

Strengthening Youth Participation in Public Decision-Making Processes in Europe: Young People's Perspectives

Promuovere la partecipazione giovanile ai processi decisionali pubblici in Europa: le prospettive dei giovani

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ABSTRACT

Young people's institutional engagement and political participation are crucial among contemporary European democracies, thus rendering them a pivotal issue at the core of European policies. The current state of youth participation, marked by declining institutional involvement and rising unconventional forms of participation, underscores the importance of understanding the link between youth, education and political institutions.

The contribution aims to delve into the perspectives of young people on strengthening youth participation in public decision-making processes. The research adopts a qualitative approach, and phenomenological philosophical assumptions underpin it. Data was collected through in-depth online interviews with 26 young members of representative European youth organisations. The pedagogical insights gleaned from the lived experiences of young people provide valuable suggestions for fostering inclusive and participatory educational policies.

L'impegno istituzionale e la partecipazione politica dei giovani sono cruciali nelle democrazie europee contemporanee, rappresentando dunque una questione chiave per le politiche europee. Lo stato attuale della partecipazione giovanile, caratterizzato da un calo del coinvolgimento istituzionale e dall'aumento di forme di partecipazione non convenzionali, sottolinea l'importanza di comprendere il legame tra giovani, educazione e istituzioni politiche. Il contributo si propone di approfondire le prospettive dei giovani in merito alle possibilità di promuovere la partecipazione giovanile ai processi decisionali pubblici. La ricerca adotta un approccio qualitativo e si basa su presupposti filosofici di tipo fenomenologico. I dati sono stati raccolti attraverso interviste online in profondità con 26 membri di organizzazioni giovanili europee di rappresentanza. Le suggestioni pedagogiche raccolte dalle esperienze vissute dei giovani forniscono spunti di riflessione per promuovere politiche educative inclusive e partecipative.

Keywords: youth participation | European policies | public decision-making processes | youth perspectives | pedagogical research

Parole chiave: partecipazione giovanile | politiche europee | processi decisionali pubblici | prospettive dei giovani | ricerca pedagogica

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Introduction

The participation of young people in political processes is a cornerstone of democratic governance in Europe, reflecting the ideals of inclusivity and representation that are fundamental to contemporary European democracies. Youth engagement is critical not only for the legitimacy of democratic institutions but also for fostering a politically active citizenry that can sustain democratic values over time (Giugni, Grasso, 2022). Despite this, there has been a noticeable decline in traditional forms of political participation among young people, such as voting and party membership, coupled with a rise in non-conventional forms of engagement, including activism through social media, political consumerism, and grassroots movements (Yurttagüler, Pultar, 2023). This shift highlights the challenges faced by European democracies in connecting with younger generations and ensuring their voices are effectively integrated into public decision-making processes (Pitti, 2018).

Given these dynamics, the research study seeks to explore the educational trajectories that foster long-term engagement with European institutions. This paper focuses on examining the perspectives of young people, specifically exploring their needs and aspirations for strengthening their participation in public decision-making processes within the European context.

1. Evolving Patterns and Challenges in Youth Political Participation

The literature on youth political participation in Europe reveals a complex landscape, where traditional forms of engagement such as voting and political party involvement are in decline, while new forms of participation are emerging. These non-conventional forms include political consumerism, lifestyle politics, and digital activism, which are often seen as more relevant to younger generations (Crowley, Moxon, 2017). Scholars have observed that young people today are increasingly engaging in what can be termed as “everyday participation,” where political actions are embedded in daily life choices and consumer behaviours (Vromen, Collin, 2010). This shift reflects a broader redefinition of what constitutes political participation, moving away from institutionalized forms to more fluid, issue-based and networked forms of engagement. However, this evolution in participation modes has not been without challenges. There is a significant recognition deficit from older generations, which often fail to acknowledge the legitimacy of these new forms of engagement. This has led to a perception of young people as apathetic or disengaged from politics, a view that is both misleading and detrimental to the development of inclusive democratic processes (Percy-Smith et al., 2023). Traditional political institutions continue to view young people as “apprentices of citizenship” who require guidance towards what is considered the “correct” forms of participation, typically those rooted in conventional democratic practices (Cuconato *et alii*, 2018, p. 10). This perception has led to a significant recognition deficit, where the new participatory practices of young people are often dismissed or undervalued. Consequently, policies aimed at increasing youth engagement frequently fail to resonate with young people, as they do not adequately reflect the ways in which younger generations are already participating in society (Pitti, 2013).

