The 'Outraged Young':

How Young Europeans are Reshaping the Political Landscape

Declining involvement in politics has long been a concern of academics and policy-makers. Yet young Europeans are today reshaping the political landscape in new ways. These diverse patterns of youth participation reveal much about the health of our democracies, writes **James Sloam**.

Since the onset of the global financial crisis, young Europeans (15–24 year olds) have become increasingly marginalised from electoral politics and by public policy. They are bearing the brunt of public spending cuts – from increased university tuition fees to the closure of youth centres – and are faced with a hostile labour market for new entrants. Although the severity of these austerity measures varies greatly from country to country, Eurostat figures show that the number of NEETs (young people not in employment, education and training) has risen by almost 20 per cent across the old European Union (the 'EU15') since 2007. Many other young people have been forced into low-paid, temporary employment or into education and training as a last resort. Indeed, today's young Europeans are likely to be the first generation since the Second World War who will be worse off than their parents.

In many instances, the interests of the young have been viewed as insignificant or even expendable (witness the Liberal Democrat u-turn on tuition fees). Whilst benefits for older people – such as pensions – have often been protected or even increased, benefits and services for young people have been drastically reduced. Though few would resent increases in basic living allowances for the elderly, wealthy pensioners (who have benefitted from credit booms and housing bubbles) often maintain their privileges. The most extreme example of this is in Britain, where the Education Maintenance Allowance (to support students from poorer backgrounds taking higher-level qualifications) was abolished, but the Winter Fuel Allowance, free TV licences and free travel passes for pensioners remain exempt from means-testing. In a number of European countries, the labour market is geared towards insiders, who maintain excellent working conditions as young people are effectively frozen out, employed on short-term contracts, or made to accept poor working conditions.

Despite facing economic hardship, the current generation of young Europeans is told by political elites that there is no alternative to this austerity and that they are the ones who have to make sacrifices. In this context, the recent proliferation of protest politics across Europe is hardly surprising: from student demonstrations against rising tuition fees in London, to rallies of the 'outraged young' (*indignados*) against youth unemployment in Madrid, to the Occupy Movement against corporate greed and political corruption, to the emergence of Pirate Parties in defence of individual freedom (especially on the internet) in Sweden and Germany.

This article examines young people's politics in Europe. In light of increasing disillusionment with politicians and parties and the rise of youth-led movements demanding political and economic change, it concentrates on voter turnout and political protest. Whilst there are many other important forms of political participation, these two types of engagement have a particular relevance for young people's politics in Europe today.

The Rise of Protest

For decades, citizens have been turning away from participation in mainstream

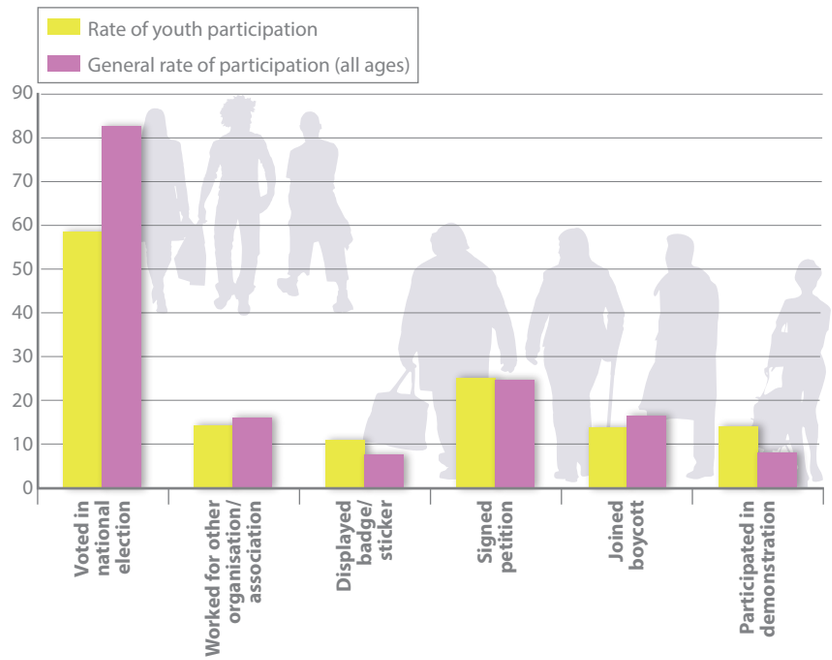

FIGURE 1 **Political Participation of Young People (15–24 year olds) in Europe (EU15)**
Source: European Social Survey, 2000-2008

