The myth of youth apathy: young Europeans' critical attitudes toward democratic life

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Authors:

Cammaerts, Bart

Bruter, Michael

Banaji, Shakuntala

Harrison, Sarah

Anstead, Nick

Affiliation: London School of Economics and Political Science

Abstract:

A common interpretation of the low levels of electoral turnout of young voters is that they are apathetic and part of a generation which does not care about political issues – indeed, a selfish and materialistic generation. In this article, we question this common perception and test this claim against an important alternative: that the limitations to youth participation in Europe is not due to a lack of interest in the public good, but rather to a combination of contextual and psychosocial factors, including the real as well as perceived inadequacy of the existing political offer. We assessed young people's attitudes towards democratic life in the UK, France, Spain, Austria, Finland, and Hungary. We used a mixture of comparative mass survey, stakeholder interviews, an experiment, and focus groups. Our data suggests that young people are willing to engage politically but are turned off by the focus and nature of existing mainstream political discourse and practice which many believe excludes them and ignores their needs and interests. Contrary to the assumptions of the disaffected and apathetic citizen approach, there is a strong desire amongst many young Europeans to participate in democratic life but this desire is not met by existing democratic institutions and discourses.

Keywords:

Youth, Participation, Democracy, Apathy, Elections, Activism

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Introduction

As some forms of political participation – such as electoral turnout or party membership – have significantly declined over the past 40 years both in Europe and beyond, many policy makers are particularly concerned and eager to make sure that young people have ample opportunities to engage with and in their respective political systems. In the EU, for example, 'participation in democratic life' is considered a fundamental right recognised by article 10.3 of the Lisbon Treaty (2009) and an inherent part of the European citizenship provisions. When focusing more specifically on young European citizens, the same treaty emphasises the importance of:

> encouraging the development of youth exchanges and of exchanges of socioeducational instructors, and **encouraging the participation of young people in democratic life** in Europe. (Article 165 - Lisbon Treaty, emphasis added)

In another document of the European Commission, published in reaction to the new treaty, the main policy objectives in terms of youth participation are summarized as follows:

> Ensure **full participation** of youth in society, by increasing youth participation in the civic life of local communities and in representative democracy, by supporting youth organisations as well as various forms of 'learning to participate', by encouraging participation of non-organised young people and by providing quality information services. (European Commission, 2009: 8 - emphasis added)

Achieving these goals remains elusive, not least because the national policy contexts in relation to youth participation are highly diverse across the European Union, but they tend to coalesce around a series of policies focussed on training and higher education, the transition from education to employment, opportunities for volunteering and youth work and issues relating to housing. What is, however, much less addressed or acknowledged are the systemic failures of the democratic system and institutions to facilitate youth participation in democratic life and to represent young people's concerns and interests at all levels of governance.

Besides this, many policy makers adhere to the *pessimistic disaffected citizen* frame, suggesting that a majority of young people today are a-political, indifferent or totally apathetic towards politics. This is corroborated by some studies (Kimberlee, 2002; Henn, et al., 2005; Wattenberg, 2006), and by popular belief. We do not disregard the fact that there might be quite a number of young people out there that express sentiments of apathy when it comes to democracy and participation, also in our study. However, we also argue that the reasons for these negative sentiments are complex and not merely reducible to apathy. As Loader (2007: 10) points out: 'The rejection of arrogant and self-absorbed professional politics may not be a cynical withdrawal, but rather interpreted as the beginnings of a legitimate opposition'.

Furthermore, while an election is a very important ritual in a democracy and the party-system the prime expression of this, democratic life and democracy is also so much more than elections and party-politics (Almond and Verba, 1963; Dahlgren, 2009). We thus contend, concurring with Wring et al. (1999) and Harris, et al. (2010), that there exist a wide variety of participatory practices young people engage in which do not necessarily comply with the old party-political structures through which young people used to engage in

democratic life in the past and which expand the notion of political participation beyond elections.

In an attempt to address these issues and get a sense of what young people themselves think about these issues, we assessed young people's attitudes towards democratic life in the UK, France, Spain, Austria, Finland, and Hungary. We used a mixture of comparative mass survey, stakeholder interviews, and focus groups to do so[1].

First we will focus on participation and democratic life in relation to young people to subsequently address electoral participation, youth voices in EU policy processes and youth participation in activism and volunteering.

Youth Participation and Democratic Life

When talking about participation it becomes apparent fairly quickly that many people have different conceptions as to what participation actually means and entails. Back in the 1970s, Pateman (1970: 1) already referred to the elusiveness of participation when she wrote that

> the widespread use of the term [...] has tended to mean that any precise, meaningful content has almost disappeared; "participation" is used to refer to a wide variety of different situations by different people.

