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POLICY STUDY
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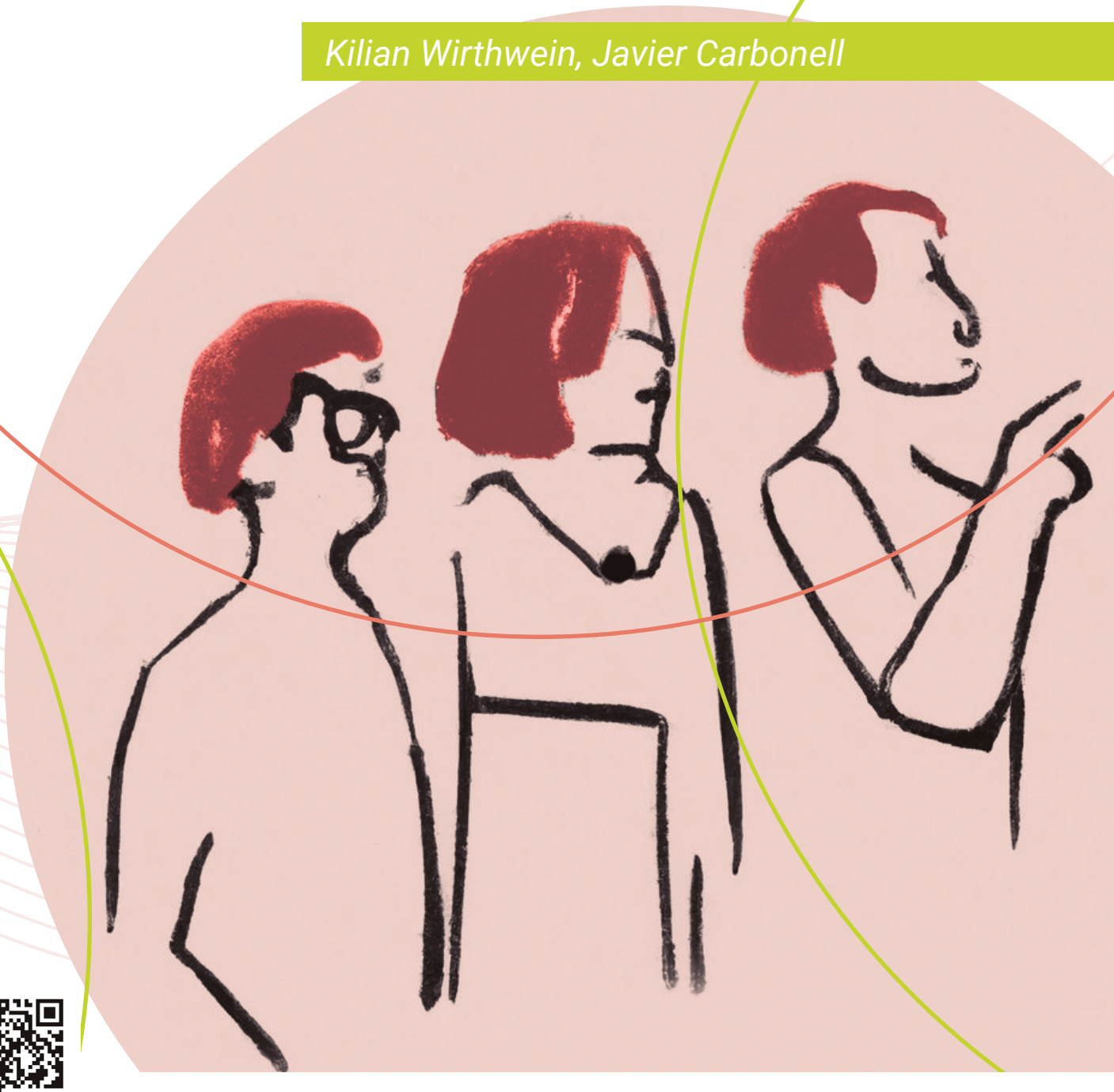
YOUTH SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY IN SPAIN

DEMOCRACY IN THE FACE OF DISADVANTAGE

Kilian Wirthwein, Javier Carbonell



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Builders of Progress

Builders of Progress is a FEPS-led series of research outputs that explore the key concerns and aspirations of young Europeans. It examines their opinions on a wide range of social issues, including (in)equality, climate change, political participation and the European Union. In the tradition of FEPS's previous Millenial Dialogue project, a major study is published every four years in which European youth are surveyed across many European countries. You can find the 2022 Builders of Progress survey here: https://feps-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Builders-of-Progress-Europes-Next-Gen.pdf.

Between these major outputs, we address important aspects highlighted in the surveys that deserve more attention and a more nuanced, often qualitative, analysis. This present publication is part of such a deep dive, investigating the relationship of disadvantaged young people with democracy in five countries, namely, Ireland, Hungary, France, Poland and Spain.

The research findings of the Builders of Progress series stimulate debate and provide sound advice on how to shape a progressive future with and for young people.

More information on Builders of Progress can be found here: https://feps-europe.eu/theme/youth-participation/.

