

WORK IN PROGRESS

Young People's Trends in Political Trust and Views of their Declining Sense of Duty

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Abstract. At European level, the society is facing one of the most serious concerns, namely the young people voter turnout and their non-involvement in politics. They also have poor opinions of politicians and parliamentary behaviour. Low trust suggests that something in the political system, politicians, institutions or both is thought to be poorly functioning. Studies show that Romanian young voters as well as the British ones have little expectations from the political system commitment, being pessimistic about the slogan: "Your today's vote can be your tomorrow's chance!" This article is meant to investigate the reasons why this is so, and to further debate young people's political views and behaviour, by suggesting solutions to help strengthen their bond to their local politicians and policy makers. Our research should also be viewed within the context of the evolution of political and citizenship education in schools, promoting initiatives and attitude change and focusing on answering a series of key research questions.

Keywords: *political trust, young voter turnout, lack of political awareness, sense of duty*

When speaking about political trust it is important to specify what we mean, because there are certain opinions surrounding the use of the term *trust*. Political trust is an ambivalent concept. Because of its inherent relationship to the performance of political institutions, it is difficult to separate it from evaluations of government¹. Trust in parliament may be a good measure because confidence in institutions is about something deeper and more fundamental than trust in politicians or in particular governments. Parliament is the main representative

¹ Martin, Aaron J., *Young People and Politics-Political engagement in the anglo-american democracies*, Routledge Research in Comparative Politics, New York, 2012, p.40

institution of democratic governments, and sudden or consistent decline in confidence in it is a serious matter.

Young people are often singled out as being the least trustful, levels of trust among the young and how these differ from those of older people, not being very well established in the literature. It is known that young people have depressingly low levels of political interest and knowledge. They also have poor opinions of politicians and parliamentary behaviour. This article set out to investigate the reasons why this is so, and to further explore young people's political views and behaviour.

At European level, the society is facing one of the most serious concerns, namely the young people voter turnout and their non-involvement in politics. Nowadays most young people do not believe in their vote importance and value and seem to have lost hope for a better life. They do not believe in demagogic speeches of politicians or in the fact that they have the power to change anything. Although young people should have a positive thinking, energy and many aspirations towards a better future, it has lately appeared that most of them are pessimistic about the slogan: Your today's vote can be your tomorrow's chance!

We are wondering why young adults do not vote. That's a **vexing** question political campaigns have been asking for decades. The most likely answer is that young adults do not vote because many are still, in a sense, children, without adult commitments or responsibilities. The data suggest that three factors consistently make a difference in voting rates: money, marriage, and homeownership. Those are the adult commitments that give people a **stake** in society; to protect and expand their stake, they vote.

Studies show that those who graduate from college into a bad economy experience long-term wage losses, particularly after being underemployed, with lower earnings even six years after recovery. Those wage losses will likely continue to have an effect on marriage and homeownership rates, which will in turn have an effect on voter turnout².

Georg Simmel, a German sociologist and philosopher stated that "trust is one of the most important synthetic forces within society". Political trust and social trust are similar in some ways, but different in others. Social or interpersonal trust

² Russell, Cheryl, *The Surprising Trends That Suggest Young People Won't Vote in 2012*, in New Republic, 5 February, 2012 (<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/politics/100774/young-voters-election-2012#>)

can be based upon immediate, first-hand experiences of others, whereas political trust is more generally learned indirectly and at a distance. John Scholz and Mark Lubell, professors of political science, extended their influential works by analyzing the development and maintenance of the cooperative solutions to collective action problems, and, in one of their studies they emphasized the idea that: “trust improves the practical possibilities of social co-operation, while at the same time reducing the risks of free-riding citizens and exploitive elites”³.

Low trust suggests that something in the political system (politicians or institutions or both) is thought to be functioning poorly. It may be that performance is poor, or that expectations are too high, but either way low trust tells us that something is wrong. Political trust is important because democracies are based on institutional mechanisms that are supposed to ensure that politicians behave in a trustworthy manner, or pay the political price. Confidence in the institutions that are supposed to maintain trustworthy politicians is a crucial element in this mixture⁴.

A research team from the Qualitative Research Unit at the National Centre for Social Research carried out a study, which demonstrates that young people cannot be treated as a uniform group where politics is concerned. They vary in their levels of interest in politics and display their interest in a variety of ways. But the evidence provides further understanding of how young people assess their interest in politics. It also shows how the interaction between the personal and financial circumstances of an individual, their beliefs and values, and a range of external factors, will determine how a young person conceptualises politics, which in turn influences the level of connection they make with it⁵.

The involvement of young people in the democratic process is incredibly important. In these unprecedented times of financial challenges that we as people face, it is vital to ensure that young people feel involved in their community and society as a whole. Involving young people in the political process helps strengthen their bond to their local community. This is a great investment as it will also help them remain involved in the political process as they reach adulthood.