This explains why, in the political theory literature, participation tends to be differentiated into various degrees of participation. In political theory, meaningful participation is defined as sharing power – in other words, where participation leads to a defined space of authority. Pateman, for instance, introduced the useful distinction between full and partial participation, whereby the former refers to 'equal power to determine the outcome of decisions' for all participants and the latter to a consultation where 'the final power to decide rests with one party only' (Pateman, 1970: 70-1). Others will speak of non-participation, fake or manipulative participation (Arnstein, 1969, Strauss, 1998), whereby participants are given the impression that they can participate fully, while this is not the case at all. These hierarchies of participatory practices point to the difficulty or even impossibility of achieving 'full' participation within current social systems of political and economic organisation. Despite this we see that policy documents, such as the one quoted in the introduction, uses the concept of 'full' participation.

Democratic participation can be defined in a narrow sense, as a method to elect competent leaders (Schumpeter, (1942 [1973]) or in a broad sense stressing the value of citizens' participation in civil society organisations and social movements, student participation in the governance of schools and universities, worker participation in professional contexts, as well as democratic participation in the family context.

> The existence of representative institutions at national level is not sufficient for democracy; for maximum participation by all the people at that level socialisation, or *social training*, for democracy must take place in other spheres in order that the necessary individual attitudes and psychological qualities can be developed. This development takes place **through the process of participation** itself. (Pateman, 1970: 42)

[1] (1) a large-scale representative survey of pre-voters (16-18yo) and young voters (18-30yo) was conducted in all countries plus Poland (Total N=7201); (2) 77 stakeholder interviews were conducted (face-to-face, telephone, Skype and some through email); (3) a total of 18 focus groups were held with a wide variety of young people from different backgrounds (in each country, a focus group of students with no particular avowed interest in politics and denoted as 'reference' group was held, as well as a group of activist youth denoted as 'active' group and a group of excluded youth, denoted as 'excluded' group); (4) thematic analysis was applied on the interviews and focus group data.

However, it would be totally wrong to simply juxtapose the representative model with the participatory one. Many participatory models of democracy attempt precisely to articulate ways in which the two need to co-exist and feed off each other, so as to improve to the quality of decision making by 'forming a broad consensus prior to embarking upon legislation and to sustain legislation once it is in place' (Héritier, 1997: 180).

Young citizens are at the heart of what many observers deem a 'crisis of representative democracy'. Some of the more alarming accounts proposed by proponents of the theory of a 'crisis of democracy' have to do with a perceived distrust of political systems, institutions, and social elites by European citizens in general and young citizens in particular (see Newton, 2001; Mishler and Rose, 1997; Kaase, et al., 1996). More generally, social scientists have tried to document what they almost unanimously perceive as a growing impression of 'dissatisfaction' of citizens towards what the European Union and its national member states can offer them as democratic citizens (Norris, 1999; Torcal and Montero, 2006). The current financial crisis has only exacerbated this.

While young citizens are the most likely to criticize the state of their political systems and apparently disengage from it, they are also the most likely – to a significant degree – to hold ambitious and idealist notions about what democratic participation should be like and about how involved they actually say they want to be (Bruter and Harrison, 2009). This democratic paradox, also noted by Pattie, et al. (2004), leads us to wonder how the participation of young citizens can be encouraged and increased using this paradoxical appetite for involvement.

In our stakeholder interviews and focus groups a number of the tensions and issues identified in the literature on participation and democracy were highlighted by youth experts and young people alike. What is strikingly obvious across all of the focus group data is a very clear disconnect between attitudes to the *theory* and *the practice* of democracy. Virtually every respondent in every focus group agreed that as a concept, democracy signifies or should signify freedom, equality and social integration.

- It's associated with equality and the absence of hierarchy. ('Active' focus group, France, 2012)
- There should be democracy everywhere. It means everyone has a say. ('Reference' focus group, Austria, 2012)
- Ideally, it's about equality. ('Excluded' focus group, France, 2012)

Such widespread assertions in our data emphasize that many young people wholeheartedly believe in democracy, in democratic values and in democracy as a principle. Although a small minority appear to hold authoritarian views about governance and inclusion, the rest overwhelmingly believe that citizens' participation is essential, that governments should consult citizens using direct democracy (referenda) more often when key decisions are taken, and that citizens should have more opportunities to participate in political decision-making (cf. Table 1). It is also worth noting that young people in our sample largely continue to favor a traditional conception of democracy, centered on the founding role of elections and the will of the people, suggesting that it is not with these mechanisms in principle that young people have problems. It also has to be noted that a clear majority of respondents told us that they do not believe that political questions are too complex for them to have an opinion, and confirm, instead, that they have an opinion on most political issues.

