

INSIGHTS – MEANINGFUL YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN EUROPE



Youth Partnership

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



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INSIGHTS – MEANINGFUL YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN EUROPE

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Council of Europe and European Commission

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Abbreviations

CSOs	Civil society organisations
Covid-19	Coronavirus strand which caused global pandemic in 2020
DIO	Do-it-ourselves politics
DSA	Direct social action
EU-Council of Europe youth partnership	Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of youth
EURYKA	EURYKA – Reinventing Democracy in Europe: Youth Doing Politics in Times of Increasing Inequalities
FFF	Fridays For Future movement
ibid.	<i>ibidem</i> , i.e. the same source as the last full reference in the text
ICONS	The ICONS Project creates simulations and scenario-driven exercises to advance participants’ understanding of complex problems and strengthen their ability to make decisions, navigate crises, think strategically, and negotiate collaboratively
LGBT	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender
LGBTIQ	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, questioning
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PARTISPACE	Spaces and Styles of Participation
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund
UNHCR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
XR	Extinction Rebellion

Introduction

This research on youth political participation builds on the long-standing work of the EU-Council of Europe youth partnership in this area. It started with *Revisiting youth political participation – Challenges for research and democratic practice in Europe* (Forbrig 2005) and further developed from the symposium “The future of young people’s political participation: questions, challenges and opportunities”, held in 2019 (Bacalso 2019; EU-Council of Europe youth partnership 2019), and on its outcomes. This work included literature reviews (Galstyan 2019), toolkits and perspectives of experts (Deželan 2018; Farrow 2018; Kiilakoski 2020), and the *Compendium of practices* (Yurttagüler and Martinez 2020). Young people’s participation was also further explored by the partnership in 2020 and 2021, with a focus on young people’s access to rights, particularly their right to assembly (Pantea 2021), and drew on *Shrinking democratic civic space for youth* (Deželan and Yurttagüler 2021). The knowledge developed over the years was further supplemented by the theoretical study *Meaningful youth political participation in Europe: concepts, patterns, and policy implications* (Bárta et al. 2021), which brought forward some of the less-debated dimensions of youth political participation and introduced original avenues in defining meaningful youth political participation.

In this fourth volume of Insights, we explore the main outcomes of the aforementioned study (ibid.), focusing on (1) how to identify meaningful youth political participation, (2) how conventional political participation works best, and (3) how the concept of intersectionality (that is, overlapping inequalities and discrimination) affects unconventional youth political participation.

The first section creates an overview of the key concepts, including various types of participation, such as conventional, unconventional or individualised, and the justifications or arguments for youth political participation. The characteristics of various democratic environments are presented and linked to different mechanisms of youth political participation, showing the importance of the context in which political participation activities take place. Meaningful youth political participation is then explored across different democratic environments in order to understand how it can be identified in practice.

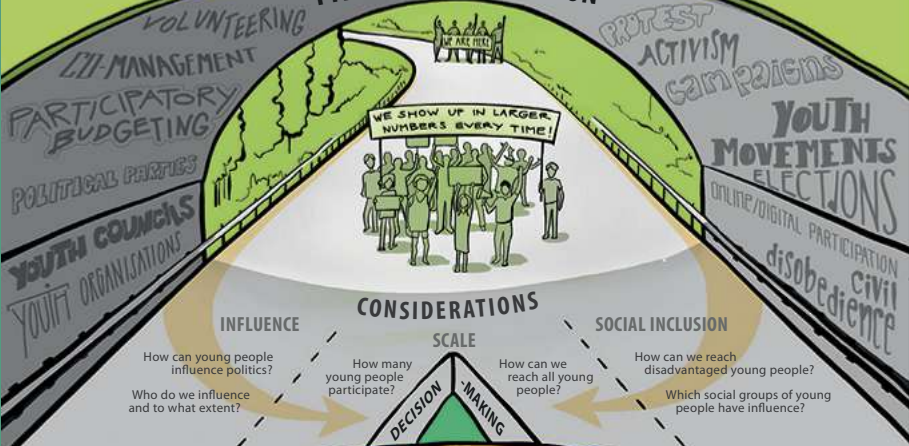
The second section tackles specifically the domain of conventional political participation, presenting some typical approaches and forms of youth political participation and their outcomes. It discusses the idea of political socialisation through participation, and the long-standing notion that democratic attitudes and skills needed for engaging in the public sphere can be gained through non-formal learning. It further explores aspects of participatory democracy which have the potential to trigger transformative political socialisation in young people, and therefore strengthen the vitality of democracy.

The third section focuses on unconventional youth political participation, showcasing through case studies some examples of unconventional youth political participation opportunities. Major concepts and debates on unconventional participation, social movements and youth activism – and their interplay – are discussed and linked to democratic environments. The opportunities and challenges for unconventional participation are explored in light of both contextual and individual driving factors. Patterns of inequality and exclusion are further highlighted through the lens of intersectionality.

Lastly, recommendations are presented, supporting policy makers and practitioners to facilitate, support and promote meaningful political participation of young people.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE

TYPES OF PARTICIPATION



THE FUTURE OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

<p>INCLUSIVE</p> <p>Young people advocate for open and pluralistic participation which can make their organisations, movements and societies more inclusive.</p>	<p>DIVERSE</p> <p>Young people engage in politics in a diversity of ways: voting, membership in political parties, youth organisations or formal structures, digital tools, activism, protests, campaigns, youth movements and civil disobedience.</p>	<p>SUBVERSIVE</p> <p>Young people increasingly critique the status quo using humour and irony with the help of social media and digital technologies, by creating memes and deepfake videos.</p>
<p>UNCOMPROMISING ON KEY VALUES</p> <p>Democracy, diversity, respect and human rights.</p>	<p>EMPOWERING</p> <p>Through participation, young people learn how decision-making happens in practice and increase their competences; but stakeholders are also empowered in the process, benefiting from young people's diverse and creative perspectives.</p>	<p>COLOURFUL</p> <p>Young people also engage through different art forms – painting banners, graffiti, songs, flashmobs, theatre performances.</p>



MORE TO COME!

Section I

Key concepts of meaningful youth political participation

1. Political participation

The EU-Council of Europe youth partnership uses a wide definition of political participation: “Political participation is any activity that shapes, affects, or involves the political sphere” (EU-Council of Europe youth partnership 2020). This approach is consistent with a long line of authors (Deželan 2015; Quaranta 2012; van Deth 2001, 2014) who argue that, generally speaking, the definitions of political participation largely focus on the activities of citizens aiming at influencing political decisions. When comparing various concrete definitions of political participation, four features create a common ground (van Deth 2001: 5):¹

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

To understand how these characteristics translate into practice, we could ask if the engagement of a young person in the national youth council is in itself political participation. First, it requires an individual to get active and engaged, and as such it is an action. Secondly, it is voluntary, as the person can opt out (or never engage in the first place). Third, it is voluntary in that it is not conducted to gain profit (or at least not primarily so). Fourth, the national youth council can either take action directly in political processes (as advisory bodies in some instances), or it can target the political processes from the outside. In this case, engagement in national youth councils can be defined as either a conventional or unconventional political participation activity, depending on the relationship of the national youth council to the state structures.

