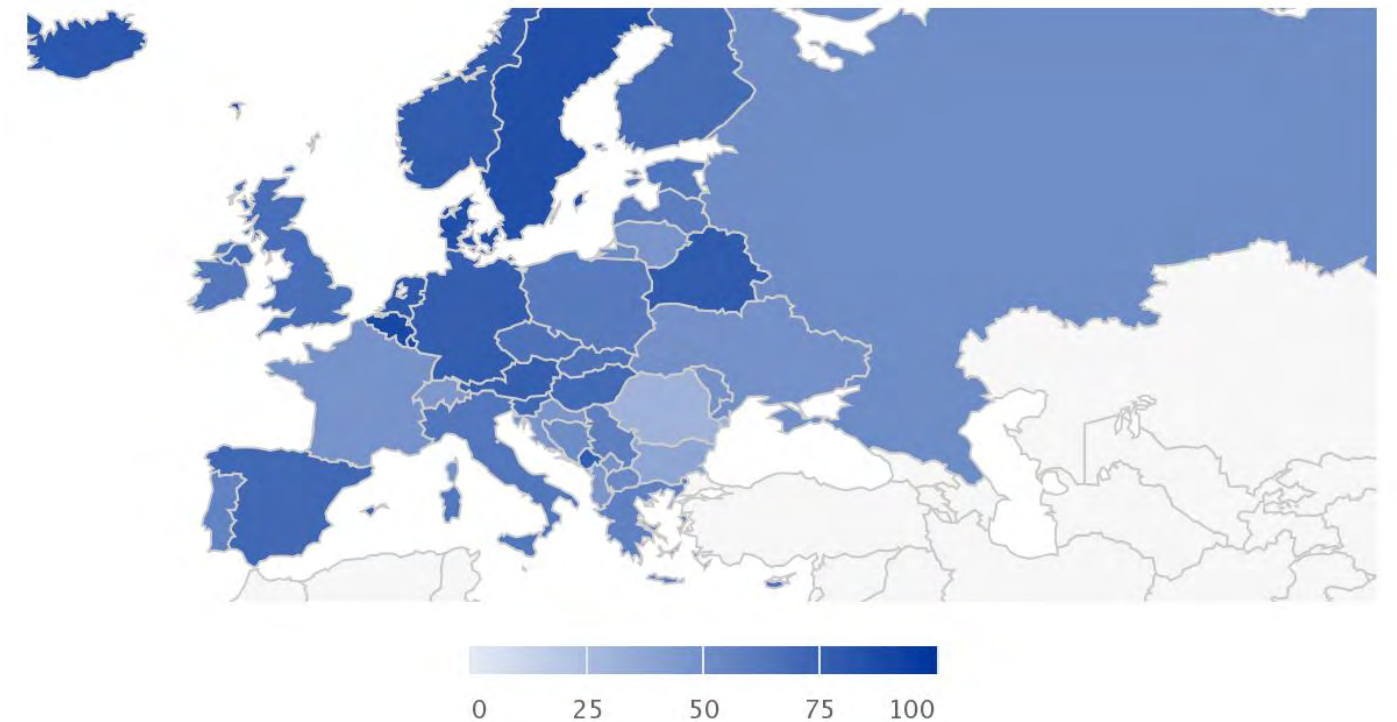
A series of comparative studies has revealed that political participation varies substantially across Europe, creating distinct clustering based on, inter alia, the type of welfare capitalism, age of democracy, political culture and period effects, such as the impact of the economic crisis (Ellison et al. 2020; Kitanova 2020; Sloam 2016a).

These variations hold true even for the simplest and least demanding act of political participation, namely voting in elections. As can be seen in the map below (Figure 7), voter turnout varies from as low as 32% in Romania to almost 90% in Luxembourg. Albacete (2014) distinguishes three groups of countries on the basis of their citizens' engagement in institutional modes of

participation: the Scandinavian countries and Belgium, characterised on average by higher levels of participation; Southern European countries with lower participation rates; and the rest that stand in between.

Longitudinal empirical data point to plummeting voter turnout in both national and European elections over the last decades (Blais, 2007; Franklin, 2004; Dalton & Wattenberg 2000); a finding that has sparked vibrant and often gloomy discussions regarding the legitimacy of democratic systems and the future of politics. On average, voter turnout decreased by 8% between 1970 and 2005 (Hay, 2007), but the pace is accelerating.

Figure 7 - Voter turnout in parliamentary elections



International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), 2022, <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout>, accessed 20 Dec. 22

This phenomenon is particularly pronounced among young citizens, who are participating in elections less than both older adults and the young people of previous periods (Albacete 2014; Pilkington et al., 2015; Sloam 2016a). All data suggest that younger generations are far less likely to vote than older citizens, but some qualifications need to be made. First of all, youth electoral participation usually follows the general trend of the population in each country; by that we mean that when overall voter turnout decreases it usually decreases for younger citizens as well, maintaining the previous ratio (Sloam 2016a).