BUILDERS OF PROGRESS
EUROPE'S NEXTGEN

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The younger generation, hit by events like the 2008 Great Recession and the global pandemic, has harboured lasting shifts in their political outlook. Most studies that explore the political attitudes, participation and satisfaction with democracy of the youth yield inconclusive or conflicting results because they rely heavily on surveys and macrolevel polls. Notably absent are economic discussions on vulnerability and disadvantage, for which additional methods like focus groups and expert interviews are necessary. In this policy study, we (A) delve into the perspectives of young individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, probing their satisfaction with democracy and proclivity for active engagement in political institutions; and (B) uncover causal mechanisms, drivers and the underlying logic behind observed trends. To carry out this research, this policy study (1) provides a review of key studies on the youth's attitudes towards politics and democracy; (2) analyses four focus groups conducted in various Spanish municipalities (including carefully selected groups in both urban and rural areas); and (3) includes insights from 12 expert interviews with young leaders from major political parties, experts in youth inequality, prominent youth organisation representatives and members of parliament (MPs).

Main findings: Are disadvantaged youth disconnected from democracy in Spain?

The first major finding is that, for Spanish youth, especially disadvantaged youth, there seems to be a large gap between interest in politics and actual participation. While we find that young people in Spain are frequently highly interested in politics, their opinion of the functioning of the political system is deeply critical and levels of distrust in political institutions and parties are very high. Despite high general interest in politics, direct and regular participation in the activities that are critical to the functioning of democratic institutions, such as membership of political parties or participation in civil society associations, appears to be very low.

The second major finding is that, despite alarmist narratives, there is broad support for democratic principles and values among all participants. The minority of youngsters who expressed harsher criticism of the democratic system did not do it because they saw other systems as better than democracy, but because their distrust was so high that they did not believe that the system they were living under could be characterised as a real democracy. In this environment, the most serious threat is that this minority buys into actors who promote autocratic tendencies in the name of democracy. In other words, autocratic parties and leaders may construct a narrative of alternative forms of democracy, when, in fact, the real aim is to act against democracy. While this is obviously a worrying problem, the universal acceptance of democratic values also implies that (disadvantaged) youngsters can be reengaged in democracy if appropriate and timely opportunities are provided.

The third finding of this study is that it does not seem to be the case that young people are less interested in politics than in the past, but rather there are greater socioeconomic obstacles to having an incentive to get actively involved in politics (including in traditional party politics) compared to older generations. In this respect, five key possible reasons for this gap between interest in politics and lack of participation were identified:

1. The increased lack of resources (time, coverage of basic needs, energy) was identified by several participants in the focus groups across very distinct territories. This leads to a situation where especially those living under the pressure of economic hardship decide not to actively

participate in politics and democratic institutions such as parties.

2. There seems to be increased stigma and negative social consequences resulting from being identified with a political party, which can lead to tensions in the family, neighbourhood or, in the most extreme case, active discrimination in the workplace. This situation indicates that the tolerance for political differences has been eroded over the last years.
3. Political parties are no longer seen as preferred places for deep socialisation. While for older generations political parties were places to make social and friendship connections with like-minded individuals (especially in small villages), most young people nowadays prefer other spaces of socialisation.
4. Language barriers and lack of relatable language used by public institutions, in legal texts and for political communication were identified by young people as being fundamental reasons for their disenchantment with the functioning of democratic institutions. Young people and experts concluded that democratic institutions lagged severely behind in constructing effective digital communication, for instance.
5. The loss of trust that young people had in media outlets and the capacity of modern media outlets to produce or, at least aspire to produce, objective and non-politicised content was a major source of concern by young people. There was a clear impression that the young people participating in the focus groups had high levels of distrust in the media.

Policy recommendations

The structural nature of these root causes means they cannot be solved through the implementation of a few policies, but a fundamental rethinking of the place of young people in politics and a long-term transformation are needed. The overarching paradigm shift is from youth policies to a youth perspective, which, in line with the youth-mainstreaming approach, implies that all public policies need to take into consideration how they will affect young people. In this regard, we propose two priority proposals based on the ideas that the lack of attention to youth issues and lack of resources of young people (particularly the disadvantaged) are the main hindrances to their political engagement:

1) To pass a **youth law in Spain** that formalises the youth test and the adoption of a youth perspective for all laws and government policies. At a bare minimum, this law should include a youth impact assessment as part of the general state budget (PGE), in the same way as there is a gender impact assessment.
2) A significant increase in **support for youth organisations** in Spain, both financial and administratively, as many have seen their budgets cut by more than two thirds in the last decade. Youth organisations are the main vehicles that enable young people to participate in politics, particularly those from a disadvantaged background.

In addition to these priority proposals, we propose a series of recommendations to improve the ability of young people to participate in politics, to improve their dire economic situation and to help parties and civil society organisations attract young members. We also add policies that have been discussed in the literature but do not seem to work.

Political and administrative reforms

- Reduce legal jargon and improve bureaucratic procedures that hinder youth engagement with the administration.
- Introduce an automatic voting registry for migrants who have the right to vote.
- Lower the voting age to 16.
- Mainstream the need for gender-inclusive language.
- Create a “unified citizen’s folder”.

