

The need to re-engage Europe's youth

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In the immediate aftermath of the UK EU referendum, the breakdown of results sparked talks of a generational conflict, with young people – who voted overwhelmingly to remain - being blamed for having brought Brexit on themselves with their dismally low 36% turnout. New data compiled by the London School of Economics reduces the grounds for these accusations, suggesting a 64% turnout for 18-24 year olds. While this is certainly positive, the problem of youth disengagement lingers as the 64% turnout of those aged 18-24 has to be weighed against a 90% turnout of those aged 65+. This should not come as a surprise as Britain generally has the lowest youth turnout in Europe and the last referendum confirmed a trend that is not at all new, neither in Britain nor in other European countries.

Given its long-term implications, the lack of participation amongst Europe's youth in elections not only puts into question the quality of our representative democracies today, but also puts the tenability of the system under strain in the future. Actions at all levels can help to revert young people's declining participation.

Youth absenteeism: a broad and complex phenomenon

While the age gap in voting is higher in the UK than in other advanced democracies, nowhere in Europe do the young turn out more than older people. Historically, youth turnout has never been particularly high anywhere but young people have further retreated from the ballots over recent years. According to Eurobarometer, the percentage of Europeans aged 15-30 who voted in an election plummeted from 80% in 2011, to 73% in 2013, and to 63% in 2015.

On closer look, one could argue that young people's political participation is not in *decline* but in *transformation*: compared to other age groups, young people participate more in alternative forms of political engagement, for example street demonstrations, volunteering, or signing petitions. As young people have a narrow understanding of what constitutes political action - which they mainly associate with the activity of political parties - from their perspective, these flexible forms of political participation are non-political in nature, and therefore considered more positive than activities connected with political parties, whose reputations are at an all-time low. Corruption scandals and the failure to provide the public goods that political parties are expected to deliver – such as jobs and stability – have shaped young people's perception of the political class as a corrupt, old elite unable to cater to their needs. This perception was worsened by the economic crisis, which has led to record high long-term youth unemployment. In this context, young people chose to be (politically) active, but without the intermediation of political parties and without taking part in one of the most powerful ways to influence politics: casting their vote.

Key reasons behind youth absenteeism

In order to engage in the democratic process, people must believe two things: that something is at stake, and that they can influence the process. Young voters today face challenges with respect to both.

Young people's delayed entrance in the labour market, worsened by the economic crisis, has further pushed the age at which they feel there is something at stake. This is problematic as the lifecycle affects voter turnout: being a homeowner, having completed studies and work experience have a positive influence on voting. Furthermore, young people do not believe they can influence the decision-making process. In fact, the main reason explaining their decision not to vote in elections is the belief (i) that their vote will not change anything and (ii) that political parties are all the same.

In this framework, trust becomes a key variable. According to the pan-European Millennial Dialogue survey, trust in leaders, rather than in political manifestos is what motivates young people to vote. The popularity of parties like Five Star Movement and Podemos among young people can be considered evidence that they favour parties which portray themselves as an alternative to the old party establishment and which make 'honesty' their main, self-proclaimed feature. These new parties find fertile ground in young people's distrust of an old political establishment, one that is perceived as corrupt and which is not only failing to address their needs, but is also seen as part of the problem, having produced the conditions that created Europe's 'lost generation'.

Europe's changing age pyramid also negatively influences youth participation. The fact that young people form a smaller proportion of the electorate justifies parties' negligence of this particular segment of the voter base. This minimises the chance of having youth representatives and youth-related policies at the top of the policy agenda, which in turn reinforces young people's perception that politics doesn't address their needs and is not 'their business.' Since voting has important habit-forming effects, the absentees of today risks remaining the absentees of tomorrow, with serious implications for representative democracy.

Boosting youth participation

Political parties, national and European authorities – and young people themselves – all have a role to play in re-engaging youth in the political process.

Political parties should put forward more young candidates – as some political parties are already doing – and be open to youth engagement without relegating it to party youth wings and without conditioning it to party membership. Evidence from Five Star Movement, Podemos and Syriza, proves that young people vote and engage with parties with young leaders, lower median age, and less hierarchical structures. Parliamentarians should also devote extra attention to their young constituents during their mandates, building the trust that encourages young people to cast their vote.

Governments should adopt serious measures in addressing the problems affecting their young constituents, especially when it comes to tackling youth unemployment. This would demonstrate that governments can be part of the solution, and restore their trust in the fact that their voice – and vote – counts.

EU member states should consider lowering the voting age to 16 as studies prove that it both stimulates political engagement and leads to higher turnout in the longer term. Although this is no silver bullet, the experience of Austria, as well as evidence from the Scottish independence referendum, proved that when they are allowed to vote, 16-17 year-olds have higher turnout rates than 18-24 year-olds and that lowering the voting age leads to higher youth turnout in the future. Additionally, bringing in 16-17 year olds balances out the share of older people in the electorate; in the UK, allowing 16-17 year-olds to vote would have added 1.6 million citizens to the electorate, partially compensating old people's disproportionate influence and potentially incentivising political parties to engage with younger voters.

Member states should publish official turnout results by age to fully assess the size of the phenomenon across Europe; at the moment it can mainly be assessed through polls and surveys. A statistical profiling of absentees would also give clear indications to policy-makers as to which categories have withdrawn their political participation and which actions should be undertaken to re-engage them, ensuring every segment of society a fair influence on the decision-making process.

Finally, young people should not shy away from becoming 'voting ambassadors' among their peers and be active agents in boosting youth participation. As the quality of representative democracy heavily depends on voter turnout, today's young people should not be left to become the political absentees of tomorrow.

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