This current understanding of political participation practices is the result of almost a century-long journey, as outlined by van Deth (2001) and summarised in Figure 1 below. It set off in the 1940s with a rather narrow understanding of political participation limited to voting, moving to unconventional participation, and by the 2000s included an even wider spectrum of civic and social engagement (van Deth 2001: 5; Galstyan 2019).

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

Based on this approach, three key types of political participation can be identified:

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

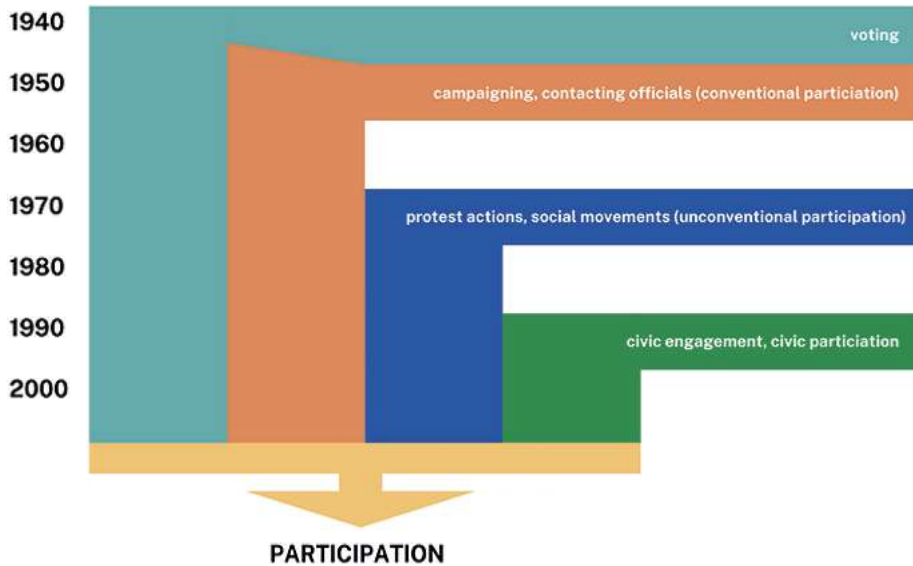


Figure 1: The expansion of the political action repertoire (van Deth 2001: 14)

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

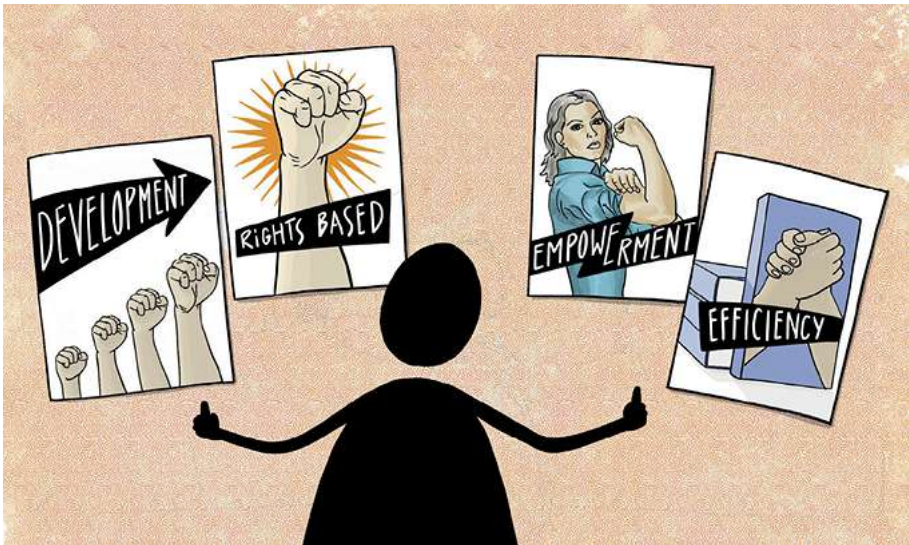
Unconventional political participation (also named “non-conventional” [Bárta et al. 2019; Hafner Fink 2012; Pontes et al. 2018; Zani and Barrett 2012], “unorthodox political participation” [Bourne 2010], or “protest activities” [Newton and Giebler 2008; Quaranta 2012]) is seen as such activities which aim at influencing the political domain but are carried out via different means than the narrow avenue of conventional participation (Galstyan 2019). In contrast to conventional political participation, it can be defined as activities which use out-of-the-system approaches to achieve their goals. Examples of such activities include demonstrations, strikes, boycotts or petitions (Quaranta 2012).

Individualised political participation (also named “lifestyle politics” [de Moor 2016]) has occurred in expert and public discourse only in recent decades, and brings to

the participatory domain a vital change: this type of political participation often takes place at the individual level and as such does not require group, community or mass action, as was the case in both previously defined political participation types. This shift brings to attention the “politicization of everyday life choices” (de Moor 2016: 3), and the activities of the individual which carry a political meaning in various areas, such as animal welfare (veganism), or ethical aspects of the production processes (boycotting).

In conclusion, it is important to fully understand the definition of political participation in a given context. An example of national youth councils explored above shows that one mechanism can easily be interpreted as falling under two different types of political participation activities. Therefore, be careful when debating different types of political participation activities with your colleagues, as it should not be taken for granted that everyone understands these concepts in a completely identical way.

2. Aims of youth political participation



In line with the previously established definition, youth political participation can be understood as active, voluntary engagement of young people from their citizen perspective in any activity that shapes, affects or involves the political sphere.

Youth political participation also requires a detailed look, among other aspects, at its justifications, or reasons for youth engagement in decision making, and aims. By and large, aims are based on justifications which make youth political participation worthwhile. Four main justifications of youth political participation can be found (Farthing 2012: 77; cf. Kiilakoski 2020, Reimer 2002, SIDA n.d., UNICEF 2019):

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

Rights-based justification for youth political participation strives to fulfil the legal obligation set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and in other policy documents (European Commission 2018). These documents clearly state that young people have the right to participate in matters that concern them. The aim of youth political participation under the rights-based justification is to ensure that young people are guaranteed access to such mechanisms, which allow them to exercise their right to political participation and engage in political participation processes. Young people may need specific mechanisms to enable them to fully participate in public matters, given their specific legal position in most countries. Lowering of the legal voting age can be seen as an example of a specific mechanism, as well as any endeavours aiming at establishing new mechanisms enabling young people to participate in political processes.

Empowerment justification for youth political participation strives to enable young people to make changes in the world around them (Farthing 2012: 75-76). The main aims here are power sharing and inclusion of young people in decision making. In practice, youth-led initiatives, projects and social movements can provide room for youth empowerment, generating concrete impacts in various areas (environmental protection, etc.), and youth empowerment can also be reached via young people running for office, or participating in state structures in roles with clearly defined decision-making responsibilities such as youth commissions and councils in local administrations (Municipal Research and Services Center 2019), or student chambers of academic senates (Masaryk University 2020).