Table 1: Perceptions of democracy for under and over 18yo young citizens[2]

	<18yo	>18yo	<18yo	>18yo
Is citizens' participation essential to democracy?	Essential		Not essential	
	67%	69%	7%	7%
Should government have to directly consult citizens on important decisions or is it enough they have been elected?	Obliged		Legitimate because elected	
	62%	64%	9%	9%
Wish citizens had more opportunity to participate in political decisions	Wished		Not wished	
	62%	64%	8%	8%
Country best governed if politicians listened to what people want or to what competent people say?	People		Experts	
	57%	52%	14%	18%
Can nothing replace elections, or could regular surveys and citizens consultation replace elections?	Elections		Survey/Consult	
	48%	46%	17%	19%

Source: EACEA/EC 'Youth Participation in Democratic Life' Survey, 2011-2012

Democracy is thus seen by and large as a healthy, positive and fair way of organising society. As a concept it is often juxtaposed to a dictatorship, to hierarchy and to the silencing of argument and disagreement. In practical terms, however, few respondents understand themselves to be living in a truly democratic system. For this reason, when asked what the term democracy means, answers commonly begin with 'ideally' or 'in theory' and proceed by outlining the limitations, impossibility, fragility, rarity and contradictions involved in its actual practice:

- We do not have a democracy because people do not get represented. ('Active' focus group, Spain, 2012)
- Most young people do not believe they have a democracy. ('Active' focus group, Finland, 2012)
- We don't live in one or if we do, it's dying. ('Reference' focus group, France, 2012)
- We're losing it. The ideal is one thing. The reality another. ('Reference' focus group, Spain, 2012)
- In theory, it's for the good of all. But in practice, minorities are always trampled on. ('Excluded' focus group, Finland, 2012)
- The poor aren't heard. You're only heard if you have money. ('Excluded' focus group, Hungary, 2012)

In this regard, there is a remarkable congruence between the views young activists, average youth in mainstream schools and vulnerable or excluded youth in focus groups in describing and defining democracy as an ideal and as a reality, reminiscent of Derrida's notion of 'Democracy to Come' (1992); democracy as a promise.

Youth and Electoral Participation

As we write this article, a viral video of British comedian Russell Brand which critiques electoral democracy at many levels is doing the rounds on the internet[3]. Brand has struck a chord with many young people across the country in his impassioned rejection of voting as the only means of democratic participation. Problematically, much of the existing social science literature – as well as many journalistic accounts of the supposedly low turnout of young people in elections – assume that young people today are simply fed up with politics *per se* and not interested in the political questions facing their communities or their country. However, much of this literature fails to provide convincing empirical evidence for such claims and critiques. As such, establishing whether young citizens are effectively 'bored with

[2] Figures represent the proportion of total respondents that expressed support of the statements below. Totals do not equal 100% as neutral responses are not included in the table.
[3] See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lLYcn3PuTTk

politics' or, on the contrary, demand greater democratic participation, was an essential part of our study.

Many previous studies have based their findings on either quantitative surveys or on focus groups and interviews. We bring together both qualitative and quantitative insights. Our representative sample of 7201 young voters, specific focus groups, and stakeholders all shared similar outcomes. Most young people are not bored with politics, but they often believe that those who 'do' politics are not representing them nor care about them, as exemplified by these quotes from the focus groups:

- It is because young people don't vote! So politicians don't come to see them, because they don't need them. ('Active' focus group, France, 2012)
- Those in power don't listen. Most people know their votes don't count. If someone's going to get power, they're going to get power anyway. Votes don't count. ('Reference' focus group, UK, 2012)
- This is not democracy [...] Democracy is only mentioned at election time ('Excluded' focus group, Spain, 2012 – emphasis added)

This is a crucial finding and one that shows that in all likelihood the downward trend of youth participation could indeed be reversed with institutional and political will. However, we do need to understand what experiences young voters have compared to young abstentionists: what do young people feel when they go voting or what sentiments do they express when deciding not to go voting.

While obvious reasons for voting, such as a sense of duty or wanting a given candidate to win, are cited by a majority of respondents, the 'experimental' and 'fun' aspects of the vote appear to be an important motivation (cf. Table 2). The external influences on the decision to vote are relatively limited and more related to family than friends. It is also worth noting that one in four young people decided to vote in order to express a preference *against* a given party or candidate whom they wanted to lose. In other words, for every two young people who go to vote hoping a certain party/candidate will win, one goes to vote hoping that a certain party/candidate will lose. Young people's motivations do not appear to be affected by income; and sense of duty, desire to see what it is like, and support for a party or candidate remain very important with young people of all social backgrounds.

In terms of respondents failing to vote (cf. Table 3), however, the main reason for this seems to be that a young person cannot find a party or candidate which they really want to win (44% of answers). The second highest answer is that the respondent had something important to do that day, and then that in one in four cases, the respondent did not really want to see what voting would be like. One in six young respondents also explain that they simply forgot about the election on the day, which could be a significant abstention reason when the young person is first eligible to vote in a non-salient (typically local) election. Unlike voters' motivations, non-voter motivations are strongly affected by income. Young people from poorer backgrounds are significantly more likely not to vote because there was no candidate or party they wanted to win (correlation of -0.12) or lose (-0.06) or because they did not care so much about seeing what it was like.