electoral politics and towards alternative forms of political engagement that have greater meaning for their everyday lives. Voter turnout in European parliamentary elections has declined from its 1960s high-point of 88 per cent to less than 76 per cent in the last decade.[1] In this context, youth turnout has reached a low-point. According to the European Social Survey (ESS), 59 per cent of 18–24 year olds turned out in national elections in the EU15 in the 2000s compared to 82 per cent for the population as a whole. What is more, political party membership has declined by more than a third in eight of the EU15 countries since the 1980s. Of those young people who do vote, many have rejected mainstream politics and turned to alternative political parties that focus on single issues (such as the Pirate Parties), present a populist message (for example, Beppe Grillos's Five Star Movement in Italy), or adopt an extreme position (for example, against immigrants). Germany is a good example of a country where voter turnout (and youth turnout) remains relatively high, but where support for the two main parties (Christian Democrats and Social Democrats) has declined – from a combined score of 91 per cent in the 1972 federal elections to only 57 per cent in 2009.

Although voting remains the most common form of political participation for young people, their repertoires of political engagement have become more diverse: from consumer politics, to community campaigns, to international networks; from the ballot box, to the street, to the internet; from political parties, to social movements and issue groups, to social networks. This is reflected by the relative popularity of political organisations and associations other than political parties, which are well adapted to young people's *lifestyle politics*. These organisations are often issue oriented and frequently provide arenas for social interaction with friends and peers. Over 15 per cent of young Europeans engage with these types of groups (similar to levels of participation for all ages).

The rise of protest politics is also a long-term trend. Since the 1960s, the joining of boycotts has more than doubled, participation in demonstrations has grown by over 40 per cent, and the signing of petitions has increased by more than a quarter. Participation in these political activities increased significantly in all EU15 countries during this period. Young Europeans are particularly active (relative to the population as a whole) in overt forms of protest, such as displaying a badge or sticker and participating in demonstrations.

The current wave of youth protests against the policies and practices of political and economic elites is facilitated by the rise of the internet and social media (including Twitter and Facebook), which support young people's preference for non-hierarchical, non-institutionalised forms of political engagement: in one instance, the 12 March Movement in Portugal began with a group of young people writing a blog and organising a Facebook event and quickly led to demonstrations by hundreds of thousands of Portuguese citizens in Lisbon, Porto and other major cities around the country.

The Diversity of Political Engagement

Nevertheless, there is a great deal of diversity in young people's political engagement across Europe. Within the EU15, countries can be clustered into different groups. Sweden leads the three Nordic democracies, which all boast high levels of youth participation both in voting and protest politics. For these countries, only participation in demonstrations is low (which may be a consequence of their success in other forms of engagement). Germany is representative of a group of central European states that coalesce around the average for voting and protest politics. Youth participation in Greece is similar to other Mediterranean democracies – here, rates of voter turnout meet the European average, but engagement in protest politics is uncommon (with the slight exception of demonstrations). Finally, participation rates in the UK and Ireland are worryingly low across the board apart from highly individualised act of signing a petition.

Press Association

Young Europeans are particularly active in overt forms of protest, such as demonstrations

Although the ESS survey data is not recent enough to record the explosion of political protest across Europe in 2011, and too limited in scope to include the wide spectrum of political activities performed by today's young Europeans, it does at least highlight the diversity of youth participation in Europe. In general, youth participation follows national trends. For instance, the EU15 countries with the eight highest turnout levels were also in the top eight for

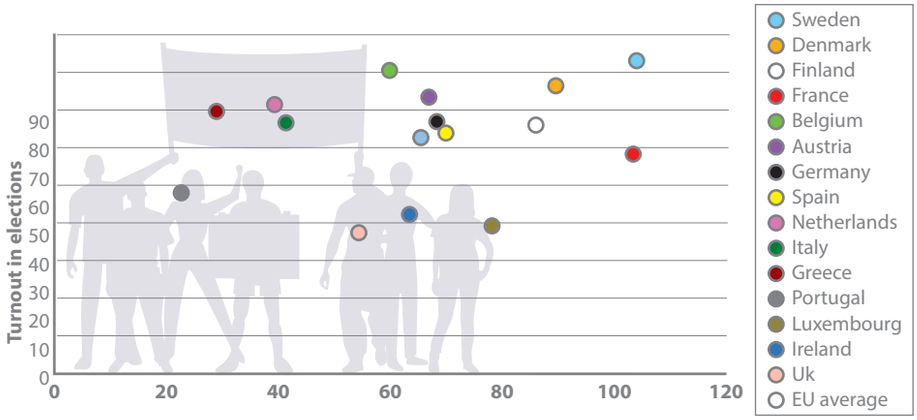

FIGURE 2 The Participation of Young People in EU15 Countries in Voting (18–24 year olds) and Protest Politics (15–24 year olds)