If youth participation is motivated by the principle of efficiency, the aim is then to improve policy and practice by including young people's perspectives. The Advisory Council on Youth of the Council of Europe can be seen as an example of such a participatory structure, enabling young people to use their expertise in formulating opinions on various youth-related matters within the Council of Europe (Council of Europe 2020). Similarly, this type of justification includes advisory boards, commissions, or councils linked to all levels of government, in which young people are systematically engaged (Municipal Research and Services Center 2019).

Developmental justification argues that youth political participation strives to provide young people with real-life experience and hence contribute to their personal and professional development (Farthing 2012: 76; cf. Lansdown et al. 2018: 4). According to this justification, youth political participation aims at engaging young people in such activities which help them learn, explore and master new skills. This justification of youth political participation, however, needs to be understood in line with the overall definition of political participation: as an activity which "shapes, affects, or involves the political sphere" (EU-Council of Europe youth partnership 2020). In line with this definition, even those youth political participation structures aimed primarily at the development of young people need to exercise an influence on real-life situations, conditions or issues (for example, school parliaments). If this is not the case and youth political participation structures are designed solely and only for training purposes with no influence on public affairs, then such structures cannot be referred to as youth political participation opportunities, but should be clearly recognised as learning and training environments (for instance, simulations of the UN Security Council [ICONS 2020]).

While the aims of youth political participation are distinct, a single youth political participation activity can combine a variety of motivations. For example, key objectives

of the EU Youth Dialogue are supporting the right of young people to participate in the political domain; achieving efficiency in policy shaping; and the development of young people (Council of the European Union 2018).

3. Types of democratic environments

Democracy is generally defined as a form of government in which a group of people living in a given territory and bound by certain laws (that is, citizens of a given country) are presented with a collection of rights to contribute to the government of such territory (Lundström 2004). Democracy, despite being based on the same initial ideas, can differ widely depending on its practical application in a given context. In order to further elaborate on democracy, exploring types of democratic environments which can be found in the current global sociopolitical climate can be helpful. All in all, five types of democratic environments can be identified in contemporary democratic countries (cf. Crowley and Moxon 2017, Gretschel et al. 2014, Kiilakoski 2020):

- ▶ direct
- ▶ representative
- ▶ participatory
- ▶ deliberative
- ▶ counter-democracy.

Before elaborating on each type of democratic environment, it needs to be noted that, as with the aims and justifications of youth political participation, for instance, even these categories strive to describe the essence of the given phenomenon in order to help understand it in a wider context – and they are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they can be frequently found in combination with each other. Defining them can be helpful in probing the nature of a specific democratic setup, and also in identifying typical youth political participation activities related to the given environment.

“Direct democracy”, or “democracy by the people” (Linder 2007: 1) enables citizens to directly participate in decision-making processes by casting votes or signing binding petitions aimed at achieving a concrete goal. While different types of activities can take place, referenda, popular initiatives, recalls and town (hall) meetings (Beedham 2006; Field 2019; Fiorino and Ricciuti 2007; Svensson 2007) are the most common and established tools of direct democracy (cf. Altman 2010).

In contrast to the idea of direct democracy, in the case of representative democracy, decisions are not made by popular vote, but by elected representatives, who are entrusted with decision-making powers (Gretschel et al. 2014; Gutiérrez-Peris and Margalef 2019; Urbinati and Warren 2008). In order for a representative democracy to work, citizens are bestowed with a sum of rights which include but are not limited to the right to vote and the right to run for an office.

“Participatory democracy is a process of collective decision making that combines elements from both direct and representative democracy: Citizens have the power to decide on policy and politicians assume the role of policy implementation” (Aragonès and Sánchez-Pagés 2009: 56). Also described as operating on the “intersections between [state] institutions and social movements” (Subirats 2008: 9), the aim of participatory democracy is to make democratic institutions more legitimate and

responsive to the desires of citizens (Subirats 2008). Some of the concrete mechanisms of participatory democracy include: “participatory budgeting, citizen councils, public consultations, neighbourhood councils, participatory planning” (Bherer et al. 2016: 225), and e-democracy (Rodean 2011).

Deliberative democracy presents a shift from decision making based on preferences (voting), to decision making based on discussion (deliberation) by the public or by the elected officials. This brings advantages of the process (citizens engaging in constructive debates, developing and showing mutual respect towards each other; [Gretschel et al. 2014; Gutmann and Thompson 2004], as well as of the outcomes (reasons provided for and against a given decision, or a compromise solution) [Gutmann and Thompson 2004; Rostbøll 2001]). When it comes to concrete mechanisms of deliberative democracy, some of the examples are Deliberative Polls² and citizens’ juries (Fishkin and Luskin 2005; Kim et al. 2018).

Counter-democracy encompasses all forms of popular activism and participation which exist as a counterweight to established democratic processes (Rosanvallon 2008; cf. Gajdziński 2016). In terms of concrete mechanisms, Dean (2018) elaborates on industrial strikes, civil society protests, parliamentary opposition, call-ins and petitions, as well as on media coverage of public policies, engagement of social movements and NGOs, various forms of citizens’ denunciation, and engagement of citizens as either scrutiny co-optees or experts-by-experience in inspection processes, and on recalls, citizens’ juries or citizens’ assemblies.

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

Table 1: Key features of the different democratic environments

2. The method has been developed and is under copyright by the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University in the USA.

Table 1 summarises the main aspects of each of the aforementioned democratic environments, showing key commonalities and differences. It needs to be repeatedly noted that in reality these types of democratic environments often occur alongside each other. This is vital, since there are often various ways of achieving one given aim through different political participation mechanisms. Where young citizens cannot vote directly on the matter (direct democracy), they can engage in election processes and lobby for their interests (representative democracy), they can create their own ideas and agendas and reach out to their representatives (participatory democracy), they can engage in public debates where their ideas are presented and defended (deliberative democracy), or they can hold peaceful demonstrations to attract media attention and push for their goals (counter-democracy).

4. Reconstructing meaningful youth political participation

As outlined above, in order to define and identify examples of meaningful youth political participation, context is of the utmost importance. In the case of youth political participation, the context depends on the aims and on the democratic environments. The aims are based on the underlying reasons or justifications of the youth political participation (rights-based, empowerment, efficiency and developmental), and the democratic environments depend on the social and political realities in which the youth political participation activities take place (direct, representative, participatory, deliberative and counter-democracy).

The meaningfulness of the youth political participation can be determined by comparing the aims of the activity with the democratic environments in which the activity takes place, considering whether the aims are achievable in the given context. When the aims are achievable in the given democratic environment, the youth political participation activity can be considered to be a meaningful one. The meaningful youth political participation activities occur when their aims align with the mechanisms and opportunities provided by the democratic environment.

In practical terms, the following four steps can help identify meaningful youth political participation activities:

1. determine if the activity is, in fact, political participation which would need to:
 - a. provide space for the activity of individuals;
 - b. be voluntary;
 - c. be implemented by the citizens;
 - d. aim at politics or a political system;
2. based on the aims, define the justifications of the activity;
3. based on the social and political context, define the democratic environments;
4. finally, by comparing the aims and democratic environments, determine the meaningfulness of the activity.