³ Scholz, John T. and Lubell, Mark, *Trust and Taxpaying: Testing the Heuristic Approach to Collective Action*, in **American Journal of Political Science**, 1998, p. 42

⁴ Locke, John, *Two Treaties on Government*, (electronic edition) edited with an introduction, by C.B. McPherson, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1980

⁵ White, Clarissa, Bruce, Sara and Ritchie, Jane, *Young people's politics-Political interest and engagement among young people*, York Publishing Services Ltd, York, 2000, p. 6

But there exists a certain disinterest in politics including political parties. A study (Nestle UK Ltd) of young people aged 18 showed that young people generally reported negative views towards the political parties in Great Britain. In particular, all main parties were seen as parties that ‘will do anything to win votes’. Another study (Park et al) found that around half of the 18 year old young people who were surveyed said it was ‘unimportant to them who won the next general election’. Similarly, Park et al found that over three quarters of those teen-agers neither supported nor felt close to a particular political party. While young people feel motivated by issues, it appears that they are less engaged by the way that the current political system deals with these issues and the politicians who run the system at local and national level.

An important issue is that of elected young people, that is members of youth councils, youth parliament and young mayors all of them being by definition young people. It is therefore unsurprising that young people can easily relate to these candidates.

Russel A., in his work *Voter Engagement and Young People* speaks about a research carried out by the Electoral Commission identifying that young people generally found it harder to relate to councilors and Members of Parliament. Young people found them to be unrepresentative of the wider population in Britain in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and social class⁶.

By not feeling that elected members relate to them it could be argued that young people do not feel their views are being heard or represented. For example, in a survey of 12 to 15 year olds, 41 per cent agreed with the statement ‘none of our politicians are bothered about the problems facing young people today’. Further research (Hansard Society) suggests that young people believe politicians have a negative view towards young people, blaming them for things going wrong in society and not making the effort to understand and meet with young people⁷.

Some of the lack of interest in politics and political parties may be explained by a lack of awareness and knowledge in the 18 to 24 year old age group of the electoral and political systems. Evidence from the Electoral Commission in Great Britain showed that young people aged 18 to 24 were more likely than all other age groups to complain that they had not received enough information about

⁶http://www.local.gov.uk/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=c85f23f6-7824-4eb7-b5f3c6cbc74f7a48&groupId=10171

⁷ Park, A, Phillips, M. and Johnson, M., *Young People in Britain: the Attitudes and Experiences of 12 to 19 Year Olds*, DfES Research Report 564, London: DfES, 2003

candidates, parties and the parties' campaigns⁸. A consistent finding of the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study Seventh Annual Report (Keating et al., 2009) has been that the 'political literacy' strand of the new citizenship curriculum in schools is the one that is least well taught. Teachers lack knowledge and young people say that it is dull and boring and not relevant to their interests and lives⁹.

Referring to Romanian young people case, social and political changes occurred in recent decades have generated various problems the younger generation faced. And despite chances and opportunities arising in the development of democracy in Romania, the level of youth participation in public and political life is very low. The causes may be diverse: they are not informed, they are not motivated or fail, although there exist some efforts. The percentage of young people dissatisfied with the way politics works in Romania is somewhat understandable, given that most are less interested in politics, often do not present interest in media (either print or audio-visual) and have only limited contact with the state institutions where they might otherwise get media information.

However, most of the Romanian young people are not prepared to meet the new demands of a democratic society and the development of a civil society and the democratization process still faces the problem of apathetic young people not being aware of the advantages of their involvement in rebuilding civil society¹⁰. The majority of young people show little inclination either to join formal political organizations, such as political parties, or to get involved in local politics or to contact political figures, such as MPs and local councilors, in the future and the general trend is downward, though some attitudes and intentions have risen while some have remained largely unchanged.

There has been a general policy shift in support of young people's right to engage, participate and have an opinion in matters that affect them in society. This shift has been supplemented by policy initiatives in education, particularly the introduction in all European countries, of citizenship education and of Citizenship as a statutory National Curriculum subject, with an emphasis on political literacy. Citizenship education is a clear and direct mechanism for political socialization

⁸ Benton, Thomas, Cleaver Elizabeth, *Young People's Civic Participation In and Beyond School: Attitudes, Intentions and Influences*, in **Citizenship Education longitudinal Study Seventh Annual Report**, Research Report No DCSF-RR052, London, [online document]

⁹Keating, A., Kerr, D., Lopes, J., Featherstone, G. and Benton, T., *Embedding Citizenship Education in Secondary Schools in England*, LONDON NFER, 2008, [online document]

¹⁰ http://www.soros.ro/ro/Implicarea_civica_si_politica_a_tinerilor

which has the potential to impact on young people's trust, engagement and civic and political participation. There is strong evidence of a democratic deficit among young people in modern, post-industrial societies. The highlight of the introduction of citizenship education is that one of its keys aims the development of young people's trust, engagement, participation through building their knowledge and skills along with the development of positive attitudes towards democracy and democratic participation¹¹.