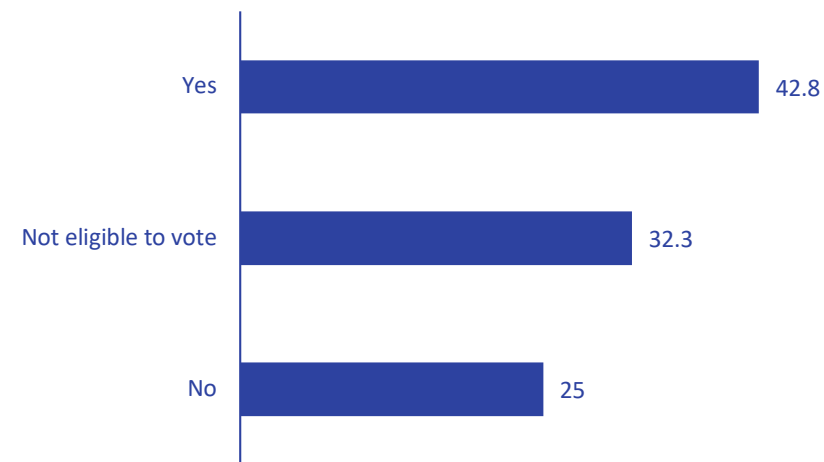
Secondly, differences in national youth turnout across Europe are significant: UK, Ireland and Luxembourg have the lowest rates of youth voter turnout, with less than 40% of eligible 18- to 24-year-olds voting in national elections, as opposed to 70-80% of young people in Belgium,

Sweden and Denmark (Sloam, 2016b).<sup>3</sup> However, voting is still by far the most widespread form of political participation, both among the youth and older citizens (European Parliament 2021; European Commission 2022; Pew Research Center 2018; Giugni et al. 2021; Nicos Poulantzas Institute 2022), though it is less common among younger citizens (Sloam 2016a).

According to the 2018 ESS data, 42.8% of young Europeans aged 15-29 years-old claim they voted in their country's last national elections, a percentage that is hardly negligible if we consider that another 32.3% was not eligible to vote at that time. Overall, only 25% of the respondents report that they didn't vote in the last elections.

<sup>3</sup> The data refer to the average participation in electoral politics in the EU15 of eligible 18- to 24-year-olds, employing data from ESS, Waves 1-6, 2002-2012.

**Figure 8 - Vote in the last national elections**



*European Social Survey (ESS) Round 9, 2018, <https://ess-search.nsd.no/en/study/bdc7c350-1029-4cb3-9d5e-53f668b8fa74>, accessed 20 Dec. 22.*

Therefore, electoral abstention should be more closely examined, especially in the case of the young. Many scholars have drawn attention to the increasing significance of non-participation for young people and particularly the case of 'political non-participation' (Hay 2007; O'Toole et al. 2003). This term denotes actions (or more accurately the absence of them) that are intended as political participation by the part of the citizens but are usually not perceived the same way from the political system. Deliberate abstention from elections is the most typical example of such an act.

Finally, it needs to be stressed that, although young people across Europe seem to be more and more detached from institutional politics -or the politics of 'old people' (Pilkington et al. 2015)- representations of voting as a mode

in citizens repertoire of political action are still positive. According to various survey data, voting in local, national or European elections is still considered to be the most effective action for making young people's voice heard (Ellison et al. 2020; European Commission 2022; Cammaerts et al. 2014). This finding is in line with interpretations highlighting young people's disappointment and sense of exclusion, rather than apathy and indifference.

Therefore, in spite of their lower levels of electoral turnout compared to older cohorts, their growing distance from institutional politics could be reversed, since they still trust electoral politics.

## 2.

### Generation Left and the Far-Right

In terms of the voting preferences of young Europeans, they appear to have distanced themselves from the mainstream parties of the centre-left and centre-right and been increasingly attracted to issue-parties, such as the various Green parties (Sloam 2016a; 2016b), parties of the Left (Milburn 2017), as well as populist and extremist nationalist parties (Pilkington et al. 2018).

Age has emerged as the key dividing line in contemporary politics, distinguishing electoral behaviour in many European countries, including France, UK and Greece, where younger voters massively support nationwide Left parties. This development has been depicted in terms like 'Left turn', 'Generation Left', and 'Youthquake'. The latter was introduced to describe the unexpected rise in youth voter turnout Party in the 2017 UK General Election, as well as younger citizens' overwhelming preference for Corbyn's Labour Party (Sloam et al. 2017). A similar phenomenon has been observed in the European South (except for Portugal), where the young stood at the forefront of the electoral dealignment and partial realignment of national party systems (Tsatsanis et al. 2021). Age now constitutes the most reliable predictor of both political attitudes and voting intention (Milburn 2017). Young people nowadays, and especially the youngest among them (Gen-Z) are more likely to hold left-wing political ideas and vote for left-wing or more generally progressive parties than their older counterparts.