Economic policies

- **Address the housing market crisis**, which constitutes the biggest financial challenge faced by young people to enable them to become economically independent, create a family and establish a life. This can be done through **rent control** and **expanding social housing**.
- **Labour market reform.** The Spanish labour market hinders the youth's ability to find resources, such as time, money and energy, to engage in political activities, given that it offers low-paid and precarious jobs. Thus, it is necessary to **reduce temporary work**, **ban unpaid internships** and **reduce working hours**.
- **Reduce inequality.** Social inequality, particularly inequality between age groups, has been increasing in Spain and is one of the most relevant factors to explain youth dissatisfaction with democracy. We must reduce inequality through **implementing measures to promote the hiring of young people at risk of exclusion** and **establish a universal inheritance**.

Recommendations for political parties and civil society organisations

- **Improve spaces for deep socialisation with parties.** Deep socialisation and its improvement of social capital not only has positive effects on political participation, but it would also help youth at risk of social exclusion to overcome their economic limitations.
- **Topic-based political engagement activities.** Parties should invite youth and citizens to participate through the organisation of sectorial and topic-based activities instead of general ideological actions.

Overall, we find that, despite the profound political trust crisis, the Spanish youth is hungry for deeper democratic participation and that addressing their problems through decisive public policies would engage them in the political system.

Context of this policy study

This study focusses on the case of Spain. To be able to compare trends across the EU and to increase the generalisability of the trends identified from the cross-border literature review, the findings from the Spanish case will also be incorporated into a more comprehensive comparative study that features insights from parallel studies on the same topic in other EU countries. This comparative study examines the complex dynamics between socioeconomic disadvantage and political engagement among young people in Ireland, Poland and Spain, with an extended focus on France and Hungary to test the robustness of the findings. The study utilises the insights from over 100 young people from 15 focus groups and 50 expert interviews to uncover young Europeans' views on the benefits, limitations and relevance of political participation in their lives. It shows an increasing move away from traditional politics, which contrasts with a rise in protest-based activism and support for non-traditional political actors. The research is based on a qualitative methodology, with participants selected to represent a diverse demographic, ensuring a rich range of experiences. The interviews, which were analysed for recurring themes, provide detailed insights into how disadvantaged young people perceive and engage with democracy. The findings are likely to challenge existing narratives and highlight the nuanced realities that influence democratic disengagement. The aim is to provide policy recommendations to bridge the growing gap between young citizens and the political apparatus and to promote a future with more inclusive and engaged democratic participation.

1. INTRODUCTION

1. INTRODUCTION

Young people across Spain are concerned about their present and future. Across the country, debates conclude that, over the past decade, there have been serious deficiencies in how institutions have responded to the economic hardship facing young people, especially considering the constant global crises. Yet, most young people participating in this study remain convinced that democracy is the best institutional option one can think of. At the same time, they admit that they increasingly decide not to actively participate in politics nor join political parties for fear of social stigma. This study examines a complex discussion of youth support for democracy in Spain, the reasons for distrust and why young people – especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds – seem to be less inclined to actively engage with political parties.

In the context of a worldwide "polycrisis"[1], Spain is amongst the countries where the economic consequences of the Great Recession of 2008, the global pandemic and inflation that has followed the Russian invasion of Ukraine have led to tremendous economic adversity. Spain has also seen the complete alteration of its party-political landscape, where the two traditionally dominant parties – the social democratic PSOE and the conservative People's Party (*Partido Popular,* PP*)* – have increasingly found it hard to form stable governments due to a fragmented parliament. Large social movements, such as the *Indignados* movement, eventually translated into the formation of new parties. In this context, young people nowadays are confronted with complicated economic perspectives and a highly polarised political environment.

In this situation of perpetual crisis, the radical right-wing party Vox has gained importance and become the preferred coalition partner of the Spanish conservatives. Following regional and municipal elections held on 28 May 2023, the conservative PP shifted its stance on forming coalition governments with the extreme-right Vox. The party entered into various agreements to assume control of several Spanish regions, including Valencia, Extremadura and Aragón, as well as securing leadership of numerous municipalities across the country. In the general elections held on 23 July 2023, PP and Vox signalled that they would replicate the regional deals at the national level, with the intention of ending the left-wing coalition that has sustained the Sánchez government. However, Spain resisted the option of a conservative coalition with the extreme right, as the PP and Vox parties did not secure sufficient seats to form an absolute majority in the Spanish parliament, mainly because of a decline in seats held by Vox compared to the general election of 2019.

In this polarised and fragmented political environment, it is of great importance to monitor the political attitudes of young people and determine the resilience of their support for democracy. Furthermore, given the significant consequences of the abovementioned economic crises for individual households, it is important to reassess how economic vulnerability might impact the attitudes of young people, in terms of the trust they have in the country's democratic institutions. It is of critical importance to monitor how vulnerability and a disadvantaged situation might transform into antidemocratic sentiments or a complete withdrawal from politics. Therefore, the potential link between economic vulnerability of the youth and possible erosion in the support of democratic values is investigated in this policy study.

In our research, we (A) delve into the perspectives of young individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, probing their satisfaction with democracy and proclivity for active engagement in political institutions; and (B) uncover causal mechanisms, drivers and the underlying logic behind observed

trends. This policy study (1) provides a review of key studies on young attitudes towards politics and democracy; (2) is based on four focus groups conducted in various Spanish municipalities (including carefully selected groups in both urban and rural areas); (3) involves 12 expert interviews with young leaders from major political parties, experts in youth inequality, prominent youth organisation representatives and Members of Parliament (MPs) and (4) proposes several policy recommendations to help bolster the civic engagement of disadvantaged youth in Spain.