Youth organizations at the European level, such as the European Youth Forum and the Advisory Council on Youth of the Council of Europe, play a crucial role in bridging the gap between young people and political institutions. These organizations advocate for youth rights and strive to enhance youth participation in decision-making processes at all levels of governance. The European Youth Forum, representing a vast network of youth organizations across Europe, has been instrumental in bringing youth concerns to the forefront of European policy-making (European Youth Forum, 2023). Similarly, the Advisory Council on Youth operates within the Council of Europe’s co-management system, ensuring that young people have a direct say in the decisions that affect them (Advisory Council on Youth, 2023).

Data from the Eurobarometer survey on youth engagement with the European Union (EU) provides further insights into the current state of youth political participation (European Commission, 2024). The survey reveals that while 46% of young people across the EU are familiar with the European elections, awareness of other engagement opportunities remains limited. For instance, only 24% are aware of EU social media channels and websites like the European Youth Portal, and even fewer know about the pos-

sibility of visiting EU institutions or contacting a Member or Commissioner of the European Parliament. This suggests a need for increased efforts to inform young people about the various ways they can engage with the EU beyond voting. The Eurobarometer findings also reveal several challenges that young people face in engaging with the EU and broader political processes. A significant barrier to participation is the lack of financial means, which was cited by 37% of respondents as the main reason for not participating in activities in another EU country. This highlights the socioeconomic inequalities that can limit the accessibility of opportunities for youth engagement, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Overall, both the literature and survey data highlight the dynamic and evolving nature of youth political participation. However, this progression is not yet adequately recognised or supported by existing policies and institutions. To effectively engage young people, there is a clear need for policies that are more inclusive, flexible, and attuned to the diverse ways in which younger generations are already participating in civic life.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, grounded in the principles of phenomenology, to explore the lived experiences of young people engaged in public decision-making processes within European institutions. Phenomenology, with its focus on understanding phenomena as they are experienced by individuals, provides a robust framework for examining the complex and nuanced realities of youth participation (van Manen, 2014, 2016). The choice of this approach is informed by the need to delve deeper into the subjective experiences of young people, moving beyond surface-level descriptions to uncover the essence of what drives and sustains their engagement in democratic processes (Mortari, 2016).

Data for this study were collected through in-depth online interviews with 26 young members of representative European youth organizations, including the European Youth Forum and the Advisory Council on Youth (O'Connor, Madge, 2017; Sità, 2012). These interviews were conducted over seven months, using a snowball sampling method to identify participants who could provide rich, detailed accounts of their experiences (Emerson, 2015). The use of online interviews allowed for the inclusion of participants from diverse geographical regions in Europe, ensuring a broad representation of perspectives. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing for flexibility in the conversation while ensuring that all participants addressed key topics related to their engagement in public decision-making. The interviewees were encouraged to reflect on their journeys through participation, the challenges they have faced, and their views on what is needed to enhance youth participation in democratic processes.

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis. This involved a systematic process of coding the interview transcripts to identify recurring themes and patterns (van Manen, 2016). The use of NVivo software facilitated the organization and management of the data, allowing for a detailed exploration of the themes that emerged from the interviews (Coppola, 2011).