Source: European Social Survey, 2000-2008

[1]Turnout figures calculated from data available on the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance website.

There are reasons for optimism with regard to young people's politics. In many European countries, youth turnout in national elections remains high. At the same time, alternative forms of participation have increased, too. Young Europeans exhibit strong social values and tend to be more tolerant of other groups in society than previous generations. Sweden is a prime example of a country where youth participation in politics is both vibrant and diverse.

However, the marginalisation of young people from mainstream electoral politics and by public policy (which is biased in favour of older generations) runs the risk of alienating young Europeans from the democratic process. This is particularly the case in countries with high proportions of NEETs, low social mobility and large socio-economic inequalities. In the United Kingdom the intergenerational rupture in political participation is at its widest. Young people participate at only 60 per cent of the rate of the general population (compared to a European average of 86 per cent).

Although the global financial crisis and European sovereign debt crises have indirectly led to the politicisation of young Europeans, this politicisation runs the risk of deteriorating into disillusionment or extremism unless more bridges can be built between political protest and democratic governance.

youth turnout. The dominance of national civic cultures also leads to large variations in youth participation. In a number of countries signing a petition was relatively common (45 per cent in Sweden, 38 per cent in the UK), but taking part in a demonstration was not (six per cent in Sweden, four per cent in the UK). The reverse was true in Spain and Italy. And, in most countries where youth participation rates were low – such as Greece and Portugal – this tended to reflect lows levels of participation for all ages.

The UK was the major exception. Young Britons participate at a disturbingly low rate across eight acts of political engagement – at 60 per cent of the rate for the overall population compared to an EU average of 86 per cent. This is not to say that young people in Britain do not have strong civic values – in fact, British youngsters have relatively high levels of engagement in charitable work and volunteering – but that there is a clear intergenerational rupture when it comes to several important forms of political engagement.

Dark Side of Political Engagement

It is tempting to conclude, as a number of academics have done in the past, that we should be optimistic about the evolution of political participation – that we should hail a 'democratic phoenix': the rebirth of political activism in new forms. Indeed, this argument holds up to scrutiny in several European countries – the best example being Sweden – where rates of voter turnout remain high and engagement in non-electoral forms of participation has increased. However, there is a dark side to recent changes in political participation – both in the nature of participation and in who participates – which has come more sharply into focus in the aftermath of the global financial crisis and with the onset of austerity politics in Europe.

The first point is that non-electoral forms of engagement bring with them inequalities of participation. Turnout in national elections does not vary much between social class (household income) and individuals' levels of educational attainment. However, alternative forms of participation – including displaying a badge and sticker, signing a petition, joining a boycott and participating in demonstrations – are much less socially equal. Citizens with a college degree are two to four times more likely to participate in these forms of politics than those who left school without a formal qualification. So, if young people across Europe have become more involved in protest politics over the past few years, they tend to be representative of a (thwarted) aspirational group of young people. We should also consider those who do not protest – who may well be socially excluded and have no voice.

A second and related issue is that young people who do vote or join political parties have been turning to new political parties. This may not in itself be a bad thing. It is perfectly natural that young Europeans are becoming increasingly involved in issue-oriented political movements. However, many of today's emerging political parties are populist (the Five Star Movement in Italy), nationalist (the True Finns in Finland) or extremist with an anti-immigrant or even anti-Islamic rhetoric (Geert Wilders in the Netherlands). These parties often recruit well amongst young people of low socio-economic status by at least pretending to listen to their concerns. This goes some way to explaining the success of French National Front leader Marine Le Pen, who gained 20 per cent of the vote amongst 18–24 year olds in the first round of the 2012 French presidential election. It also accounts for the appeal of parties like Golden Dawn in Greece, who prey on the current crisis among youth (e.g. lack of jobs, perceived threats to national identity) to win support amongst socially excluded groups.