Table 2 shows typical examples of meaningful youth political participation activities as defined by the intersection between justifications and types of democratic environments. A local school parliament in one town, for example, would not be a suitable mechanism to broaden the participation rights of young people in general, but it can be considered a meaningful youth political participation tool for the purposes

of youth development (see intersection between representative democracy and developmental justifications). As shown, this approach needs to be applied individually to each youth political participation mechanism in order to determine whether it can be considered meaningful.

The table cannot and does not contain all possible meaningful youth political participation activities and structures which may exist in the given intersection but strives to illustrate the differences in meaningfulness across different contexts. As repeatedly mentioned, it also shows that different meaningful youth political participation activities do not exclude each other, but often can be found alongside each other, complementing each other, or intertwined. This is true for youth political participation activities which, in themselves, combine different aims and operate in and towards different democracy environments at once.

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

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

There are several important aspects of this approach that should be noted.

- ▶ Meaningfulness defined subjectively on the basis of individual goals, wishes or expectations of the participants is not considered here, and should be explored separately, as these subjective aims are not necessarily in line with the overall aims of the activity.
- ▶ Meaningful activities can be fully or partly successful or can, of course, fail in fulfilling their aims.
- ▶ Youth political participation in itself is not a panacea. This approach to defining meaningful youth political participation brings the advantage of remaining open to different types of activities which may be meaningful in some contexts, while criticised as useless elsewhere.
- ▶ This approach to identifying meaningful youth political participation also implies that naming concrete elements or aspects which would differentiate meaningful youth political participation from a useless one can only be helpful in certain contexts, but it would hardly be applicable across all potential forms of youth political participation.
- ▶ This approach also enables the filtering out of such political participation mechanisms which are intended for youth, but do not further the youth agenda by only considering justifications supporting young people directly (for example, development of young people, efficiency of policies for young people, empowerment of young people).
- ▶ Lastly, it is important to emphasise that being able to identify meaningful youth political participation mechanisms helps to eliminate activities which are tokenistic and which, in principle, only blur the overall discourse on youth political participation.



Questions for reflection

- 1. Can you identify examples of meaningful youth political participation in your country/region/community? Remember, meaningful youth political participation brings together a fitting pair: democratic environment and aims (justifications)!**
- 2. Can you now see some youth political participation practices which are not meaningful? Such practices show a mismatch between the aims and the democratic environment in which they take place!**
- 3. What democratic environments are least used in youth political participation in your country/region/community? What are the most common democratic environments?**
- 4. What aims (justifications) of youth political participation are missing in your country/region/community? Which are the most common?**

Section II

Conventional youth political participation, transformative experiences and cultures of participation

1. Development of civic skills and participatory democracy

Participatory democracy is based on the assumption that participation is an empowering experience that transforms individuals into active citizens (Ferree et al. 2002: 295-97), and therefore, Pateman (1970) argues, the major function of participatory democracy is an educative one. Participating individuals gain practice in democratic skills and procedures, and develop a democratic personality involving autonomy and resistance to hierarchy (ibid). In this way, participatory democracy develops political efficacy, and a sense of co-operation, commitment to collective decisions and democratic character. It can be argued that these developmental and empowering qualities of participation offer the most long-lasting effects on individual engagement in the field of politics.

The understanding that participation makes better citizens is regularly quoted as a reason for public authorities to organise opportunities for citizens to participate in public decision-making processes (Mansbridge 1999). In a logical conclusion, it is thought that engaging young people in political processes will strengthen the vitality of democracy. Nevertheless, conventional youth participation is typically not participatory democracy. Instead, select groups of young people are offered the opportunity to participate within a representative democratic environment.

Research into the political socialisation of youth highlights how formative the years of adolescence are for the development of civic skills, political repertoires and modes of engagement in the public sphere (Neundorf and Smets 2017). While political socialisation is typically taking place through informal learning, much effort has been given to developing methods of formal and non-formal civic education. If the early experiences of civic engagement are an indicator of future civic action, one could argue that our repertoires of engagement, the way we do citizenship, are shaped by the experiences we have during our teens and adolescence. Therefore, in order to better understand the empowering and developmental aspects of both conventional and unconventional youth participation, we should interpret the factors shaping these experiences.

2. Conventional youth participation practices

Conventional political youth participation can take many different forms. Young people go to vote in elections and referenda, they become members of political parties, they run for election, they sign petitions, and they participate in tailored institutional mechanisms for youth participation. All of the aforementioned are important channels for civic engagement, and efforts should be taken to improve the access of young people to them by finding and removing barriers. Much can be done simply by evaluating the structural obstacles faced by youth in their political engagement, such as age limits for voting or running for office, or the availability of participatory opportunities that double as sites for non-formal training in citizenship skills such as youth parliaments, e-participation, local and national youth councils or student unions.



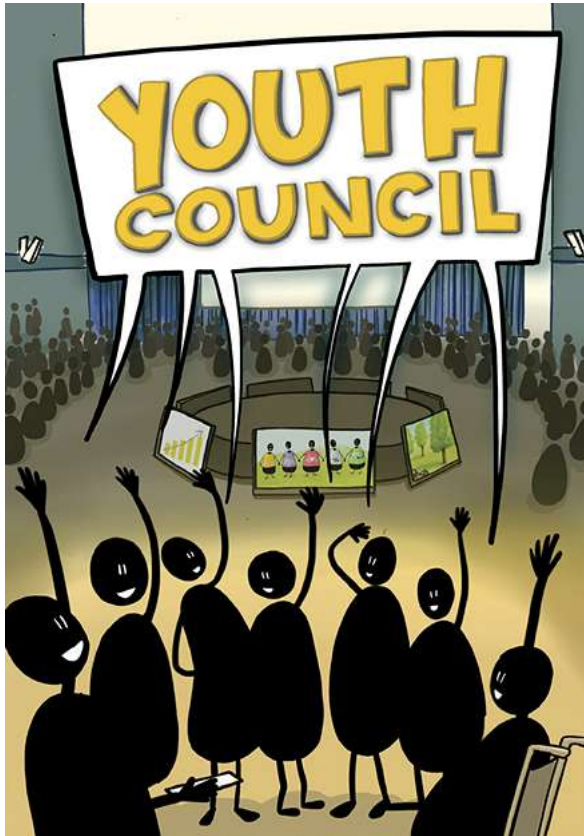
The Council of Europe's co-management structure, the Advisory Council on Youth, is a typical example of youth participation in a democratic environment that most closely approximates representative democracy. Such structures allow participants to hone their practical skills in doing politics, but a prerequisite to access these opportunities tends to be a certain skillset for public functioning (Bohman 1997). In other words, participants in these types of democratic environments, whether they are members of the local youth council at age 15 or attend meetings in Brussels at age 22, have the necessary combination of knowledge, attitudes, skills and resources to reach these positions. As a result, youth participation through representative structures usually favours young people with a certain social, cultural and political skillset mostly possessed by youth coming from privileged backgrounds, instead of deepening democracy by empowering groups of young people who have previously been excluded for one reason or another.

Engaging in representative forms of youth participation often already requires specific skills and connections, but one of the central justifications for youth participation is that it develops these very competences. So how can youth participation reach young people who lack this skillset? Participatory democracy seems to be a strong candidate with the transformative potential to equip individuals with political efficacy and turn them into manifestly active citizens.