3. “Young people need to be seen on an equal footing with decision-makers”

The interviews with young people revealed a complex and multifaceted understanding of what is crucial to enhance their political participation. Central to their needs is the creation of environments that enable meaningful and equitable engagement with decision-makers. One of the most frequently mentioned requirements is the need for “safe spaces” where young people can express their views without fear of judgment or backlash. These spaces are seen as crucial for fostering open dialogue and ensuring that young people can participate without the pressures that often accompany involvement in politically charged environments. As one participant remarked, “Young people need to have safe spaces where they could express themselves, where they feel equally treated” (Interview 10, 2023).

Another critical need identified by the participants is the provision of adequate knowledge and educational resources. Although this aspect did not emerge in the account of the experiences that were crucial in their pathways to participation, many young people emphasised the importance of early civic education. They highlighted the need for education that equips them with a thorough understanding of their rights,

the functioning of political institutions, and the skills necessary for active citizenship. This educational foundation is seen as essential not only for empowering young people to engage with political processes but also for fostering a long-term commitment to democratic participation. As one interviewee noted, “You need from an early age to educate young people to understand in which political system they are living, what it means to be an active citizen” (Interview 17, 2024). Furthermore, this need for knowledge extends beyond formal education to include opportunities for critical thinking, public engagement, and the development of practical skills through debates and other forms of participatory learning.

The interviews also highlighted the importance of supportive structures and infrastructures that facilitate youth participation. This includes not only physical spaces such as community centres or town halls where young people can gather and engage in discussions but also institutional mechanisms that ensure their voices are heard and respected in decision-making processes. Participants frequently mentioned the need for “avenues” through which young people can influence policy, such as participation in parliamentary hearings, ministerial consultations, and other formal channels. However, they also stressed that these opportunities must be genuine and not merely symbolic.

Moreover, the interviews revealed a significant concern about the socioeconomic barriers that limit the ability of many young people to participate fully in political processes. Participants pointed out that financial stability, access to resources, and basic needs such as food, housing, and internet access are often prerequisites for meaningful participation. Without these, young people may be too preoccupied with securing their livelihoods to engage in political activities. As one participant eloquently put it, “If your own needs are not met, you don’t feel like participating, because you think about food and survival rather than decision-making processes” (Interview 15, 2023). This underscores the need for policies and support systems that address the material conditions of young people, enabling them to participate in politics from a position of security and dignity.

Furthermore, the participants expressed a desire for recognition and respect from older generations and political leaders. They emphasised that for youth participation to be effective, young people must be seen as equal partners in the decision-making process. This includes recognising the value of their contributions and ensuring that their voices are not only heard but also acted upon. As one interviewee stated, “Young people need to be seen on an equal footing with decision-makers, where they also have the chance to co-create policies” (Interview 25, 2024). However, a significant barrier is the perceived lack of respect and recognition from older generations and political figures, which often leads to young people feeling undervalued and ignored. This generational gap is further exacerbated by the use of complex, inaccessible language in political discourse, which alienates young people from participating fully. Participants also emphasised the importance of moving beyond tokenism to allow for genuine influence in policy-making. They highlighted the need for a “seat at the table,” where their voices have not just a symbolic presence but an actual impact on decisions.

This need for equality and recognition reflects a broader demand for a cultural shift in how society views and engages with young people in political contexts, as well as a systemic change in how young people are integrated into political processes.

4. “We need to move from the why to the how of youth participation”

When asked what they would do to improve youth participation in political processes, the young interviewees provided a range of insightful and transformative ideas. Many of these ideas centred around restructuring the current systems to create more inclusive and effective opportunities for youth engagement. A recurring suggestion was the implementation of co-management systems, similar to those used by the Council of Europe, where young people and government representatives share equal decision-making power. As one participant explained, “I would create the same system that exists in the Advisory Council, a co-management system where young people decide equally on matters related to youth alongside state representatives” (Interview 9, 2023). This model was praised for its ability to foster meaningful dialogue and ensure that youth participation is not just symbolic but has a tangible impact on policy decisions.

Another significant proposal was the lowering of the voting age to 16, which was seen as a way to start political engagement at an earlier age and make young people more aware of their influence in society.