Table 2: Why young people vote in the first election when they are eligible to[4]

Main reasons why young people went to vote	>18yo
Duty	75%
For a given candidate/party to win	55%
To see what it was like	31%
For a given candidate/party to lose	25%
Thought it would be fun or interesting	20%
Family proposed to come along	17%
Family told respondent they should vote	15%
Many friends were going to vote	6%
Friends proposed to come along	3%
Nothing important to do that day	4%
Other	6%

Source: EACEA/EC 'Youth Participation in Democratic Life' Survey, 2011-2012

Table 3: Why young people fail to go to vote in the first election when they are eligible to.

Main reasons why young people did not go to vote	>18yo
No candidate/party wanted to win	44%
Something important to do	26%
Not interested in seeing what it was like	25%
Forgot	16%
No candidate/party wanted to lose	15%
No duty to vote	13%
Did not think it would be interesting/fun	13%
Family was not going to vote	6%
No friends went to vote	4%
Family did not encourage to vote	4%
Friends were not going to vote	3%
Other	29%

Source: EACEA/EC 'Youth Participation in Democratic Life' Survey in 7 countries, 2011-2012

We found that young people who do vote overwhelmingly associate this ritual with a vast array of positive emotions. In particular, voting makes them feel: interested; part of their community; that they are part of an important moment for their country; with a responsibility on their shoulders; excited; and even happy (cf. Table 4). By contrast, neutral (such as feeling 'nothing special') or negative emotions (such as feeling old, worried, or bored) are very rarely experienced by young voters. This is a crucial finding because it explains that while young people might start voting out of duty or to see what it is like, they are likely to continue to vote because they find it a cathartic, pleasant, and exciting experience. By contrast, those who choose not to vote are excluded from these positive experiences and shared moments and thus often more likely not to go voting the next time round (see also Bruter, 2012).

[4] Figures in Table 2 are proportion of total respondents who selected the listed explanations of why they went to vote. In Table 3 they are a proportion of total respondents who selected the listed explanations of why they did not go to vote. Multiple answers were possible.

Table 4: How young people feel when they do (or do not) go to vote.

	Feeling while voting (%)	Feeling while not voting (%)
	>18yo	>18yo
Interested	36%	4%
Part of community	36%	2%
Important	28%	2%
With responsibility on one's shoulders	22%	6%
Excited	22%	3%
Happy	9%	4%
Nothing special	9%	27%
Old	8%	3%
Worried	5%	6%
Different	4%	6%
Bored	4%	12%
Other	6%	26%
Don't know	4%	20%

Source: EACEA/EC 'Youth Participation in Democratic Life' Survey, 2011-2012

As argued above, democracy is much more than the electoral process and voting in or out political elites. As Table 5 highlights while voting is perceived as a very important channel of democratic participation, young people tend to be involved in many different forms of political participation and total apathy is relatively low, certainly for those who are above 18yo. The older peer group tends to discuss politics more, be more interested in current affairs than their younger counterparts, boycott certain products more and participate in demonstrations more than the younger cohort. There is, however, little difference between the two age groups in their use of social media tools or to volunteer time for a charity, which perhaps suggests once the decision is made to commit time and effort to one of these things it is often carried throughout the years beyond.

Table 5: Modes of participation experienced at least once by young citizens

	<18yo	>18yo
Discuss politics	46%	60%
Sign existing petition	32%	55%
Donate to cause or charity	31%	45%
Vote in national or European election	7%	59%
Vote in local election	7%	57%
Overpay for a product to support a cause	27%	40%
Vote in sectorial election	17%	33%
Participate in a demonstration	21%	26%
Volunteer time to cause or charity	23%	24%
Boycott a product for political reasons	14%	25%
Vote in a Facebook or social media survey	19%	23%
Political comment on Facebook/social media	17%	23%
Stand for non-political election	18%	17%
Follow charity or party on social media	14%	18%
Join union or pressure group	6%	16%
Subscribe to charity or party newsletter	9%	14%
Send letter to politician or organisation	8%	13%
Join a political party or young party organisation	3%	6%
Initiate a petition	4%	4%
Stand for election	3%	4%
None of the above	19%	7%

Source: EACEA/EC Youth Participation in Democratic Life survey, 2011-2012.

In what follows, we will focus on two distinct democratic practices that move beyond elections. First, we will address the representation of youth voices towards policy makers and second the engagement of young people in civil society organisations and protest movement, as volunteers and as activists, will also be highlighted.

Representing Youth Voices in Policy Processes

The representation of youth voices and interests in policy processes can be addressed at two levels of analysis. First of all, how democratic and participatory are organisations that represent youth in policy processes and second, how participatory and genuine are the efforts of democratic institutions to consult young people and their representatives.