According to Milkman (2022), in the US, Millennials contest the generally negative stereotypes that have been attributed to them — including that they are a lazy, 'sensitive', selfish and apathetic generation — by engaging in a

series of social movements, as well as becoming involved in the Obama and Sanders electoral campaigns. Moreover, they have more progressive attitudes and beliefs than older citizens on issues ranging from racial and ethnic diversity to state interventionism (Parker et al. 2019). Similar trends have also been observed among European Millennials and Zoomers who identify more to the Left or the Centre of the political spectrum compared to older generations and adopt more progressive stances on climate change and various forms of discrimination, while they also have a high regard for public services (Eurobarometer data) (de Weck et al. 2019).

On the other hand, it cannot go unnoticed that at the same time, another part of European youth expresses its distrust towards the political system via anti-democratic and authoritarian attitudes and behaviours, closely related to the electoral rise of far right and the growing acceptance of xenophobic, anti-immigrant views. Right-wing populist, nationalist and extremist parties like the National Front in France, the Freedom Party in Austria, and the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn in Greece (Pickard et al. 2018; Pilkington et al. 2018; Koronaiou et al. 2015) have experienced an expansion in their electoral appeal and voting share during the crisis, particularly among younger Europeans. This surge in support for extreme right-wing parties is partly explained by their anti-establishment positions and their claim to be different from the rest of a corrupted political system (Pilkington et al. 2018). This appeals especially to the generally distrustful younger generations and the socially excluded groups among them (Sloam 2016b).

Yet de Weck and Ferguson (2019) raise a fair point when they argue we should not overestimate the electoral power of Millennials and Zoomers in Europe. The aging European population signifies an aging electorate as well, meaning that young voters represent a declining share of the overall European voter base. In particular, 40% of the EU's

population is 50 or older, while voters under the age of thirty account for only 18% of its electorate. This development also attests to why politicians and political parties in Europe direct their appeals to older citizens rather than the young, further alienating them from the political system.

### 3.

## Party politics

As already mentioned, the fall in voter turnout in most European countries is moderate, albeit undisputed. What is more alarming, however, is the general demise of party politics, documented in the widespread and long-term decline in political party membership and party identification (Dalton et al. 2000; Franklin 2004; Van Biezen et al., 2012). This is particularly the case for younger people (Dalton et al. 2000; Albacete 2014; Norris 2003; Giugni et al. 2021). Not only are they underrepresented amongst party members, but youth organisations are losing members at a faster rate than parties overall are (Scarrow 2007). It has to be noted, though, that there are significant variations in party membership across European countries (from less than 2% of 15 to 24-year-olds joining a party or action group in the UK, Finland, Italy and Luxembourg, to over 4% in Austria, Denmark, France, Greece and Sweden, while it is significantly determined by socio-economic status (Sloam 2016b).`

The same holds true for participation in other institutional or formal political organisations, like trade unions (Sloam 2016a; Giugni et al. 2021). In terms of party identification, ESS data

document a decline similar to that regarding party membership, already starting in the 1980s, with the youth at the forefront of this trend (Albacete 2014; Sloam 2016a; Giugni et al. 2021).

Sloam (2016b, 292) notes that 'given these participatory trends and the demographic reality of ageing European societies, mainstream political parties have become less able (and, perhaps, less willing) to represent young people's interests'. This situation has been exacerbated since the outbreak of the financial crisis: it further weakened political parties' potential to articulate an alternative plan, and has put an uneven strain on the lives of young people. Albacete (2014) comes close to the same conclusion, arguing that new cohorts of voters are less exposed to mobilisation agencies and networks compared to earlier cohorts, with implications both for their involvement in political and civic associations and their psychological engagement with parties. Ergo, political parties are losing their ability to mobilise the young in particular (Henn et al., 2005).

Many authors (Sloam 2016a; Albacete 2014) draw attention to young people's withdrawal from party and electoral politics, arguing that their increased involvement in non-institutional modes of participation cannot fully compensate for it. If young people are underrepresented in political parties or even election results, their voice cannot be heard, leading to a vicious cycle. That is, their issues and views are not visible in the public dialogue and have low prioritisation by politicians and parties, creating inequalities between younger and older citizens and further disappointing, excluding and alienating them from the political system and the formal channels of participation. Furthermore, younger generations are questioning political parties' ability to bring about meaningful change, due to their ideological convergence, professionalisation, and irrelevance to young people's lives (Hart et al. 2017; Hay 2007). They are also wary of their internal structure and hierarchy that seems to leave little

space for influence and substantial contribution on their part (Hart et al. 2017). Nevertheless, this 'spiral of diminishing mobilisation, participation and engagement at all levels' (Hay 2007, 22) is not inescapable; young voters have mobilised on certain occasions, like for the campaigns of Barack Obama in 2008, Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn, suggesting it is more a matter of supply than demand.

