Understanding the political empowerment of young people

Strategies for democratic change in Europe should include the political empowerment of the young to avoid their disenfranchisement, whilst tapping their creativity. By studying how and why young Europeans participate in politics, EURYKA offers some policy suggestions.

Young people often face barriers to political engagement, against a backdrop of few policies designed to enable and encourage their involvement. This is compounded by the fact that young people are also often framed negatively or as passive by those with power. They are rarely conceived of as capable of autonomous action.

This situation could deter them from political engagement, at least from institutional politics. But a survey conducted by the EU-supported EURYKA (Reinventing Democracy in Europe: Youth Doing Politics in Times of Increasing Inequalities) project, set up to explore the political engagement of European youth, found that it actually motivates some to ensure their voice is heard.
“As many are sceptical of traditional politics, we found that participation was not always undertaken through institutional channels, such as voting, but through alternatives, such as participation in protests. Lifestyle politics such as ethical consumption are also a way of being heard,” says project coordinator Marco Giugni.

EURYKA generated a series of evidence-based reports, including policy briefs, focused on issues such as Youth and Political Change and Youth Online Political Participation. The project also organised a number of roundtables with stakeholders to decide on priority actions.

**Cross-country multi-method analysis**

“The starting assumption for the EURYKA project was that political engagement, defined as including attitudes, interest, trust, activities and behaviours, can be studied at three distinct levels of analysis,” explains Giugni, who is based at the University of Geneva.

Firstly, at the micro level of people’s individual characteristics, background and relations; secondly, at the meso level, concerning the presence and activities of different youth organisations; and thirdly, at the macro level of the broader cultural, social and institutional context.

The project wanted to evidence the ways in which inequalities are lived by young people and the conditions and causes underpinning their way of engaging with politics.

“A key finding was that socialisation processes are central to understanding the degree of young people’s participation in politics, and that for those who do participate, it usually has a deeply personal impact,” adds Giugni. The study found for example that whilst young people may typically have their first opportunities to talk about politics at home, school offers opportunities for collective action, such as participating in demonstrations. Here, the role of inspirational teachers was found to be especially important.

For comparative analysis, the project included a range of European countries with different degrees of social inequalities and with different political regimes, namely France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

This yielded interesting similarities and differences. For example, it was especially marked in Geneva and Stockholm that respondents with parents born in another
country were politically socialised through discussions about their parents’ home country, with most sharing their families’ political stance.

Public policies and practices towards youth

Over 4,500 political claims made in the public domain on youth-related issues were analysed. A quantitative analysis of around 4,500 youth-related and youth-led organisational websites was conducted, as was a qualitative analysis of 265 semi-structured interviews in nine cities.

A panel survey was also carried out on representative samples of the general population, involving around 9,000 people, alongside survey experiments with about 16,800 respondents. Biographical interviews with 252 young people were completed along with social media analysis of around 850,000 tweets.

The project’s findings led to a number of policy recommendations, especially those that targeted young people with fewer opportunities. These include the need for a youth engagement strategy, the creation of a Youth Ombudsman in the European institutions and/or in each European country and consideration of the idea of lowering the voting age to 16.

Keywords

EURYKA, youth, politics, political engagement, inequalities, voting, protests, demonstrations, socialisation, disenfranchisement

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