There are a whole set of challenges linked to making youth participation in policy processes a reality. The first issue here relates to who gets a voice inside the policy process. In this regard, we see that involving intermediaries such as youth organisations, who in turn represent various constituencies of young people, tends to be being preferred over and above inviting unorganised youth the participate. And when unorganised youth are invited, as is sometimes the case within the EU, there are issues of selection and of expertise that are invoked by some, illustrated by this quote:

> When it is a policymaking meeting, **we cannot send someone from the street.** The representative needs to be someone from the organized youth. The EU wants two organized and two non-organized young people in the meetings. I have no idea how those two non-organized are chosen. It's not good for either of groups if they come to meetings where **they don't have a clue**. (Stakeholder interview, f2f, Finland, 2012 – emphasis added)

This is an honest and practical, albeit rather elitist, account. Other stakeholders in our sample made similar observations. For example, a member of the British Youth Council noted that their aim was 'to promote on one hand, effective and on the other hand, representative participation' (Stakeholder interview, f2f, UK, 2012). It is interesting to see that these two objectives – effectiveness and representative – are presented as being somewhat at odds with each other.

However, we did not see evidence in our data that young people did not believe in selecting or electing representatives in general. In fact, despite all the distrust and sense of betrayal expressed towards politicians, young people in the focus groups were keen to:

- Be heard by their representatives
- Be taken seriously by their representatives
- Have more representatives from minority groups – disabled, homeless, young women, unemployed, ethnic minority – engaged in speaking to those in power
- Have regular contact with and feedback from their representatives
- Have 'authentic' representatives, not just those who were suited to politics and rhetoric.

Having said that, ample critical perspectives were also voiced when it came to the way in which young people and their interests are being represented by large youth organisations. Some consider reaching minority groups to be an issue, others stress that more emphasis should be put on making sure that unorganized and excluded young people are reached and represented. Some also critique large organisations such as the European Youth Forum

(EYF[5]) for being more concerned with their own survival than with the interests of unorganized young people:

> The EYF is now foremost an organisation that represents 'youth organizations' rather than genuine young people. This can be witnessed in the lobbying for the new Youth in Action program, where the focus is mostly on opportunities for youth organisations rather than the interests of unorganized youth. (Stakeholder Interview, email, 2012)

One way of navigating this tension between the effectiveness of and representativeness of participation is to explicitly reject broad definitions of representation and participation. We found some evidence of this in our sample, where the need to *represent all European youth* was not directly equated with *involving all European youth*. A board member of the EYF argued:

> It is important to see the youth forum as a tool for individual youth organisations to collaborate together and be stronger together. It is not therefore important that young people know about the direct activities of the Youth Forum. [...] It is also an important right that many young people **do not want to participate directly** at the European level. It is therefore the youth forums' roles to support the educational work of its member organisation so that decisions are made with the right knowledge'. (Stakeholder interview, email, 2012 – emphasis added).

This argument not only re-conceptualizes the idea of representation, it also posits the right not to participate. It should be noted though that the above argument does not preclude the EYF seeking to expand its base of participants (which is something that was argued for in the same interview)[6].

However, for the EYF to claim legitimacy, ensuring that no groups of young people are institutionally exempted or discouraged from participation, even if they then do not actively choose to take part, is paramount. The main problem in this regard, is many of those who are engaged in youth organisations and in policy consultations of young people tend to be socially advantaged youth who are already highly skilled in comparison with their peers and have a higher degree of self-confidence to speak out, as this quote points out:

> 'Besides my **academic studies and trainings experiences**, I needed to get experience in public space. Besides my studies in law, I had a will to be integrated in circles, in European networks. [...] Me, if I went to those councils, it's because I could see the added value it could bring me, with competencies and things like that' (Stakeholder interview, regional Youth Council of Ile de France, f2f, France, 2011 – emphasis added).

For many young people, the highly formalized model of political engagement inherent to policy processes is alien and intimidating. This assertion is supported by both the focus groups and the stakeholder interviews. The perceived requirement for political skills was especially evident in the 'Excluded' focus groups. Some examples in our dataset included:

> '[Commenting on people involved in a political campaign] For example, those were students. I don't mean any harm but they are freaks that are **well versed in everything**' ('Excluded' focus group, Austria, 2012 – emphasis added)
> 'I'm not confident because **I don't have knowledge**' ('Excluded' focus group, Finland, 2012 – emphasis added).

This alienation should not be mistaken for a lack of interest or political engagement. There is nothing in our evidence to suggest this is the case. Rather, there is a lack of confidence

[5] The EYF is the main youth organisation in Europe, accredited by the EU Commission to represent youth at a European level.
[6] For the accession criteria and admission procedure of the EYF see: http://www.youthforum.org/

among many young people and a belief that politics is both difficult and requires specialist knowledge.