Methodology box

Overall, this study employed a very inductive approach, since one of the key objectives was to identify new trends and produce insights not covered previously in other studies. In the first step, four focus groups with young people from urban and rural areas were conducted to gain a broad picture of the current debates that are likely to resonate with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The selection was carried out for areas and neighbourhoods with high levels of economic vulnerability and focused on young people (up to 29 years old) from disadvantaged backgrounds. Criteria included a maximum of high school education, long-term unemployment or overqualification (see Annex).

In the second step, expert interviews were carried out with political party representatives, academics and representatives from civil society organisations that work with disadvantaged young people or are involved in the design of policies and legislation affecting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Interviews included those with national, high-level profiles in Spain and local representatives, with increased exposure through their more direct and practical work as members of local civic organisations. Therefore, a balance between the macrolevel and microlevel of analysis was a continuous endeavour of this study.

In the third step, inductive insights from the focus groups and interviews, in combination with previous insights found in the literature, were used to determine what young people, especially those at risk of social exclusion, currently think about the functioning of democratic institutions in Spain.

Focus groups

Focus group	Main criteria for selection: young people (up to 29 years old) from disadvantaged backgrounds. Key criteria for the selection of participants included: • Maximum education level: high school. Alternatively, those with further education, but long-term unemployed or in situations of overqualification. • Participants were selected from areas and neighbourhoods with important levels of economic vulnerability and the presence of minority groups. • To mitigate geographic and ideological biases, the groups were organised in areas with a different political contexts, in terms of whether the neighbourhood is traditionally right or left leaning. Young people with a background of migration or self-identification with a minority group were also invited to different focus groups. There was also a priority to include a gender perspective with a focus on women's rights (over 50% of the participants were female). The individuals were from diverse professional backgrounds, several were unemployed or overqualified. Anonymity was agreed for the participants of the three focus groups. Each focus group lasted approximately 60 minutes and consisted of 7-10 participants per group.

Expert interviews

We conducted 12 interviews with experts from national and regional political parties (including national and regional MPs), leaders of the youth branches of political parties, other youth representatives, academics and relevant representatives from local NGOs. Interviews were carried out both online and in person and generally lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. The interviews took place between May and September 2023, periods which coincided with local and national elections in Spain.

2. DISADVANTAGED YOUTH: PREVIOUS STUDIES ON DEMOCRATIC SUPPORT IN SPAIN

2. DISADVANTAGED YOUTH: PREVIOUS STUDIES ON DEMOCRATIC SUPPORT IN SPAIN

Support for democracy involves many different aspects. We first review the literature on youth satisfaction and support for democracy and on the participation of young people in politics. To understand both, we must go beyond the exclusive focus on these two elements and into the wider processes of political participation by young people in the aftermath of the Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Disadvantaged youth" is a contested concept. For the purposes of this study, young people refers to those aged 18-29. The term disadvantaged is defined as people who have not attended university, are in a situation of overqualification or are long-term unemployed. Furthermore, to account for disadvantage, participants in our focus groups were selected from neighbourhoods with important levels of economic vulnerability, high levels of immigration and the presence of minorities.

Notably, Spain is one of the countries in the EU with the highest levels of overqualification (42% of young people). While the numbers of university students are relatively high, an important share of them – especially those who do not enjoy a strong network and socioeconomic privilege – do not end up working (28% youth unemployment). Furthermore, youth unemployment and the inability to gain economic independence speaks of a situation where the majority of young people could fall into the "disadvantaged" group if compared internationally. Therefore, the literature review starts with a more general outlook of the adversities that young people currently face in Spain and their attitudes concerning political interest and democratic values. Through the use of focus groups, this study looks at the political attitudes of those who are economically more vulnerable than the average young citizen, according to the criteria set above. This sequence helps to distinguish general trends for Spanish youth from trends that are particularly pronounced amongst the disadvantaged.

2.1 Democracy and young people: Satisfaction and support

The literature on satisfaction with democracy is vast and continues to be debated[2]. A report by the Centre for the Future of Democracy of the University of Cambridge noted that, globally, satisfaction with democracy reached its peak in 2005 and has declined ever since.[3] Scholars agree that measures of satisfaction with democracy address overall satisfaction with the political system, that is, satisfaction with the way democracy is *functioning* rather than an evaluation of the democratic regime itself (compared with a preference for an authoritarian regime).[4] Thus, satisfaction with democracy is highly dependent on contextual variables, such as satisfaction with the economy, procedural fairness,[5] economic perceptions,[6] voting for a winning or losing party,[7] or perceived representation.[8] Given the very harsh economic and political crisis that Spain has suffered,[9] it is not surprising to see that Spain is below the European average in satisfaction with democracy (Figure 1).[10] This fact is important because the negative view of politics and high levels of dissatisfaction are widely shared across all sectors of Spanish society.