Furthermore, more in-depth research on the issue of party politics, like that carried out by the Nicos Poulantzas Institute (2022) suggests even though most young people are distrustful towards party membership, political parties do not appear to be blindly discredited and rejected as means of political organisation, while their importance both for constructing collective identity and constituting an institutional pillar of democracy is acknowledged.



2.

**SOCIAL MOVEMENTS  
AND THE YOUTH**

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# 1.

## NEW FIELDS, AGENCIES, AND REPERTOIRES OF PARTICIPATION

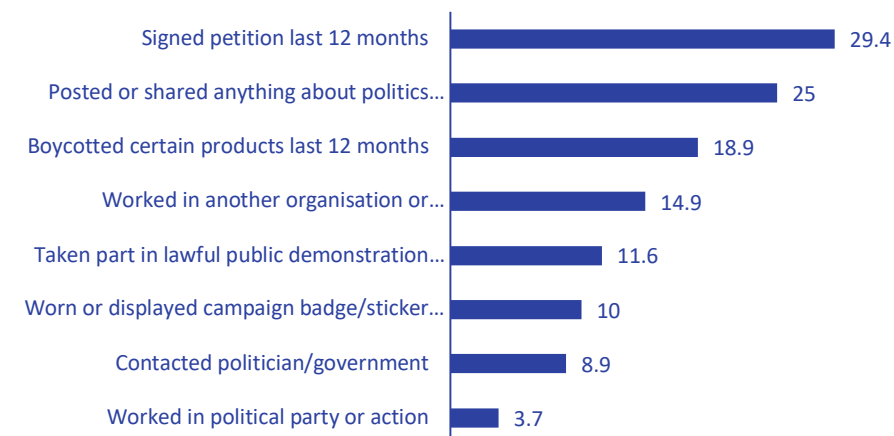
In order to have a more comprehensive understanding of youth political participation, we also need to examine other modes of participation. It has been argued so far that young people are not indifferent to politics or apathetic; rather they participate differently, by favouring non-institutional, non-conventional forms of action (Norris 2003; Pilkington et al. 2018; Sloam 2016a) or being 'standby' and participating ad hoc, in select causes, when they feel that what is at stake concerns them (Amna et al. 2012; Bang et al. 1999).

However, comparative and longitudinal research across European countries (Albacete 2014) has revealed that institutional and non-institutional modes of participation are increasingly employed in a complementary rather than an alternative manner, and that younger citizens do not seem to concentrate more on non-institutional forms, relative to older adults (see also Hooghe et al. 2015). Many scholars have indicated the relationship between economic deprivation and the

precariousness of the new generation with its massive and catalytic presence on the streets (Tejerina et al. 2013, Graeber 2014, Gerbaudo 2017, della Porta 2017). However, both the causes of and obstacles to collective action have increased internationally; new conditions of dispossession and individualisation define threats and opportunities for new generations (della Porta 2019a, 2019b), but the latter do manifest their availability to protest (Andretta and della Porta 2015: 49).

The European Social Survey data are in line with the relevant literature, documenting the increasing appeal of non-institutional forms of participation, like signing petitions, which comes second in youth's responses (29%), after voting in national elections. In addition, online political participation and boycotting are also high in youth's preferences, with 25% and 19% of young Europeans correspondingly stating they have taken part in during the last 12 months.

**Figure 9 - Political participation in non-electoral modes**



European Social Survey (ESS) Round 9, 2018,  
<https://ess-search.nsd.no/en/study/bdc7c350-1029-4cb3-9d5e-53f668b8fa74>, accessed 20 Dec. 22.

A recent Eurobarometer survey focusing on the young (European Parliament 2021) documents even higher levels of youth participation in various modes of action. The most striking finding is, perhaps that almost nine in ten respondents (87%) have engaged in at least one political or civic activity. In particular, 42% have created or signed a petition, 25% have engaged in more direct forms of action, including boycotting or buying certain products on political, ethical or environmental grounds and 26% have participated online, by posting their opinions on a political or social issue. Also, almost 1 in 4 respondents (24%) has taken part in street protests or demonstrations.

Nevertheless, aggregate levels of youth participation vary significantly across European countries.<sup>4</sup>

Scandinavian countries (Sweden, Denmark, Finland) and France were characterised by higher overall levels of youth political engagement, reflected in moderate to high voter turnout and high levels of participation in non-institutional, issue-based modes. The Central European cluster (Austria, Belgium, Germany) and Spain held average rates for both engagement types, while the rest of Southern European states had moderate to high levels of electoral participation, but lower rates for non-electoral forms (although it has to be noted that the range of non-institutional modes included in the survey is rather limited).<sup>5</sup>

Ireland and United Kingdom stood out due to the very low levels of voter turnout but had moderate rates of non-institutional participation (Sloam 2016a).