Another important difficulty young people and the organisations that represent them are faced with is the lack of 'full' participation within policy processes. As Zentner (2011: 13) points out, not only the structures to enable youth participation to take place need to be in place, policymakers also need to listen and genuinely take young people's concerns and wishes into consideration:

> Provided structures exist and are known and consequences of developments are understood, youth will participate in society and policymaking. Then it is the task of the politicians to accept young people's approach to participation, try to understand the messages and requests and act to it.

For example, the European Commission's main vehicle to consult and involve young people in their policy making process is the so-called *Structured Dialogue*. The Structured Dialogue sessions bring together young people from across Europe who have gravitated towards it through various, nationally- and transnational-defined paths. As such, there are a number of distinctive relationships in play between local, national, party and transnational participation. Our research data suggests that while such organizations frequently act as "feeder" groups for the Structured Dialogue, they are not nationally consistent in terms of their relationship with formal political institutions, especially government, student unions and political parties nor representative of a majority of young people. Some also argue that such processes should be organized in a way that is much less top-down:

> 'It would be good if the structured dialogue would be organized as **a bottom-up process**, which means that young people themselves are asked what they consider to be important and that these themes would be communicated to national governments and the EU. In this way, we would know what really is important to young people instead of asking young people's views on things they sometimes do not have not have an opinion on' (Stakeholder interview with representative to Structured Dialogue, email, 2012 – emphasis added).

Beyond this, the guiding questions[7] as currently instituted can actually act as a barrier to participation, since they require a lot of knowledge to engage with: 'the guiding questions should be more easy to implement. Now the guiding questions are written in jargon and often not useful to consult young people' (ibid).

However, it should also be noted that our stakeholder interviews were not consistent on this point. A Hungarian community radio station producer who focused on youth and politics told us that the topics raised by the Structured Dialogue actually drives much of their discussion and provided an important focus within the youth-politics project they run (Stakeholder interview, f2f, Hungary, 2012). This seems to be a particularly positive example and constitutes evidence of how even complex policy debates can engage a broader base of young people if mediated in an appropriate manner.

Despite this nuanced perspective, it is clear that involving young people and the organisations that represent them in genuine policy processes, be it at a national level or the EU level, often amounts to partial participation at best, tokenism and fake participation at worst. Given (young) citizens the impression that they can participate is a very risky strategy as it can potentially result in exactly the opposite of what participatory discourses of closing the gap between the governed and the governors aim to achieve (Cammaerts, 2008).

[7] This is a set of questions which guide the structured dialogue process, essentially creating the agenda for the discussions. These questions are set by the country chairing the EU at a given time thereby reflecting the policy agenda of that member state rather than of young people.

Youth, Volunteering and Activism

As shown above and also in other studies (Banaji and Buckingham, 2013; Harris, et al, 2010; O'Toole et al., 2003a&b), despite their belief that political issues matter, for many young people formal, institutionalized politics is alien and unapproachable. A significant proportion of young people therefore prefer to channel their political participation towards civil society organisations and social movements, rather than political parties and the formal democratic system. Attitudes to and experiences of formal politics in the Finnish focus group were indicative of this problem:

> '[I will participate] in some demonstrations yes, but I would not join political parties, they are somehow too large ensembles, it's easier to support specific persons'
> 'Yeah, some civil organisations may have a clearer target, whereas the scale in political parties is wider, so it's more difficult somehow' ('Reference' focus group, Finland, 2012).

In 2011, DG Education and Culture at the European Commission commissioned Flash Eurobarometer 319 on 'Youth on the move', which highlights some important aspects of voluntary youth participation. This research suggests that while only around 15% of young people participate in institutional political groups, a substantive minority (24%) of young Europeans engage in voluntary civil society organisations. This is confirmed by our focus groups and interviews with youth policy and youth work stakeholders. This is confirmed by interviews with youth policy and youth work stakeholders as well as our focus groups:

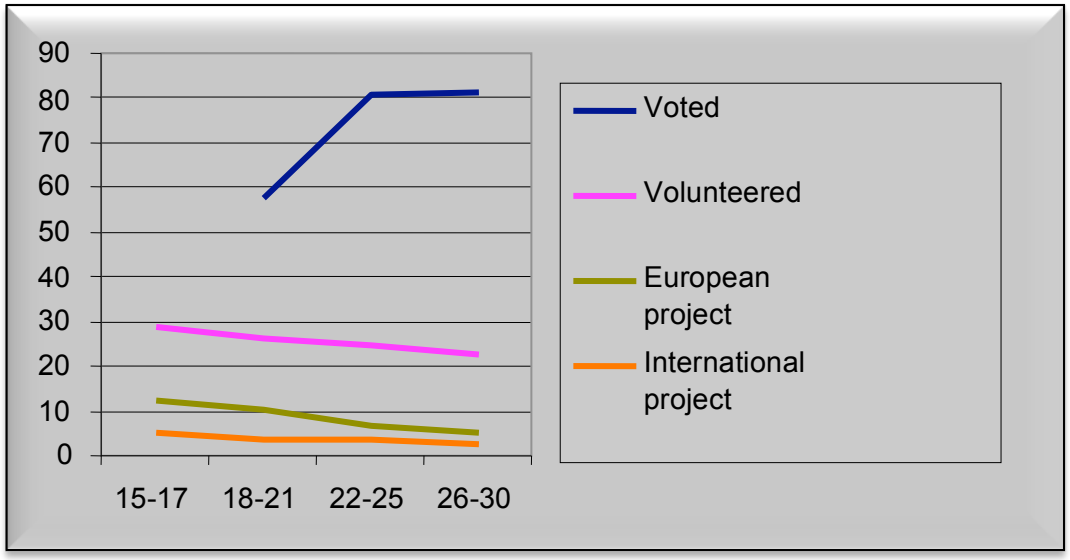
- 'I volunteer at youth clubs'. ('Reference' focus group, UK, 2012)
- 'I volunteer for EuroGames [Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender sporting event] very actively. I volunteer for a programme [to inform high school students about LGBT issues] very actively. And I can't put these in my CV because I'll likely work in a social institution and they, especially the ones funded by the state, might not appreciate my [gay] identity'. ('Active' focus group, Hungary, 2012)
- 'It's easier to start with something else, become active, and then participate politically, for instance working first in a time bank or other volunteering systems'. ('Active' focus group, Finland)

Approximately half of these voluntary actions (51%) surveyed by 'Youth on the Move' were directed at improving local communities. These results confirm that for many young people political participation in democratic life starts with proximity, first and foremost at the local level. This is where young people get a chance to see the direct impact of their involvement. Unlike voting, engagement in voluntary activities seems to be negatively correlated with age, since it concerns 28.6% of under-18s, 26.2% of 18-21s, 24.5% of 22-25s, and only 22.7% of 26-30 year olds (cf. Figure 1). Given that employment in the labor force rises with age, as do caring and/or childcare responsibilities, and thus 'spare' time diminishes, a decline in volunteering activities amongst those above 18yo is a completely expected finding that must be kept in mind when injunctions to volunteer are sent towards young people. Disadvantaged young people also tend to engage less in volunteering activities because their pre-occupation is most often focused on meeting their basic needs in terms of housing, energy and food. However, many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds also volunteer in less visible and recognized ways, for instance by caring for younger children or the elderly.

Finally, 9% of the young people interviewed in the survey claimed to take part in some activity aimed at fostering international co-operation, approximately two-thirds of which focuses on co-operation within the European Union. There again, strong generational differences highlight the increase of transnational projects involving the youngest generations and student-aged youths. While only 4.9% of 26-30 year olds claim to be part of a project aimed at fostering European co-operation, this proportion increases to 6.9% of 22-

25s, 10.3% of 18-21s, and 12.6% of under-18s. For non-European projects, these proportions are 2.8%, 3.6%, 3.8%, and 5% respectively.

Figure 1: Evolution of four key forms of political involvement by age group



Source: EACEA/EC 'Youth Participation in Democratic Life', based on re-analysis of Flash Eurobarometer 319 data, 2011

Whilst we find that there is a clear difference between the participatory experience of under and over 18s across the various modes of participation such as discussing politics, discussing current affairs or signing petitions, we can see from Table 6 that there is no notable difference between the two age groups when it comes to volunteering time to a cause or charity.

Table 6: Percentage of youth engaged with volunteering or donations

	<18yo	>18yo
Volunteer time to cause or charity	23%	24%
Donate to cause or charity	31%	45%

Source: EACEA/EC Youth Participation in Democratic Life survey, 2011- 2012

This suggests that young people do not become more active as volunteers as they grow older. We can surmise, then, that once a young person decides to volunteer their time and labour to a cause or charity they appear to keep doing so. Unsurprisingly, table 4.5 also suggests that donating to a cause or charity does increase past the age of 18yo. Just under half of the survey respondents over the age of 18yo stated that they donated, whilst just over a third under 18yo's did so (45% and 31% respectively). As young people progress in their working lives, they have more disposable income compared to their counterparts that are under 18 and therefore are more likely to be in a position to donate to charitable causes.

Besides volunteering, some young people also participate in social movement organisations and become activists. Testifying to this, young people in our survey expressed a high degree of willingness to participate in peaceful demonstrations, in signing petitions and even in striking (cf. Table 7).

Table 7: Modes of participation in which respondents expect to participate in the future

Expected mode of participation	<18yo	>18yo
Vote for a party close to me	89%	87%
Sign a petition	86%	84%
Participate in a peaceful demonstration	73%	59%
Participate in a strike	57%	49%
Join a pressure group	38%	31%
Join a political party	30%	22%
Stand in an election	28%	18%
Participate in a violent demonstration	9%	11%

Source: EACEA/EC Youth Participation in Democratic Life survey, 2011-2012.