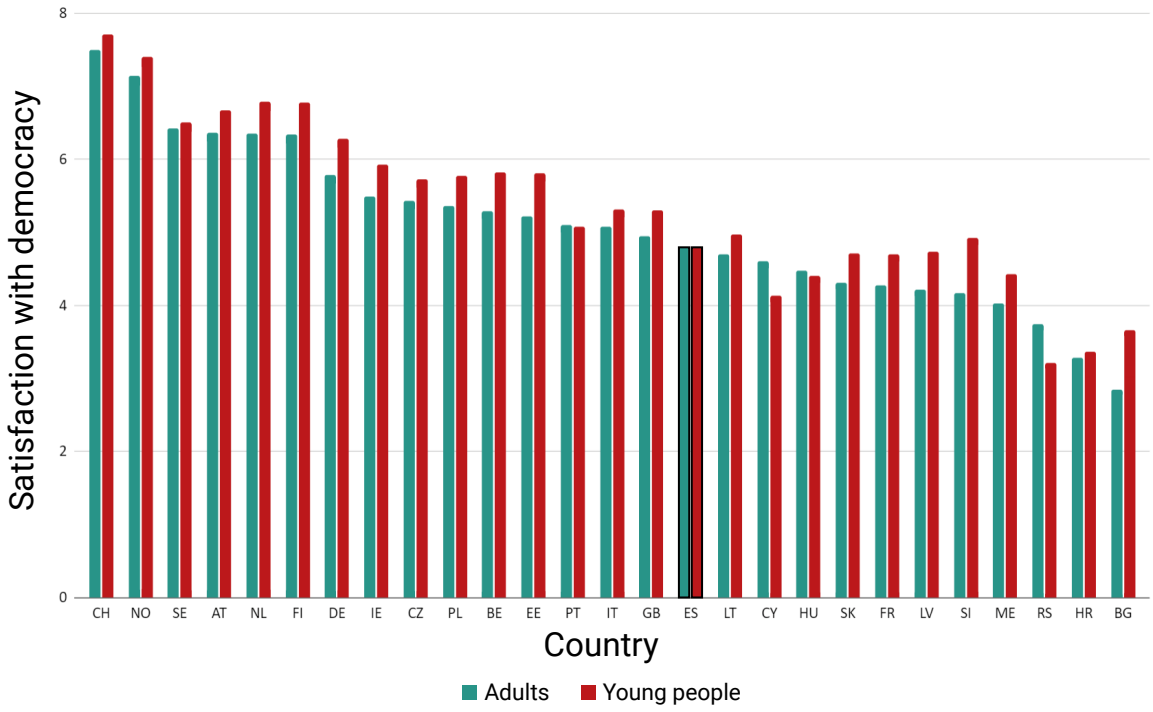
Nevertheless, we find contradictory evidence concerning the distribution between ages. Foa and Mounk[11] defended the existence of a "deconsolidation

process", by which people's support for democracy waned, particularly among young people, which challenged the continuity of the democratic regime. While the existence of a political crisis is widely acknowledged, the ideas that it constitutes a threat to democracy as a regime or that young people are disengaged have been extensively criticised,[12] and evidence seems to point to a deconsolidation only in a very limited number of contexts.[13] Other measures, such as political trust, also show signs of recovery but not among socioeconomically disadvantaged people.[14] Thus, the jury is still out on how threatened democracy is and how young people view it.

Simón et al.,[15] based on European Social Survey (ESS) data, found that there was no difference between young people and adults when reporting satisfaction levels with democracy (Figure 1). However, Cordero and Roch found that support for democracy increased with age, and that young people aged 18-35 were most prone to think that democracy was not always the preferable system (Figure 2).[16] Foa et al.[17] also found that, throughout the world, the Spanish Millennial generation was the age group that most experienced a decrease in satisfaction with democracy compared to the previous generation (Generation X).

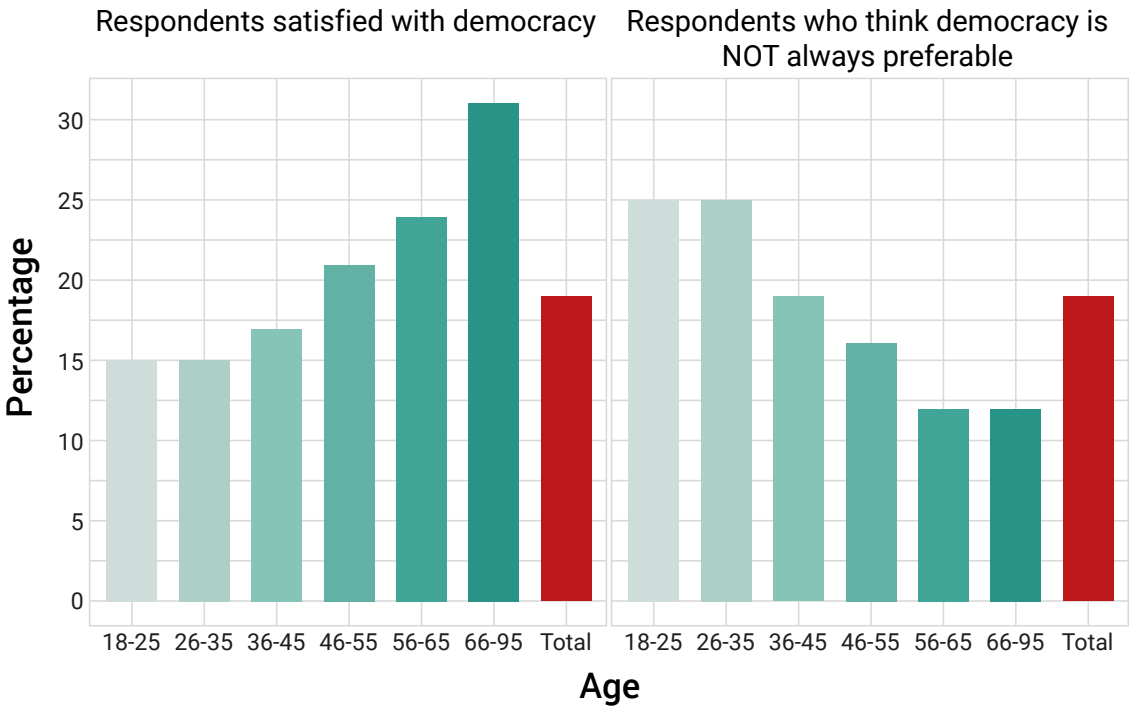
This contradictory evidence indicates that satisfaction with democracy is not an ideal measure to capture the relationship between youth and politics. We must look at the functioning of concrete political institutions, given that most scholars agree that satisfaction with democracy is highly dependent on an overall assessment of the state of politics and economics of a country.[18] Thus, given the narrative that Spain was particularly harshly hit by the 2008 economic crisis and that this was followed by a major political crisis,[19] it seems necessary to look in more detail at the consequences of these crises on the youth. These might be more indirect, but ultimately more informative, pathways to understand the relationship between young people and democracy.