Finally, the issues that Millennials and Zoomers are concerned with also attest to their progressive or even socially radical orientation, while their concerns are also expanding into new fields of interest and politicisation. According to Eurobarometer data (European Commission

2022), European youth prioritise tackling poverty and social inequality (43%), protecting the environment and combatting climate change (39%), and reducing unemployment (37%). Younger citizens' left-wing attitudes are not only evident in their policy priorities, but also in the positions they hold on the issues. These have also been referred to as 'cosmopolitan-left attitudes' since they combine traditional left-wing stances with more cosmopolitan or libertarian grievances (Sloam et al. 2018).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It has to be noted that this classification is made by Sloam, based on ESS cumulative data from waves 1-5 (2002-2010), regarding participation in the fifteen old member states of the European Union.

<sup>5</sup> Even though the European South has often been described as having lower levels of civic and political (non-electoral) participation, one needs to consider other dimensions of citizens' engagement that might alter the overall picture, too. Firstly, Southern European countries have exhibited signs of an alternative, yet robust civil society, especially since the onset of the 2008 economic crisis. This includes large-scale and prolonged protest action like the 'Indignados' movement (Gerbaudo 2017) and the emergence and expansion of mostly informal social solidarity groups and networks (Sotiropoulos 2014). Secondly, direct citizen action is often manifested in highly contentious ways, as well as by large-scale participation of wider segments of the citizenry, rather than being limited to political party or union members (Diani and Kousis 2014; Karyotis and Rüdig 2018). Finally, despite the somewhat lower levels of trade union density in the European South, it has to be stressed that almost half of all general strikes since the 1980s were called in Greece (Hamann, Johnston and Kelly 2013),

<sup>6</sup> These refer to attitudes that are found on the left of the left-right divide but can simultaneously be characterized as cosmopolitan or libertarian. They reflect a more liberal stance on a series of issues, ranging from cultural diversity, immigration, and national identity, to matters of morality and lifestyle (like LGBTQIA+ rights), which cut across the traditional left-right divide.



# 2.

## INDIVIDUALISATION AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

If left-wing parties want to reach young people, they have to understand the social environment in which they live and which shapes their identity and goals. According to mainstream theory, postmodern era is characterised by an accelerating process of individualisation and a subsequent detachment of new generations from politics and public sphere. This perspective has been criticised by intellectuals such as Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1991), according to whom we should not speak of postmodernity, but of late modernity, since the process of individualisation must be considered as a result of the radicalisation of modernity rather than an overcoming of it. In this context of “liquid modernity” (Bauman 2000), it would be better to distinguish between “singularism” and “individualism”, as Martuccelli proposes, with the former referring to one’s own originality, incomparability and uniqueness and the latter to privatism and the supremacy of individual interests over group ones (Alteri et al. 2016: 739). Similarly, individualisation should be separated from individualism (Giddens 1991). The former is a process that fosters autonomy and self-construction, while the latter is an attitude synonymous with egoism. As Gozzo and Sampugnaro note, “the process of individualization – undoubtedly present on the cognitive level – does not necessarily imply selfishness. There emerges a mixture between personal interests as the search for freedom and a desire to build authentic relationships as a propensity towards altruism and egalitarianism” (2016: 764). In every case, the relationships between individual and society, between actors and structures, have substantially changed. Structural constraints remain, although it is more difficult now for the individuals to perceive and interpret them without the mediation of social groups (ibid: 753-4). However, they have lost

their regulatory capacity in terms of identity and meaning making (Pirni and Raffini 2016).

But what does this tell us about the new generations’ relationship with politics? Modes of participation are affected by the structures of late — or post- — modernity. Some people are negatively affected in terms of their ability or willingness to engage in politics, while others find ways to reinvent political action (Alteri et al. 2016: 721-2). Some may accept events and perceive difficulties as personal failures, while others choose to act through an autonomous and reflexive relation with politics (Gozzo and Sampugnaro 2016: 765-6). Basically, what was for Generation X an unconventional way of acting, is for the generations that grew up in the twentieth century the only way of being involved in politics (Alteri et al. 2016: 724). “Networked individuals” (Rainie and Wellman 2013) engage in “individualized collective action” (Micheletti and McFarland 2010) or “connective action” (Bennett and Segerberg 2013), instead of collective action. This culminates in single-issue movements and single-event mobilisations, political consumerism, social enterprises or the sharing economy, and especially digital activism (Alteri et al. 2016: 725). They direct their energy increasingly to “life politics” or a “politics of self-actualization” at the expenses of “emancipatory politics” and their traditional social orientation (Giddens 1991), while the temporality to which such kind of activity is connected is the present (Alteri et al. 2016: 736-7). Thus, young people’s participation did not decline — it just changed form (Earl et al. 2017). Scepticism must not be considered as cynicism (Loader et al. 2014: 148), while non-participation in institutional politics must be seen through the prism of “dissenting citizenship” (O’Loughlin and Gillespie 2011).