3. Case study: youth councils

Youth councils are a form of civic engagement that approaches participation through formal political and governmental institutions (Checkoway and Aldana 2013: 1896). Youth councils, youth parliaments or youth forums are structures provided by local and regional authorities for the participation of young people. They allow young people, whether or not they belong to organisations or associations, to express their opinions and present proposals on the formulation and implementation of policies affecting them. Some youth councils are composed by election, by appointment from within the organisations of young people, or by open participation. Ideally, young people assume direct responsibility for projects and play an active part in the related policies. In this way, youth councils are thought to support the aims of empowering young people, developing their capacities, making policies better informed and efficient to implement and, last but not least, guaranteeing the right of young people to participate in matters that affect them.

However, youth councils have been criticised for targeting a select audience of active youth, reproducing social inequality, and failing to offer an adequate participatory platform for the vast majority of young people (Augsberger et al. 2018; Gretschel and Kiilakoski 2015; Matthews and Limb 2003; Ødegård 2007; Taft and Gordon 2013). Despite her criticism, Ødegård (2007) also found Norwegian youth councils to have a positive effect on the political socialisation of those who did participate, pointing out, however, that any larger social effect was missing since the opportunity to participate was only open to a select few. These findings are echoed by Hill et al. (2004: 86), who propose that often processes and methods of participation require participants to have certain skills in expressing themselves, understanding institutional languages and in reading cultural interactions. This automatically excludes many of those with the most to gain from participation such as migrants, young people or those who are functionally impaired (ibid: 91).



Summarising, youth councils and similar structures for political youth participation tend to recruit members with specific skills, abilities and competences. Therefore, instead of increasing political pluralism they often end up reproducing social inequality by not being inclusive enough. Despite their resemblance to a representative democratic process, many of these structures have unclear positions in their decision-making mechanisms and often lack executive power, therefore having little effect on political decisions. Representative forms of political youth participation can also be an inefficient means of empowering participants and developing their capacities, if the selection procedure favours those who already have a highly developed skillset for public functioning (in comparison to their peers).

4. Case study: participatory budgeting

Participatory budgeting has become a method of best practice for citizen involvement around the world over the last 30 years. It was introduced in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in the late 1980s to curb corruption and clientelism in local politics and to channel public funds in a more egalitarian way. It is based on the premise that citizens should be able to influence public spending (Baiocchi and Ganuza 2017: 19; Gret and Sintomer 2005). The Brazilian case exemplifies a spectacular reversal in public

spending priorities as a result of letting local inhabitants make decisions regarding their surroundings (Cabannes 2004; Gret and Sintomer 2005). Participatory budgeting brings a new approach to inclusion by offering a low-threshold opportunity for participation without the need for a particular skillset often associated with formal representative structures.

With regard to the aims for conventional political youth participation discussed in the previous section, participatory budgeting ticks all the boxes with far less trouble than the typical representative forms of youth participation. This approach, combining large-scale events with interactions in small workshops and a citywide vote can engage large groups of people. It does not require sustained commitment from participants while still making it possible and worthwhile to engage in some of the activities. This keeps the threshold to engage low while giving participants the option to immerse themselves in the process, increasing the likelihood of personal development and political empowerment in a style of engagement that is completely different from the formal style of representative democracy. Finally, participatory budgeting has a direct bearing on how public spending is directed locally. Since the receivers of these provisions are included in the decision-making process, tailor-made local solutions become a real possibility.

All in all, the two styles of organising civic participation that have been outlined here speak different languages. A comparison between the participation of young people expressing their preference in the youth council, and the participatory budget's open invitation to discuss and negotiate in a structure of co-governance with civil servants and decision makers emphasises just how different these political participation opportunities are. Accordingly, the two styles also speak to various young people. The reasons a youth council might be useful for one person could be the same reasons why another one would rather engage in a participatory budgeting activity. Offering engaging opportunities for participation in different styles whether they are representative, participatory, empowering, deliberative, or something completely different is a good way to build social cohesion. Participation strengthens trust in public authorities and brings together people who would otherwise rarely meet, exposing them to opinions and circumstances different from their own.

5. Youth as active citizens

A common argument in favour of participatory democracy is that the experience of participation transforms individuals into engaged citizens (Barber 2009: 151-52; Ferree et al. 2002: 296-97; Mansbridge 1999; Pateman 1970: 22-44), while the downside is that when participation fails to engage and empower, participants will likely experience apathy, growing cynicism and disenchantment (Berger 2015; Fung and Wright 2003: 33-39; Talpin 2012). For some, conventional youth participation turns out to be an empowering experience, transforming them into engaged active citizens while leaving others untouched. Why do young people have different experiences, although they participate simultaneously in the same structure? According to Paul (2014), transformative experiences offer radically new insights that change individuals in deep and fundamental ways. Paul argues that these experiences are causing fundamental changes in core preferences, and how one sees oneself as a person.

In order to produce empowerment and individual development, a participatory opportunity must hold some transformative potential. Recent research into transformative experiences gives some clues towards understanding when these turning points occur in people's lives and helps us understand how this development might be realised more consistently in conventional youth participation.

In order to understand why youth participation turns out to be transformative for some but leaves others unaffected, it is necessary to determine the connection between politics and culture, or why participatory processes can make sense to some participants but leave others untouched. This suggests that the transformation of citizenship skills through youth participation is a result of a culturally resonant (relevant) process of participation. The resonance of a participatory process is dependent on the cultural toolkit available to the individual. These toolkits are created by past experiences and form a lens the individual uses to make sense of the participatory mechanisms.

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

Acknowledging that these cultural toolkits will affect the way a participating individual makes sense of their opportunity to participate allows us to see that young people with different toolkits need different political participation opportunities to thrive. In other words, under certain circumstances, political youth participation triggers deep life-changing experiences if the participant has the skillset needed to gain this insight. When the skillset of young people and the nature of political participation opportunities align, the scene of participation resonates with the participant.

Youth participation can be a transformative experience in terms of enriching participants with political efficacy, democratic values and the competences and attitudes required for a life of active citizenship. As resonance describes a process that a participant sees as relevant from their own point of view, the development of civic skills can be described as a result of a culturally resonant experience of youth participation. However, when an individual with a highly developed skillset is engaged in culturally resonant youth participation, the outcome is an accumulation of privilege and a further boost of the skillset. On the other hand, when participation is culturally non-resonant or irrelevant to a participant, the outcome of the experience brings feelings of failure. Young people in that situation often end up in a position of a spectator, not an active agent, and participation in the role of a spectator again reinforces political passivity of the individual. Finally, a participant in possession of the prerequisites for participation, attending a culturally non-resonant participation activity, will exit the scene of participation while staying loyal to the general idea of democracy, continuing their search for a mechanism of participation that reflects their preferred repertoires of political action.

One of the key benefits and objectives of conventional political youth participation is the prevention of marginalisation and a strengthened social cohesion. Unfortunately,

the accumulation of influence and positive experiences of conventional political youth participation tends to benefit privileged groups. Consequently, youth participation paradoxically sometimes strengthens dominance of young people from high-end backgrounds.