Figure 1. Satisfaction with democracy among adults and young people in Europe in 2018.



Source: Own elaboration based on data from ESS and Simón et al.[20]

Figure 2. Percentage of respondents satisfied with democracy and those who think that democracy is *not* always preferable in Spain.



Source: Own elaboration based on data from Cordero and Roch.[21]

2.2 Disadvantaged youth

The literature on the relationship between democracy and disadvantaged youth in Spain is scarce for several reasons. Firstly, most studies are quantitative and these groups of people, particularly those in extreme poverty, tend to be underrepresented in surveys and experiments. Secondly, while socioeconomic measures are included in nearly all studies on youth participation, these studies do not focus on disadvantaged youth. In all of these studies, we can observe that a lower socioeconomic status is correlated with a lack of political interest, participation and overall satisfaction with democracy.[22] Therefore, we see the political participation of young people at risk of social exclusion as a product of their economic situation.

Thirdly, the focus on economic status becomes very relevant when explaining not only disadvantaged youth's relationship with politics in Spain but that of all young people. This is because the generations of young people reaching adulthood in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis have experienced a process of "precarisation". As detailed in Section 2.4, the economic situation of the youth has worsened greatly. This means that being young is increasingly correlated with being economically disadvantaged in Spanish society. Thus, most studies address the process of "proletarianisation" of the youth as a whole, rather than the situation of the most economically disadvantaged young people.

Therefore, although our focus is on the democratic engagement of disadvantaged youth, we find it necessary to speak about youth and their problems more generally, as we see working-class and impoverished middle-class youth as suffering from the same vulnerabilities, although to varying degrees. As one of our interviewees explained, "It's not so much that young people at the risk of social

exclusion have changed their attitudes, it is that more and more young people are being thrown into that group who, in the past, were relatively well-off economically" (Pau Mari-Klose). Of course, there remain important differences, which are pointed out throughout the policy study.

2.3 Youth and politics

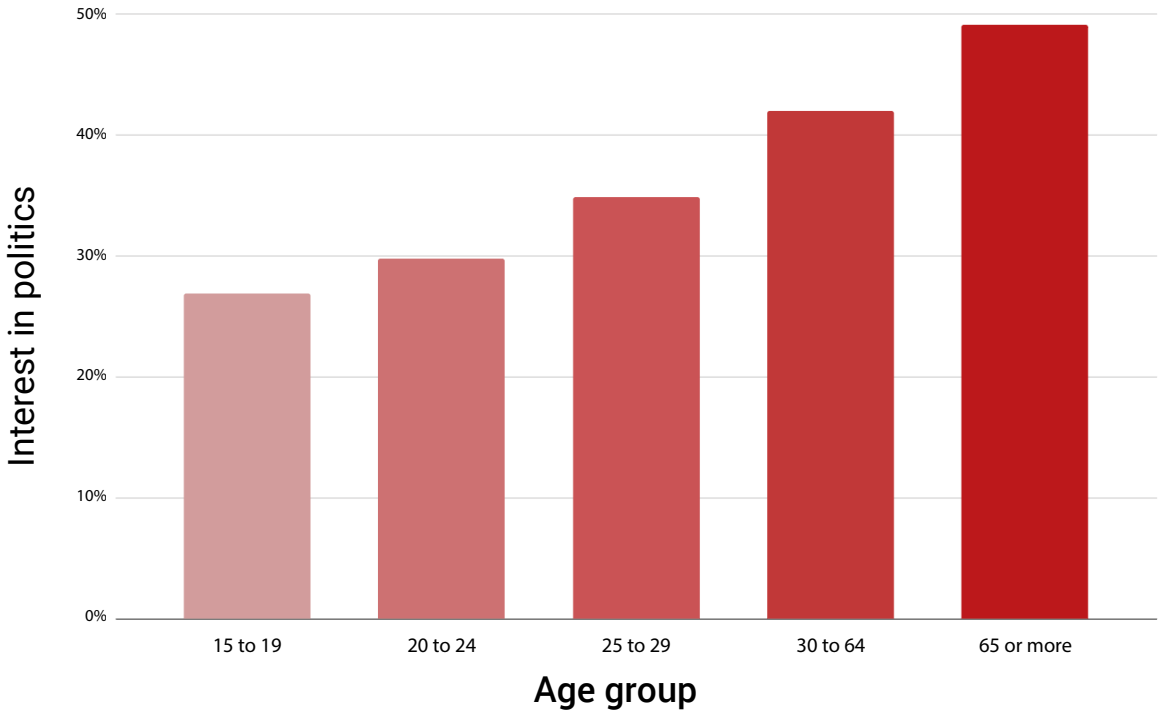
Participation in politics is dependent on many variables that intersect (gender, class, country, etc.). When addressing young people, scholars tend to focus on two variables: the fact that they are young (life-cycle effects); and the specific social circumstances in which they were raised (cohort and country effects).