# 3.

## ORGANISING IN A NETWORKED SOCIETY

But how does this “new politics” affect the role of political organisations? Collective actors are weakening because they are losing authority and are becoming increasingly fluid. Their boundaries seem porous, while they have been transformed into spaces for inter-personal exchanges in the context of subjectivation processes (Pirni and Raffini 2016). Basically, “one adheres to the extent that such an adhesion allows him to connect his individual project with a collective project” (ibid: 806). Apparently, young people participate by choice, not by obligation, and only if their participation contributes to the formation of the group and fulfils their need for self-representation (ibid: 818). This does not necessarily lead them to loneliness and isolation or narcissism, since they are (perhaps more) able to create relationships and form groups (ibid: 812-3). Simply, participation in the collective sphere is weaker, plural, differentiated and temporary, while they prefer to participate in horizontally organised groups of new social movements instead of traditional hierarchical organisations (parties, trade unions, etc.).

This preference is not linked with some — rather unexpected — triumph of anarchist ideology. Rather, it is an expression of the culture of autonomy, the fundamental cultural matrix of contemporary “network societies”. According to Manuel Castells (2012), these latter are based on horizontal interactive communication that connects cyberspace and urban space,

creating communities and transforming social movements into networks of networks. In this context, horizontality seems to be the key for overcoming pre-existing structures through the adoption of an organisational structure which is “horizontal, self-organized, fragmented, oriented to individual participation, openness, and self-determination, with no durable structuration and no party affiliation” (della Porta 2019b: 1590). Maybe the most prominent example of mass mobilisation through such connective action networks with no clear leadership is still the Indignados/Occupy movements of 2011 (eg. Anduiza et al. 2014). This networked informal organising was practiced by the alter-mondialist activists and some autonomous political milieus of previous decades (Flesher Fominaya 2015), but became a generational taste, either among new feminists (Portos 2019, Chironi 2019) or new precarious workers (Zamponi 2019). Traditional organisations are no longer equipped to address the youth’s demands for politicisation. Moreover, as far as the “biographical availability” (McAdam 1986) of younger generations is concerned, either because of their impatience (della Porta 2019b: 1588) or the very fact that the current financial crisis has reshaped opportunities and resources available for youth mobilisation (della Porta 2019a: 1414), it is narrower than supposed. Thus, they prefer to engage in ephemeral, ad-hoc, issues-based campaigns rather than more long-term organisational projects.

# 4.

## PROTESTING IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Hence, they privilege repertoires of action that are characterised by “immediate prefiguration in free spaces”, the “return to social movement dynamics in the streets” and the “frequent use of new technologies” (della Porta 2019b: 1586-7). The latter play a crucial role in the political participation and civic engagement of “networked young citizens” (Loader et al. 2014). It is true that online social networks facilitate people with lower previous political experience to engage in politics (Anduiza et al. 2014), while politically engaged young people integrate social media use into their existing organisations and political

communications, transforming every aspect of organised activity, from event organisation and production and broadcasting information to everyday political discussion and doing politics online (Vromen et al. 2014). Even “clicktivism” must not be underestimated, given that low-cost activity via social media (clicking ‘like’ on Facebook, signing online petitions, forwarding letters or videos, or changing profile pictures) can be considered as a ‘thin’ form of participation (Hapulka 2014).



# 5.

## NEW CLAIMS, NEW FRAMES

The claims, framing and discourse of new generations are different from those of older ones, too. Their widespread mistrust towards political institutions and representational politics is expressed via their preference for direct or real democracy, as was put on display during the Indignados/Occupy movements of the last decade. Born in an era that saw new social movements flourishing, they fully embraced the “rights” discourse. However, they elaborated their own agenda, especially regarding feminist and LGBTQIA+ issues (gender violence, surrogate motherhood, paid sex work, same-sex marriage, same-sex adoption, etc.) (Chironi 2019). Racial discriminations became much more intolerable, environmental issues gained prevalence and animal rights as well as a vegan culture came to the fore. Moreover, they enrich this post-material

template with new material claims regarding the economic and social conditions shaped by generalised precariousness and neoliberal reform. More interestingly, they started to bridge these different claims by adopting or elaborating an intersectional analysis, which allow the understanding of the interconnection among different forms of oppression and combine the overcoming of differences and the maintenance of pluralism (Milkman 2017: 10-11, della Porta 2019b: 1590-2). Subsequently, new generations somehow differentiate their values and language. Tolerance, plurality and inclusiveness constitute core values for them, while they speak of a language adapted to the everyday experiences rather than marked by traditional ideological signifiers (Papanikolopoulos 2023).