Questions for reflection

- 1. How do young people in your country/community/region participate in conventional participation opportunities?*
- 2. Which practices of conventional participation do you find effective?*
- 3. What do you consider to be examples of best practice in your own country/region/community, when it comes to conventional political participation?*
- 4. Can you name your political participation skills?*
- 5. What cultural factors influence youth political participation in your community?*

Section III

Unconventional youth political participation, social movements and youth activism

1. Unconventional youth political participation

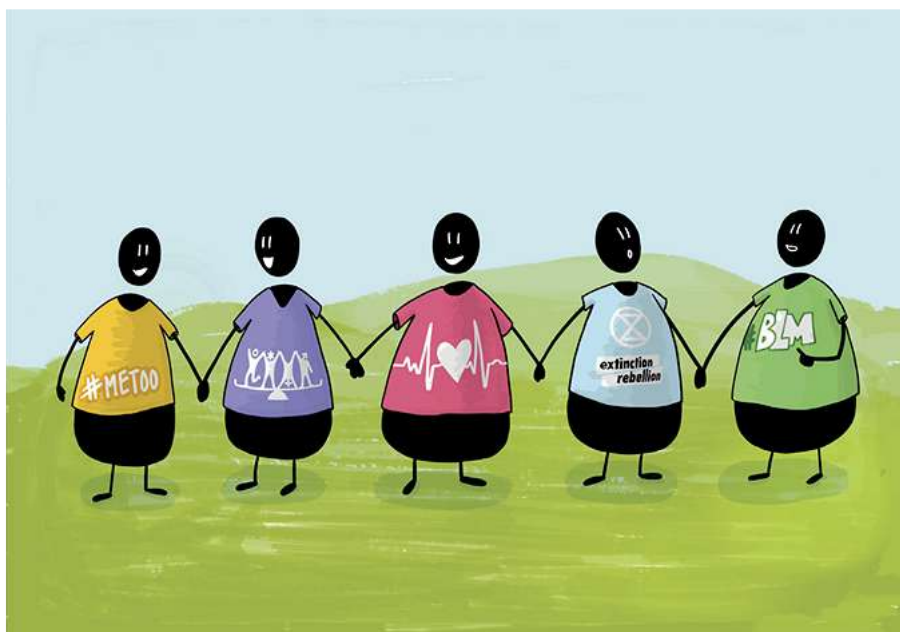
Unconventional participation is defined as non-institutionalised direct political action, such as signing petitions, traditional marches and demonstrations, boycotting, disruptive actions and occupation of public properties, among others. Because of a growing distrust and distaste in institutions, such as government, political parties and other representative bodies, young people have changed their modes of participation, leaning towards unconventional activist forms rather than institutionalised ones (Dalton 2008; Norris 2002; Wattenberg 2008). Young people today are more focused on individual values of autonomy and self-expression, mirrored in individual lifestyle choices, such as political consumerism, artistic performances or online activism (Micheletti 2003; Mosca and Della Porta 2009). This fluid engagement is often issue or cause-oriented, informal and spontaneous (Batsleer et al. 2020).

Unconventionality is about the type of forms and (political) authorities, the law, and broader power relations in society, namely the type of democratic environment (cf. section 1). It is important to recognise that conflict may be an element of unconventional youth participation, such as within social movements. In radical democracies or counter-democracy types of environments, conflict and antagonism are not suppressed. In fact, the creation of participation opportunities and spaces in which engagement is formalised, and conflict avoided or foreclosed, can be perceived as policing and exclusive rather than inclusive. Movements such as Occupy and Indignados have shown that decision-making processes based on horizontal relations and democratic deliberation – in contrast to representative mechanisms – are more accessible, inclusive and equal, opening up spaces for young people to participate and voice their opinions and concerns.

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

While youth activism and unconventional participation can stretch to many different forms – including civic and social engagement, such as volunteering – less explored types of youth unconventional participation include social movements and more recent, increasingly significant forms such as do-it-ourselves politics (DIO) (Pickard 2019) and direct social actions (DSA) (Bosi and Zamponi 2015).

Most contemporary social movements have a vital youth component, even when they are not youth-led, as shown by their involvement in multiple movements with different and cross-cutting causes – Occupy movements against austerity measures, climate change movements such as Fridays For Future (FFF) and Extinction Rebellion (XR), gender equality and feminist movements such as Ni Una Menos and #MeToo, and social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter.



Youth movements nowadays are increasingly transnational, particularly on relevant issues which are global, such as climate change. Because of this, social media plays a crucial role in connecting young people across countries, inspiring each other's actions through virtual encounters. There is also an increased tendency for young people in social movements to engage in prefigurative politics, often pushing for innovative and radical solutions that may challenge existing norms. Prefigurative politics indicates actions and practices in which certain political ideals are experimentally actualised in the "here and now", rather than hoping to be realised in a distant future (van de Sande 2013: 230).

In contemporary democracies, unconventional political participation is not only increasingly common but also accepted. Protest actions are no longer a synonym of turmoil and political instability, but an alternative way of expressing political opinions and dissent and promoting social change (Dalton 2008; Quaranta 2016: 234). The diffusion of political protest as a “normal” form of political engagement makes it a more flexible and “customisable” tool for young people.

Along with protest, DIO politics puts the stress on the entrepreneurial skills of young people, taking the initiative in a great variety of non-electoral/non-institutional forms of political participation. For instance, young girls and LGBTIQ youth around the globe are tackling sexual harassment in the streets and catcalling, with several initiatives that aim to raise awareness about gender-based street harassment, create solidarity and foster cultural change around these issues. For instance, the international youth-led movement Chalk Back uses digital media and public chalk art to raise awareness: “we write stories of harassment word-for-word in the posts where they happened alongside the hashtag #stopstreetharassment using sidewalk chalk and then post on social media to spur dialogue and story sharing” (Chalk Back 2019).

Keeping informed about non-electoral political news and issues Liking, sharing, posting non-electoral political information online Signing a petition offline or online Recycling, using public transport and other environmentally friendly actions (ongoing) Boycotting and buycotting brands/products/retailers/countries (political consumerism) Being a vegetarian or going vegan Volunteering in an NGO, association, community group or network Informing and mobilising within a leaderless-horizontal political network Performing politics through artistic and cultural actions Taking part in a protest march, demonstration or rally Carrying a placard and/or banner during a march, demonstration or rally Flash-mobbing Occupying a public space, public square Camping out in a peace/climate camp Squatting in a private building or space Carrying out other acts of civil disobedience and direct action Refusing to co-operate with the police and/or being offensive to police Computer hacking, culture jamming, guerrilla communication Participating in urban disturbances, disorder and/or riots (adapted from Pickard [2019: 62-63])
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Table 3: Non-electoral forms of DIO politics

Encapsulated in certain forms of DIO politics are DSA which refers to forms of action that aim at directly changing some specific aspects of society without having to wait or ensure the interventions of public authorities or other actors (Bosi and Zamponi 2015: 373-74). The stress is put on the directness of the actions and the social side, namely targeting society rather than the state. A common example is the creation of multiple free services for citizens and young people, such as popular gyms, recreational and cultural activities, remedial education, among others.