Reported likelihood of participating in strike action and demonstrations appears to decrease considerably as young citizens grow older, as does the likeliness of joining a pressure group or political party. This suggests perhaps that if the idea of joining a political party or pressure group is not an interesting option during the ages of 16-18yo then the probability that this will become more enticing decreases significantly as citizens progress in life. Focus group discussions confirm the trend suggested by the figures (30% of those under 18yo and 22% of those over 18yo may join a party) that disillusionment with politicians and political parties increases significantly with age and experience.

Even though young people in the 'excluded' groups may seem more cynical about the efficacy of their protests in bringing about social change, several of them were still emphatic about their own participation. They showed no signs of having lower levels of interest than the rest of the population, although it was clear that several of them would like to know more about the options for participating that exist. In particular, this was brought home to us in the UK focus groups where the 'excluded' group spoke about wanting to take part in a discussion of their issues with the young mayor of their area, but they did not even know that precisely such a debate had been organized by some of the 'active' youth in the town hall across the street.

Mechanisms for young people even to be informed about the options in terms of participation are seen to be largely *ad hoc* or depending on 'whom you happen to talk to', 'what your family is like', 'where you live' or 'if you accidentally become part of something'. The most 'activist' young people described to us campaigns which involved a range of participatory mechanisms and which, in addition, were carefully set-up so as to make sure that both the means and the ends were keenly democratic. Good examples of this are the occupations by the Indignados Movement in Spain as well other anti-austerity activism in other countries. A stakeholder from the *UK National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts* summed up the views of most of the activist interviewees in our sample and many of the young people, protests must not be seen as non-participation; in fact, they are:

> 'a good example of very oppositional type of participation; opposing the austerity agenda, opposing the undermining of public services, defending the welfare state. It is a **creative as well as defending action**' (Stakeholder interview, f2f, UK 2011 – emphasis added)

Conclusions

Our study found that voting is still both at the heart of the problem and at the heart of the solution to today's apparent crisis in political participation. Not only do young citizens use voting as a key channel of participation in practice, but they also claim to value it, desire it and enjoy it, and they stress that if the participation of young people is to be improved, then voting will need to be part of this. Ironically, this avowed enthusiasm for voting may be the result of current political socialization through family, school and media, but the low voter

turnout in this age-group is testimony to the frustration and betrayal felt by some young people .

Our research has highlighted the mismatch between young people's hopes for democracy and the way these are being addressed (or not) by politicians. Anyone who thinks that the low turnout of young voters is due to young people being too lazy to take five minutes to go to the polling station or being too selfish to do so is grossly mischaracterizing the immense political appetite of European youth. However, at the same time the overwhelming message that young people delivered to us was: 'we want to and are excited to vote, but you need to treat us seriously and like intelligent people'.

Our data confirms that a majority of young people is critical rather than apathetic – i.e. they are unhappy with the political offer rather than bored with politics. As such, while many young people of various backgrounds express disconnection from and are highly critical of politicians and of the party political system, they – even many youth in extremely vulnerable, financially and socially insecure situations – have clear views and opinions about politics.

Mechanisms to stimulate youth participation and the role youth organisations play are perceived as important by young people, both in previous research as well as our own. At the same time, there is ample evidence that many of these organisations could do more to orient themselves towards young people's needs and in particular towards the needs, interests and motivations of young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Our stakeholder interviews and youth focus groups confirm many of the concerns from the literature and previous projects about the lack of representativeness of youth councils and youth organisations. In order to be involved in such organisations young people need skills to participate, they need to be articulate and they need to know the ways in which political institutions and politics work, prior to joining.

Inevitably, as pointed out through our research, education plays a pivotal role in relation to young people's participation in democratic life. It needs to be stressed in this regard that young citizens also learn about democracy in non-formal settings, by getting involved in a youth club/center, a community media initiative, an NGO, a social movement or a sports club. Stakeholder interviews, our survey and the existing data and literature all concur that young people are equally if not more likely than adults to participate in voluntary activities. Within this group, educated but unemployed young people often show the most willingness to volunteer, which demonstrates that young people are not disconnected en masse from the civic life of their communities.

Beyond voting, being active in policy processes, and volunteering there are a variety of other ways in which young people participate in democratic life. These forms do not always conform to the normative preconceptions of rationality and civility and may also include acts of civic disobedience, dissent and critical protest. Another important conclusion is the intricate relationship between emotions/passions and participation, which might enable us to develop strategies to make political participation more attractive to young citizens.

Finally, participation should also not be fetishized; several stakeholders indicated that we also need to respect the right not to participate. Furthermore, our data confirms that non-participation is by no means the same as a lack of interest in politics or a general feeling of apathy. The survey, as well as the stakeholder interviews and the focus groups allow us thus to categorically refute persistent claims of youth apathy towards democracy or politics.

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