# POLITICAL SUGGESTIONS

Having taken seriously all the aforementioned developments, we will try to address the following question: how can the European Left build bridges with European youth?

What follows refers to some preliminary relevant suggestions.

**1.** The parties of the European Left must change their organisational model, fighting the “iron law of oligarchy” (Michels [1911] 1962) within them and changing their bureaucratic and centralised structures. The individual in the era of late modernity cannot be reduced to the role of the apathetic spectator. That is why left-wing parties must place citizens at the centre of the deliberation and decision-making processes. During the twentieth century, participation in political parties offered opportunities for socialising, getting informed, and forming one’s own political identity. Nowadays, however, all this takes place much more easily, quickly and efficiently, outside of party frameworks, through processes controlled by individuals themselves. The only thing that parties can offer them is participation in actual decision-making processes. But a necessary condition for this is that left-wing politicians, rank-and-file activists, and intellectuals stop counting losses from the processes of individualisation and social fragmentation and begin to discern the possibilities offered by the networked society, as Hardt and Negri (2001, 2005, 2011) already did.

**2.** But if left-wing parties want to exploit the actual (and not the imaginary) biographical availability of young people, who participate by choice and not by duty, it is essential to create a digital platform that will provide opportunities for deliberation and participation in collective decision-making. Podemos is the most famous and interesting example of entering such an innovation. Its organisational development marked by the “mixture of vertical and horizontal element, which balances the quest for internal democracy with the need for efficiency”, resulting to the formation of a “hybrid party” (Chironi and Fittipaldi 2017: 295). Of course, there has been severe criticism of digital parties (Gerbaudo 2018), which we must take into account. However, although it is true that the use of digital platforms facilitating decision-making processes may strengthen party leaderships, we must not forget that oligarchy has also jeopardised participatory processes within the traditional hierarchical parties of the Left, securing it a no less strict control over the party, securing on its behalf no less strict control over the party. Besides, the problem with representational system is representation itself, especially when a great deal of the party members and voters feel more competent than party’s leaders and rank-and-file. Additionally, we have to seriously consider that during the Covid-19 pandemic trade unions, maybe the most traditional political formations, managed to sustain their activity via digital tools. Therefore, our aim should not be to replace traditional parties with digital ones, but to create new hybrid parties, which will combine the virtues of face-to-face contact with the advantages offered by digital communication. After all, both are demands of modern youth. Of course, such a task needs a trial-and-error method and psychological endurance, since “where danger is, grows. The saving power also” (Friedrich Hölderlin).

**3.** Another issue that needs taking into account is political parties' personnel. The existing political staff, even of those parties and organisations belonging to the Left, seems to be lacking in representativeness, especially when it comes to the young, as it often reflects the 'old way' of doing politics. In this sense, political parties do not contribute towards engaging young people, since they reproduce and validate this stereotypical representation of politics as something that 'old people do'; something boring and obsolete which does not relate to the lives and concerns of young people. The significant age gap between young people and the majority of party cadres, especially as we go up the party hierarchy, makes them remote and inaccessible in the eyes of young people and, thus, ultimately, unrepresentative (White et al. 2000). The 'generational conflict' permeating the societies of late modernity is becoming increasingly visible, partly due to the various overlapping crises of the past years that have led to a 'divergence in images of the future' among the different generations (Milburn 2019). Party politics could never have escaped this conflict. Hence, they should try to address this problem instead of ignoring it, both in terms of their political discourse and political personnel.

Giving prominence to young people (as well as to women and citizens belonging to minorities or other excluded social groups) would get a clear message across to youth that they are being recognized as a distinct social group which, despite its internal differentiations, has discrete interests, grievances, and claims. Although such a move coming from political parties is far from sufficient to ensure the substantive representation of young people, it would give young people voice, as well as the sense they are visible and somewhat represented in the public sphere and policy — ensuring, at the very least, their descriptive representation (Pitkin 1967; (Pantelidou-Maloutas 2023)). Moreover, it would contribute towards shaping an alternative representation that would portray politics in general, and left-wing politics in particular, as something that is not only the job of white, middle-aged and men from the middle and higher social strata (Pantelidou-Maloutas 2023). It cannot go unnoticed that the European Left already has some successful examples of the electoral appeal of young (or at least younger) political cadres, like Alexis Tsipras, and Pablo Iglesias, even if they cannot solely — or even primarily — account for their parties' success. Therefore, left political parties and organisations should consider organically incorporating young people and placing them in crucial positions, both within party structures at the local, regional, and national levels, as well as in electable positions in their ballots.