Many forms of unconventional participation reflect the views of society that social movements aim to put forward. For example, the FFF movement uses school strikes to put moral pressure on policy makers to take action in favour of climate justice. Their vision is based on “building a better future” by taking care of planet Earth (FFF 2020). The 15-M and Indignados movements put forward the idea of social change based on radical democratic values and practices, against the so-called 1% of the rich, the powerful, the corporations, and the corrupted elites – through public citizens’ assemblies, camping in public squares, experimenting with new and direct democratic practices, in contrast and as a critique to representative democracy.

3. Sociopolitical contexts, conditions and resources of unconventional youth political participation

Although for the most part leaning outside formal and institutional settings and shaped by cultural dynamics, unconventional participation through social movements is highly dependent on the political, social and economic context. State policies, state bureaucracies and repressive capacities are a critical component of the political context and can channel and influence the action of social movements (Della Porta 1998; Kriesi et al. 1995; Tarrow 2011). The role of political institutions and politicians is crucial to understand why, eventually, young people prefer to engage in unconventional forms of political participation, taking distance from traditional politics.

The accessibility, required level of commitment and formality, and the perceived efficacy of the actions carried out are three important elements. For instance, informal spaces and networks may be more easily accessible for young people, especially for “first-timers”. A protest, a demonstration or a smaller event such as a book presentation may already provide opportunities to participate. Assemblies of many informal groups are public and open to everyone; they do not require formal membership, or specific skills and knowledge to take part in them. Similarly, the required level of commitment is adjusted according to individual preferences and motivation; some youth may easily become “super activists”, others may participate only in some of the major events and initiatives.

In other cases, some specific policies are directly connected to one or more of these elements and represent a challenge for unconventional activities. For example, these may include the bureaucracy and the fees needed for registering protest events, prohibition of covered faces during collective actions, fines for graffiti, restrictions on public assemblies to prevent the occupation or camping in the squares. More broadly, freedom of assembly and processes of criminalisation and stigmatisation of activists, including arrests and detention, are determining for any type of unconventional

activity. Resources such as money, time, knowledge, media and networks are critical for the survival of social movements. Many times, young people cannot mobilise funding due to lack of connections, experience or because of age-based discrimination. Public institutions, other civil society organisations and even older activists can provide networks and resources that would be otherwise unavailable to youth, particularly marginalised ones, and which are vital for the success of social movements' activities (Earl et al. 2017; Taft 2015).

4. Intersectionality and patterns of exclusion

When it comes to social movements, a specific focus should be placed on intersectionality, or "intersectional mobilisation". The concept of intersectionality stems from feminist theory, a methodology for research and a social justice action agenda. It starts from the idea that all people live multiple, layered identities along with the assumption that they are members of more than one community at the same time, and can simultaneously experience discrimination in different ways (Crenshaw 1989). On a practical level, intersectionality focuses on the inclusion of the different experiences of marginalised and discriminated young people.

Diverse examples exist which show how some movements achieved the adoption of an intersectional approach. Young people who have mobilised across different social movements in recent years have come to understand how different "issues" that can be a source of different inequalities are linked to one another. Several examples of contemporary movements – such as climate justice movements and, most importantly, feminist movements – link issues of gender inequalities to sexual orientation, migration or ecological issues, thinking of them as interdependent: fighting for one means fighting for all. Young people politically engaged nowadays are fully aware of the intersections between racial and social justice, climate change and gender equality. They support each other across campaigns, protests and different types of actions: in contrast to institutional politics, they do not aim at merely saving or preserving the current state of things (from destruction), but rather at changing it for the better.

4. Case study: the climate justice movement

Greta Thunberg and the international FFF movement (or Youth for Climate, Climate Strike, Youth Strike for Climate depending on the countries) are the symbol of the (re)awakening of the climate justice movement(s) since 2018. The large majority of FFF protesters in Europe are between 14 and 19 years old, with the share of young women exceptionally high; they significantly rely on social media and peer networks and have a limited commitment in formal environmental organisations and a relevant involvement in lifestyle politics. A significant part of the protesters were newcomers to demonstrations. FFF builds on a series of tactics that have been used by social movements for decades in order to attract attention and raise their demands publicly, such as sit-ins to occupy public spaces during protests, strikes, and the more and more common die-ins, in which activists simulate being dead.

Another climate justice movement, born in 2018, in which young people are increasingly involved is XR. XR was initiated by scholars and academics working in science, but attracted increasing numbers of young people. The movement uses a series of non-violent direct actions and civil disobedience that are deliberately disruptive to the public and political authorities. Another characteristic of XR is the stress put on prefigurative politics, as their actions are fuelled by interpretations of a radical change of the system, for which they claim to go beyond politics: “Governments must create and be led by the decisions of a Citizens’ Assembly on climate and ecological justice” and aims at “Mobilising 3.5% of the population to achieve system change – such as ‘momentum-driven organising’” (XR 2020).

5. Youth political participation in times of crisis

Young people’s political participation in times of crisis may be hindered by different challenges, including restrictions on freedom of expression, online and offline, and freedom of assembly and association (Deželan and Yurttagüler 2021). However, young people have constantly demonstrated that even in times of crisis, political participation is possible and necessary. Through various forms, including innovative ones, they have kept on monitoring governments, documenting abuses to inform advocacy work, and building horizontal solidarity networks at local and transnational levels. During the Covid-19 pandemic, direct social actions (offline) have been particularly manifest in the lockdowns and their aftermaths, notably through mutual help groups. At the same time, DIO politics mediated through social media has demonstrated its full potential through the actions of many young people around the globe. In addition to digital strikes, there have been mass-Tweet and mass e-mail actions, in order to put pressure on policy makers and stakeholders, or to call on politicians to hold virtual town hall meetings. Digital participation, in general, has seen a peak during the pandemic crisis, as many social movements moved their initiatives online in creative ways. However, it has proved to be particularly effective even in contexts of shrinking space for civil society (Pantea 2021). Activism, in this context, is changing as movements and more formal groups are learning to adapt to either new situations or challenging ones.

Young people have been involved in global online campaigns as well as online and offline small-scale actions, such as the preparation of online tutorials to produce homemade-based environmentally friendly products by activists, engagement in community kitchens, grocery shopping for elderly people, food and primary goods delivery for groups at risk, or providing socio-emotional support to young girl victims of gender-based violence through Instagram, Telegram and WhatsApp chat. Protests have continued and are resurfacing with increased frequency every time new restrictive measures are put in place. In Poland, young women marched and drove in April 2020 against the ban on sex education in schools and came back to massive protests in October after a court decision to ban abortion in the country.