Several participants suggested that this change would help integrate political education into the lives of younger people and provide them with early experiences of participation that could encourage lifelong engagement. One interviewee argued that “lowering the voting age to 16 is important to start a conversation on a younger level about youth participation and to show young people that their voice has an impact” (Interview 19, 2024). This idea reflects a broader desire to embed participation into the everyday lives of young people, ensuring that they grow up with a strong sense of their role in democratic processes.

In addition to institutional changes, participants also proposed more practical and immediate measures to support youth participation. Increased funding for youth organisations was a common theme, with many interviewees pointing out that financial support is essential for these organisations to operate effectively and reach a broader audience. This idea was often linked to the need for more resources to support non-formal education and youth work, which are seen as critical components of a robust participatory ecosystem. The participants argued that without adequate funding, youth organisations are limited in their ability to engage young people and influence political processes.

Moreover, participants emphasised the need to change societal attitudes towards youth participation. They expressed a desire to redefine how youth work and participation are perceived, moving away from the idea that these activities are merely extracurricular or voluntary. As one interviewee put it, “We need to redefine the landscape of how we interpret youth work, to move from the why to the how of youth participation” (Interview 5, 2023). This reflects a broader call for a cultural shift that recognises the importance of youth engagement as a vital component of democratic governance, rather than a marginal or optional activity.

Likewise, some participants expressed a desire to address more fundamental issues within the political system itself. For example, one interviewee suggested that there should be a “maximum voting age” alongside a minimum voting age, arguing that this would give more weight to the voices of younger generations in decisions that affect their future (Interview 20, 2024). Others proposed creating symbolic opportunities for younger children to experience leadership roles, such as having a day where a child could “be the Prime Minister” to help them understand the responsibilities and challenges of political leadership (Interview 12, 2023). These imaginative ideas underscore the participants’ desire for a more inclusive and innovative approach to youth participation, one that challenges existing norms and structures to better reflect the needs and aspirations of young people. Their suggestions reflect a deep understanding of the challenges they face and a strong commitment to making political participation more accessible, meaningful, and impactful for their generation and for generations to come.

5. Conclusion

The interviews highlight a critical demand for safe, supportive, and empowering environments that facilitate meaningful engagement. The call for inclusive, co-managed spaces where young people can engage as equals with decision-makers reflects a broader demand for democratic reforms that authentically integrate youth voices into the governance process. Like previous research, this study confirms that young people often feel excluded from traditional political processes due to a lack of recognition and respect from older generations (Kitanova, 2020). The frustration expressed by participants points to a broader issue of accountability in political participation. This finding suggests that if young people are not acknowledged and valued, there is a risk of disengagement and apathy, which can undermine the very purpose of including young people in these processes.

Furthermore, the interviewees emphasised the importance of early and sustained civic education as a crucial aspect in the broader education of the democratic subject (Biesta, 2011). This approach goes beyond formal education, extending into informal and non-formal learning contexts. This aligns with theories in the literature that stress the importance of education in fostering democratic participation from a young age (Eichhorn, 2018). The desire for early civic education and the lowering of the voting age to 16 also resonate with ongoing debates in the literature regarding the most effective ways to integrate young people into the political process. Research has shown that lowering the voting age can increase political engagement among young people, as it encourages early involvement in democratic processes and can lead to higher voter turnout in subsequent elections (Chan, Clayton, 2006). The participants’ emphasis

on co-management systems, where youth and adults share decision-making power, further enriches the discussion by suggesting a concrete model for enhancing youth participation, which is not yet widely explored in the literature.

The practical implications of these results are profound. The demand for more structured and supportive environments suggests that current participatory frameworks may be insufficient in addressing the unique challenges faced by young people. The interviewees' emphasis on the need for safe spaces and adequate resources, including financial support, highlights the practical barriers to participation that must be addressed to foster meaningful engagement. These findings suggest that educational practices and policy interventions should focus not only on creating opportunities for participation but also on ensuring that these opportunities are accessible, supportive, and reflective of the diverse voices of young people throughout Europe.

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