Regarding the former, it seems to be constant in practically every country and cohort that young people are less interested in politics than older generations.[23] Figure 3 shows the interest in politics displayed by different ages in European countries.[24]

Thus, to a degree, lower levels of participation are inherent to a younger age, because politics implies a learning process that younger people have not yet completed, as well as their lower capacity to participate in politics and understand the social consequences of voting.[25]

However, the particular context (cohort and country effects) in which young people have been raised and enter into adult life is the other crucial element to understand youth participation. It is here that we must look at the economic circumstances of the Spanish youth, their particular type of political participation and the history of Spanish dissatisfaction with democracy. While the country effect of Spain not being a particularly satisfied with democracy is important, it is the cohort effect of the aftermath of the Great Recession that is particularly important for Spanish youth.

Figure 3. Interest in politics by age group in Europe.



Source: Own elaboration based on data from the ESS and Simón et al.[26]

2.4 The economic situation of Spanish youth

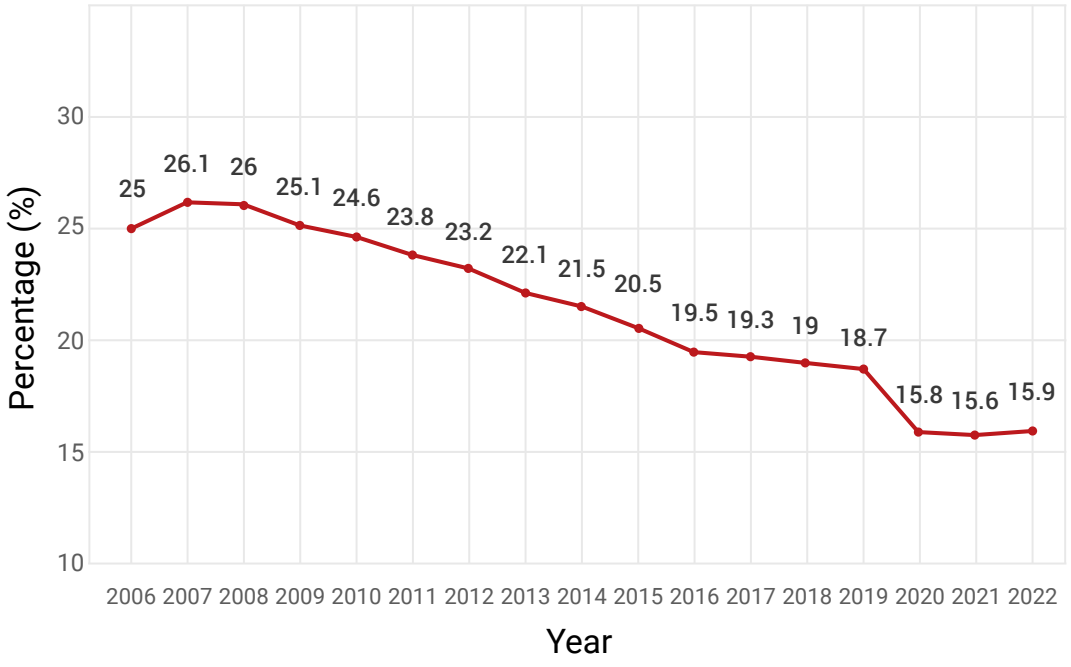
The economic situation of Spanish youth is extremely precarious, particularly when compared to other European countries. Moreover, the economic conditions have worsened in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, thus creating a general process of precarisation of the youth in Spain.[27]

In terms of housing, today, only 16% of young people do not live with their parents, compared to 32% in the EU.[28] More worrisome is that this number has been falling steadily since the beginning of the economic crisis, which provides a very crude idea of the lack of opportunities to construct a life and family that the current youth experiences (Figure 4). Even more dramatic is data regarding the average age of emancipation in Spain. According to the latest report, young people leave home, on average, at 30.3 years of age; in other words, Spanish people leave their parents' home when they are no longer officially considered young.[29]

The main explanations for this phenomenon are to be found in the housing crisis experienced in Spain and its poor labour market. Regarding the former, currently, young people spend, on average, 85% of their salary on rent.[30] An IMF paper set the European average in 2018 at nearly one third of their salary for European youngsters and around 25% for the general population.[31]

Increased house prices in Spain also imply that it is extremely difficult for young people to save enough money to buy a house. The mean price of houses in Spain is about €174,000, while the mean annual salary for young people after tax is only €12,640. This means that young people need to save nearly four years of full salary to be able to pay the deposit for a mortgage.[32] Thus, both renting and buying are increasingly difficult for Spanish youth.