**4.** The crisis of representation, which affected both right-wing and left-wing parties, was addressed by some among the latter through their participation in social movements and the adoption of relevant practices. Perhaps the most typical case of a "movement party" (Kitschelt 2006, della Porta et al. 2017) was SYRIZA before it won the 2015 Greek parliamentary elections. In this case, young people appreciated the participation of a left-wing party in the protests without the usual patronage. Therefore, left-wing parties, especially those that have not participated in governments, can turn into "movement parties" in order to strengthen the dynamics of autonomous social movements. Of course, the important part in this process is not some change of political "essence", since a party can be considered as a "movement party" as far as it participates in social movement coalitions and respective campaigns. In other words, as far as it exercises "social movement partyism" (Almeida 2010). In such a case, leftist parties may hope to receive important electoral rewards, especially from youth.

**5.** Left-wing parties in Europe should not be content with the average higher electoral support of young people, but should take initiatives so that young people stop abstaining from electoral processes in such great numbers. In other words, it should constantly organize campaigns for youth participation both in institutional political processes and in elections, stressing that "it's not about whether you vote for left-wing parties. What matters is that you don't let other people decide the policies that shape your lives".

**6.** Finally, the European Left must adjust its programmatic goals if it is to meet a mix of materialist and post-materialist goals. It is true that the economic crisis and the associated crisis management by national governments and EU institutions brought economic demands to the fore. However, this does not mean that post-materialist values have taken a back seat. As Milkman (2017: 10) observes, if the Old Left had a worldview centred on the "politics of redistribution" and the New Left on the "politics of recognition", the New New Left "have a worldview that combines struggles for redistribution and recognition". Furthermore, Alteri and Raffini (2016: 741-2) argue that "social injustices would tend to be represented as recognition problems rather than problems of redistribution" or that "injustice can become synonym of that which impedes forms of self-fulfilment". In that case, either the Left can choose to address traditional collective subjects (work class, etc.) or else use broader terms, such as "people" or "middle-class society". It would be useful not to forget to keep open the horizon for individuals, as well as to insist that the neoliberal and right-wing political forces are preventing young citizens' dreams being realised.

**7.** The European Left should address the widespread job precariousness and the consequent insecurity of the new generation through the strengthening of labour rights, the welfare state and public goods, which constitute a social wage. Similarly, the implementation of a basic income policy could help them both avoid "shit jobs" in the so-called "gig economy" and obtain a minimum financial base to do the work they really want, or create their own job. Moreover, the fact that Millennials and Gen Z are "digital natives" poses certain tasks for the Left: to take the lead in the process of digitising bureaucracy and exploiting new media to make all the products of culture accessible. De-bureaucratization and accessibility are very high on the agenda of contemporary youth. As for social and political rights, the now-established turn of the youth towards life politics defines certain priorities for left-wing parties: support of both the feminisation of political life and LGBTQIA+ people's rights, a sincere and resolute turn to environmentally friendly policies and the rights of animals, and a strong defence of the equality between natives and immigrants as well as of a multicultural society. Finally, the content of socialism, the favourite signifier of the Left worldwide, will have to be adapted to the experiences of the twenty-first century. Therefore, "neo-socialism" should be more about the commons than state control, more about the social and sharing economy than about public monopolies, more about environmental concerns than developmental ones.



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### Cyprus

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Institut of the Czech Left (Institut české levice)\*  
www.institutcl.cz

Society for European Dialogue – SPED  
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### Finland

Left Forum  
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Democratic Civic Association – DSL  
www.desili.fi

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www.espaces-marx.fr

Foundation Copernic\*  
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Foundation Gabriel Péri\*  
www.gabrielperi.fr

Institut La Boétie  
institutla-boetie.fr

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Journal Sozialismus  
www.sozialismus.de

Rosa Luxemburg Foundation – RLF  
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Institute for Social, Ecological and Economic Studies – isw  
www.isw-muenchen.de

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Contemporary Social History Archives – ASKI\*  
www.askiweb.eu

Nicos Poulantzas Institute – NPI  
www.poulantzas.gr

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www.puntorosso.it

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### Poland

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www.fundacja-naprzod.pl

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Association for the Development of the Romanian Social Forum\*  
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### Serbia

Centre for Politics of Emancipation – CPE\*  
www.pe.org.rs

### Slovenia

Institute for Labour Studies – IDS\*  
www.delavske-studije.si

### Spain

Alternative Foundation (Catalonia)  
www.fundacioalternativa.cat

Europe of Citizens Foundation – FEC  
www.lafec.org

Foundation for Marxist Studies – FIM  
www.fim.org.es

Instituto 25M\*  
www.instituto25m.info

Iratzar Foundation (Basque Country)\*  
www.iratzar.eus

### Sweden

Centre for Marxist Social Studies  
www.cmsmarx.org

### Turkey

Social Investigations and Cultural Development Foundation – TAKSAV\*  
www.taksav.org

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The World Transformed – TWT\*  
www.theworldtransformed.org

Transform! UK – A Journal of the Radical Left  
www.prruk.org

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