While there is consensus about declining youth participation in political activities, there is little agreement about the causes of such decline. Some common explanations include: alienation and disengagement, negative media discourses and lack of trust, indifference or disinterest through lack of trust. The general lack of trust in young people in society is in most cases perpetuated and reinforced by media stereotypes, phenomenon which may act to undermine such trust and influence the likelihood and type of participation with which young people engage. The news media are often implicated in the reasons why people choose not to vote in elections.

The political analysts reveal that young people who take an interest in news and current affairs have more positive attitudes and stronger intentions to participate in the political process than students with less exposure to news. Students are not politically apathetic but they are increasingly aware of politics and of its influence, in part through increased exposure to news and current affairs.

Maybe we should think about how far are school factors impacting on the attitudes and intentions of students regarding political participation. We may not say that schools are having no impact but rather than that, the impact is likely to be more subtle and diffuse. Levels of personal efficacy among politicians are not fixed by year 18, but are open to influence and change as they move through to year 24. These influences may come from both in-school and out-of-school experiences. At the age of 18 young people currently have a narrow conception of civic engagement and participation, limiting themselves mainly to activities such as voting and collecting money and student voice, that require low levels of time, effort and commitment.

Though the analysts present no great shift in the scope and forms of young political participation, there are some signs that the focus for such participation could be shifting. Student attitudes and intentions to civic and political

¹¹ Benton, Thomas, *Op. cit.*, p. 30

participation appear to be more connected to their experiences in near environments, such as family, peers, school and neighbourhood, than to what is going on in communities at national and European level. This creates the potential for the political socialization¹² of young people to take place in newer spaces or sites of citizenship, which are broader and more accessible.

The deficit model of youth participation is critiqued by those who state that young people are not apathetic or disinterested in politics but rather are redefining and refocusing their civic and political participation in line with significant shifts in political and social culture. As we previously mentioned young people nowadays are more likely to be involved in informal types of political engagement such as local community actions, local consumerism and single issues concerning politics and protests.

We should speak about general policy developments, which reflect and support young people's opportunities to engage, participate and have a say in matters that affect them, and which have been paralleled by different European policies concerning youth participation and information within education. The purpose of these policies is to promote active and responsible European citizenship on the part of young people, whose interest in public affairs is declining, with the attendant risk of a citizenship and political participation deficit.

Youth policies serve to facilitate young people's transition into working life and develop their active citizenship at European level. The White Paper¹³ "A new impetus for European Youth" led to the adoption of a framework of European cooperation in the youth field, within which the Member States agreed to focus on four specific priorities to promote young people's active citizenship and political socialization: -information; -participation; -voluntary activities; -a better knowledge of youth.

According to the Member States the two European priorities of participation and information have encouraged national youth policies and remain important for the development of young people's active citizenship. But they recognise that they must continue to cooperate with each other and with their

¹²By political socialization we mean that the processes by which individuals acquire their knowledge and understanding about politics and how they gain and build political values and attitudes that lead to participation in civic and political society.

¹³ A white paper is an authoritative report or guide helping readers to understand an issue, solve a problem, or make a decision. White papers are used in two main spheres: government and business to business marketing.

regional and local authorities if the process is to bear fruit. The common objectives on information for young people are based on three points: access for young people to information, quality information, and participation by young people in information production. Information tools are available to young people in all Member States. However, only 12 countries have opted for an information strategy which addresses all questions likely to interest young people and which encompasses all levels, from local to European.

Youth information websites are the most important information means of communication information. The *European youth portal*, created in 2003, establishes links with the national youth portals in 19 Member States. The Member States recognise that this portal has enhanced inter-ministerial cooperation and exchanges in the field of youth information. Action is above all based on issues such as free time, youth organisations and voluntary activities, while information on participation, education, employment and travelling in Europe is sometimes neglected. England has a national online service (Connexions Direct) which offers young people information by telephone, text message, online or by e-mail. In Slovenia, youth information and counselling centres pay specific attention to the young Romany population. In Cyprus and Spain, young people in rural areas are provided with information by mobile units.

Forums for dialogue between young people and decision-makers have been organised more frequently, including regular consultations, meetings and hearings. Some countries have nominated individuals to take responsibility for youth affairs. Finland has appointed a mediator, the United Kingdom a national youth correspondent, while Lithuania has opted for municipal youth coordinators¹⁴.

The findings for each question we might address need to be viewed within the context of a number of attitudes and experiences that, viewed collectively, influence young people, mainly students attitudes to political participation. When we say attitudes we refer to laws and rules, community attachment, trust, efficacy, empowerment, participation, and exposure to news, in order to avoid moderately positive attitudes toward political participation and to promote strong initiatives as a main aspect of young people education and sense of duty.

¹⁴ http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/youth/c11200_ro.htm

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