Questions for reflection

- 1. How do young people in your country/region/community engage in unconventional political participation?*
- 2. Which practices of unconventional participation in your country/region/community do you find effective?*
- 3. What challenges do you perceive in making your voice heard outside conventional channels? Do you know of any legal or administrative restrictions that discourage unconventional youth political participation in your country?*
- 4. What could you do to increase the opportunities for young people to participate in social movements or youth organisations?*
- 5. Can you think of examples of DIO politics in which young people in your community or group could engage?*
- 6. Which practices are needed for the inclusion of marginalised young people in youth political participation? How do you see different issues – i.e. climate, gender/feminism, migration/anti-racism – linked to one another?*
- 7. What do you see as the most important steps to safeguard and enhance youth political participation in times of crisis?*

Section IV

Recommendations for policy makers, practitioners and researchers

Meaningful youth political participation, both in conventional and unconventional settings, requires all actors to examine the way participation takes place. Several key aspects should be kept in mind when examining youth political participation: aims (justifications) and democratic environments; participation skillsets and cultural sensitivity of participatory opportunities; and intersectionality and support for unconventional youth political participation methods. Taking these aspects into account can help various actors in the youth sector to support the development of a more open, transparent and accessible democratic environment for young people.

Recommendations for the youth sector

- ▶ Administrative, legal and practical restrictions on youth organisations, movements and activists pose obstacles to youth political participation. In order to encourage and promote meaningful youth political participation, policy makers should:
 - be clear and transparent about the aims of the youth political participation mechanisms they establish. For example, it is vital to be clear that school youth councils aim at the development of youth political participation competence as well as increasing the efficiency of school administration;
 - be clear and transparent about the type of democracy environment in which the youth political participation mechanisms they establish operate. For example, it is crucial to acknowledge that a town hall meeting which also welcomes young people is a direct democracy measure focused on direct decision making, while a citizens' assembly is a mechanism of deliberative democracy focused on supporting public debates and providing recommendations to policy makers;

- promote access to participatory democracy opportunities, such as youth councils, public consultations, or participatory budgeting and planning;
 - avoid patronising and confrontational discourses and actions when young people engage in more disruptive (protests, strikes, etc.) forms of unconventional politics. Instead, adopt an open approach that focuses on the creation of safe spaces – physical and virtual – where young activists and other members of civil society can meet and organise, share practices, create transnational coalitions, and enhance impact;
 - promote schemes for capacity building in (a) youth workers and (b) young people in order to allow them to refine their participatory skillsets. These capacity-building opportunities should allow for seasoned actors in the field to share their experience as well as create such a variety of capacity-building mechanisms that young people from various cultural backgrounds and with different levels of participatory skills are motivated to take part;
 - promote research and evaluation in the youth political participation domain. Research has the potential to bring forward evidence (as detailed below) and to enable policy makers to adjust current policies, funding schemes or measures, to enable as meaningful youth political participation opportunities as possible in various contexts and for young people from various backgrounds.
- Researchers should facilitate debates on different types of political participation activities, mechanisms and democratic environments by gathering empirical evidence on how they are linked to each other. Namely, they should:
- inform policy making via studies that identify challenges, barriers and limitations to meaningful youth political participation, for instance, by gathering evidence on administrative and legal restrictions, collecting data for policy evaluation (existing/lack of policies and potential areas for intervention by the youth sector) in concrete settings (countries, regions, communities), and exploring how young people could be supported in participating. As an example, introducing activities which enable young people to develop their political participation skillsets could help some young people to participate more meaningfully;
 - gather and compare evidence on good practices for the promotion of meaningful youth participation across countries and create opportunities for knowledge sharing with young activists and members of youth organisations. Participatory action research methods are particularly potent in this regard and enable the combination of research and participatory skillset enhancement;
 - critically evaluate existing youth political participation opportunities to determine their meaningfulness. Using the combination of aims (justifications) and democratic environments enables exploration of existent mechanisms, reflects their strengths and weaknesses in terms of meaningfulness, and suggests avenues for further development. Evaluations should take place regularly in order to keep track of changes, monitor

- examples of good practice, and ensure transparency of the youth political participation mechanisms;
- explore participation skillset levels in youth from various geographical locations and cultural backgrounds, as well as effective ways to develop these skillsets. Research can support practitioners in anticipating the needs of young people from different backgrounds, and it can also help practitioners to design as effective capacity-building exercises as possible for various groups of young people;
 - probe the phenomenon of intersectionality and provide recommendations for all involved stakeholders on the practical utilisation of this in youth political participation practice. Policy makers may be interested in ways to engage intersectionality in existent youth political participation methods. Practitioners could be curious about how to identify and work with intersectionality in local settings, and young people might be intrigued as to how intersectionality helps them reach multiple goals and support different activities while strengthening them at the same time.
- Being aware of different democratic environments, participatory aims and motivations for promoting youth involvement is crucial when planning youth political participation activities. In order to make youth political participation worthwhile, practitioners should:
- as members of advocacy and civil society groups, ensure young people's right to participation is respected, particularly by protecting freedom from political pressure, freedom of expression, assembly and association. Stigmatisation and criminalisation processes against young activists should be condemned at all times and, if possible, also accompanied by solidarity actions and campaigns. Helping young people voice their opinions as constructively as possible should be supported;
 - as youth workers and other youth work and education professionals, provide young people with capacity-building opportunities to refine their participation skillsets. While doing so, young people from different cultural backgrounds may have different needs, and this needs to be reflected in the nature of capacity-building exercises. At the same time, young people of all backgrounds should have access to such capacity-building opportunities, and these should take various forms in order to enable young people to choose one that fits their needs, expectations and current skillset level. Similarly, capacity building of youth organisations should be supported by seasoned practitioners and more experienced organisations, and should also be included in policy developments in order to allow for financial coverage of such activities;
 - as young people involved in youth movements and organisations, encourage the participation of young women and other marginalised groups of youth (such as ethnic minorities) by adopting an intersectional approach to concrete youth political participation activities. In other words, look for synergies across the various fields of interest (for example, combining an environmental event with one focusing on social inequalities) and help create and find opportunities and spaces for these youths to voice their

- opinions and points of view. Knowledge sharing, mentoring or tutoring can help others achieve their goals and it can provide you with a chance to further utilise your experience. Network with other youth movements and organisations in your community in order to understand how different issues may overlap and how you can work together to tackle multiple inequalities. Have a look at the processes in other organisations and movements; mechanisms and channels used in one case may be potentially useful in others as well;
- in all practitioners' roles, ensure transparency of all youth political participation mechanisms with respect to aims (justifications) and democratic environments. Practitioners should always know, be clear and explicit about the reasons behind the political participation mechanisms they recommend, contribute to or directly run. Aims and type of democracy environments should be the minimum standard information available to young people, as it allows them to consider the meaningfulness of the given participatory mechanism, and make an informed decision on their engagement.

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Young people's political participation has many diverse forms; it can be conventional or unconventional, and include activities such as voting, being a member of a political party, serving on a local youth council, engaging through a youth organisation or taking part in online political activism, boycotts or a protest movement. This edition of Insights "Meaningful youth political participation in Europe" examines the key concepts and aims of youth political participation, types of democratic environments and various mechanisms of participation within the context of shrinking space for civil society, rapid digitalisation, advancement of populist ideologies, increased inequalities, a rise of global youth movements and a health pandemic.

Both conventional and unconventional types of participation are explored throughout the publication, reflecting upon young people's participation skillsets, the cultural sensitivity of participatory opportunities and intersectionality. The authors conclude with a set of recommendations for the youth sector to support the development of a more open, transparent and accessible democratic environment for young people.

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