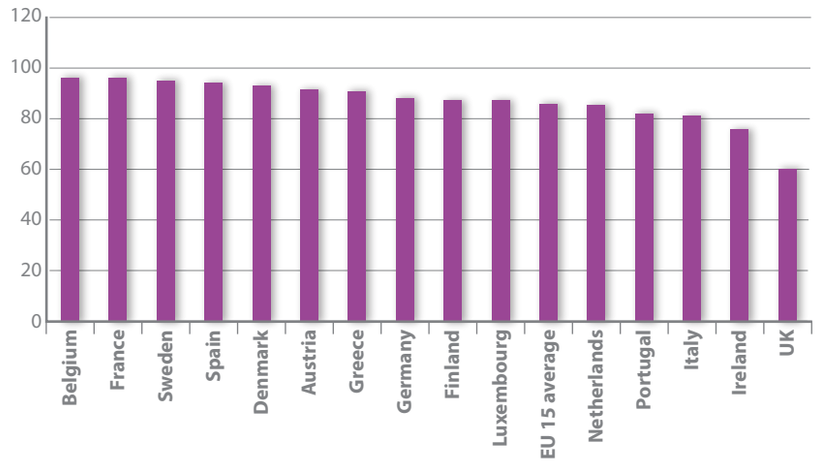

FIGURE 3 Youth participation (15–24 year olds) in politics* as a proportion of overall participation (all ages) across EU15 countries

*Eight political acts: voting in national election, working for party /action group, contacting politician/offiical, working for other organisation/association, displaying badge/sticker, signing petition, joining boycott, participating in demonstration

Voice and Diversity

Young people continue to participate in European politics. Indeed, they are reshaping the political landscape. Voting remains the most common form of political action, but young people's politics has become diverse. Today's young people prefer short-term, issue-based, project-focused forms of

Today's young people prefer short-term, issue-based forms of participation, such as the clear-up operations organised by young Londoners after the 2011 riots. Press Association

participation – such as the organisation on Facebook of clear-up operations by young Londoners after the 2011 riots – to long-term involvement in traditional, hierarchical organisations like political parties.

In many ways, these changes can be seen as positive developments – engaged young people getting involved with real issues and making a difference. However, in some EU15 countries (in particular, the UK, Ireland, Luxembourg and Portugal) the growing disconnection of young people from electoral politics is dangerous. It damages the interests of young people, and leads to public policy that further marginalises them from the political process. The ageing of European populations means that 18–24 year olds are already a shrinking proportion of the electorate. If only a small proportion of young people vote, politicians will pay little heed to their interests, leading to further disillusionment – and the vicious circle will continue.

All countries have their own traditions of political participation, which strongly influence the younger generation. However, in the UK (and, to a lesser extent, Ireland and Italy) youth participation as a proportion of the overall population is disappointingly low. It is probably no coincidence that, in these countries, there is a toxic mixture of high numbers of NEETs, low social mobility and large socio-economic inequalities.

In the UK, youth participation as a proportion of the overall population is disappointingly low

Young people continue to engage in politics, but their engagement must serve a purpose. Many political parties disproportionately supported by young people remain on the margins (though in the case of populist and nationalist parties we might see this as a good thing), and mainstream parties have thus far failed or not even tried to prioritise youth issues (for example, the emphasis on monetary stability over growth and unemployment). Furthermore, recent youth protest movements have often failed to influence public policy. In countries where young people have suffered most over the past few years – in particular, Greece, Spain and Portugal, but also Italy, Ireland and the UK – protest politics has probably reached its limits and runs the risk of spilling over into extremist politics and even violence. Even within the straitjacket of financial austerity, a concerted effort by politicians to spread the burden more fairly across generations would be a good start.

Selected References

Sloam, J. (2012) 'New voice, less equal: the civic and political engagement of young people in the United States and Europe', *Comparative Political Studies.*

Van Biezen, I., Mair, P. and Poguntke, T. (2012) 'Going, going, … gone? The decline of party membership in contemporary Europe', *European Journal of Political Research* 51, 24–56.

James Sloam is senior lecturer in politics at Royal Holloway, University of London. His recent research on young people's politics has been published in *West European Politics* (2013), *Comparative Political Studies* (2012) and *Parliamentary Affairs* (2012).