Figure 4. Percentage of young people economically independent of their parents in Spain (aged 16-29).



Source: Own elaboration based on data from CJE.[33]

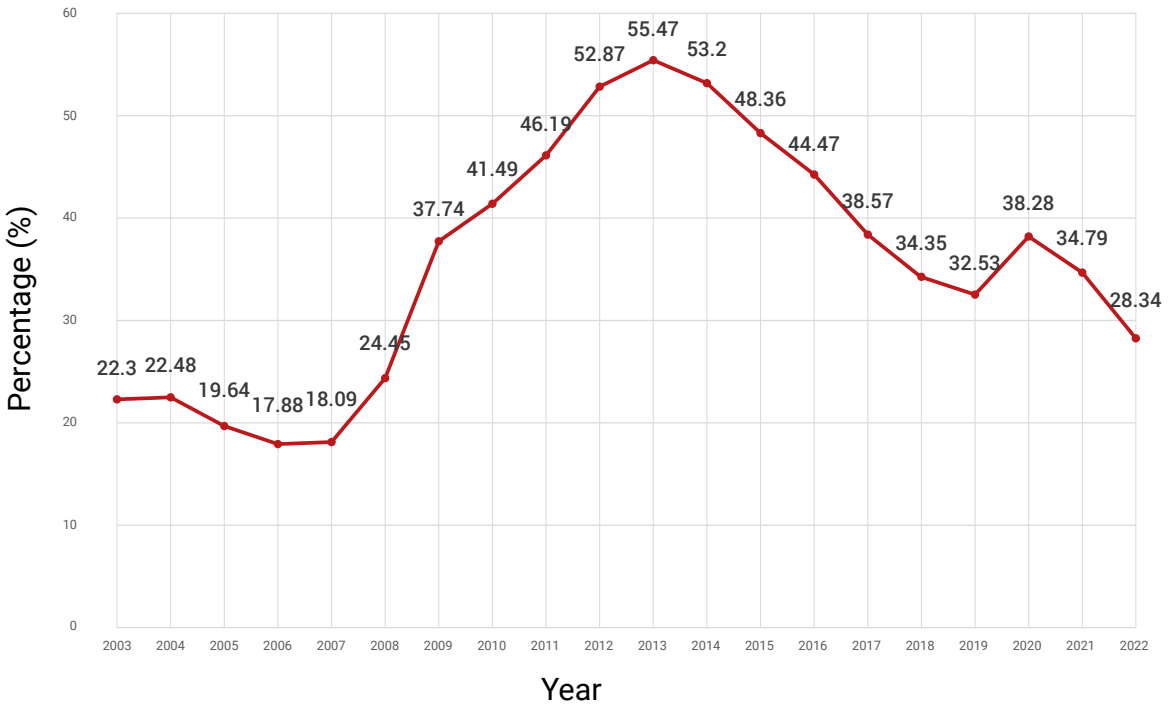
The labour market in Spain has been characterised by a strong duality between insiders (people with indefinite contracts or civil servant positions with strong labour rights protections) and outsiders (workers with short-term, precarious or part-time jobs with few labour rights protections).[34] Young people have always been overrepresented within the outsider group, but this relationship became extremely strong after the Great Recession.[35]

Youth unemployment levels in Spain in 2022 (28%) were double that of the EU average (15%).[36] However, the worst period for youth unemployment came between 2012 and 2014, when more than half of all young people seeking a job could not find one (Figure 5). This coincides with the right-wing PP taking over the government and the implementation of austerity measures that had a particularly harsh effect on young people. Moreover, youth employment is characterised by high levels of precarity, insecurity and low pay.

Another important factor in Spain is overqualification. While the European average is 23.6%,[37] in Spain more than 42% of young people work in occupations for which they are overqualified, that is, they have studied beyond what these jobs demand.[38] This speaks directly to the feelings of frustration and unmet expectations, as the youth in Spain have studied for many years only to find an extremely disappointing job market.

Poverty measures in Spain are also very striking. In 2021, the at-risk-of-poverty rate for young people (aged 15-29) in the EU was 20.1%.[39] In Spain, however, 33.5% of youth were at risk of social exclusion (28%, according to another study[40]) and 23.4% of young workers were poor, which means that working did not raise them above the poverty line.[41] This last number is very relevant because it speaks to the inability of the Spanish labour market to lift people out of poverty.

Figure 5. Youth unemployment rate in Spain from 2003 to 2022.



Source: Own elaboration based on data from the World Bank.[42]

All in all, given that the relationship between economic conditions and satisfaction with democracy is well-established, it is not surprising to find that, in Spain, youth in a highly precarious situation show significant levels of political dissatisfaction.

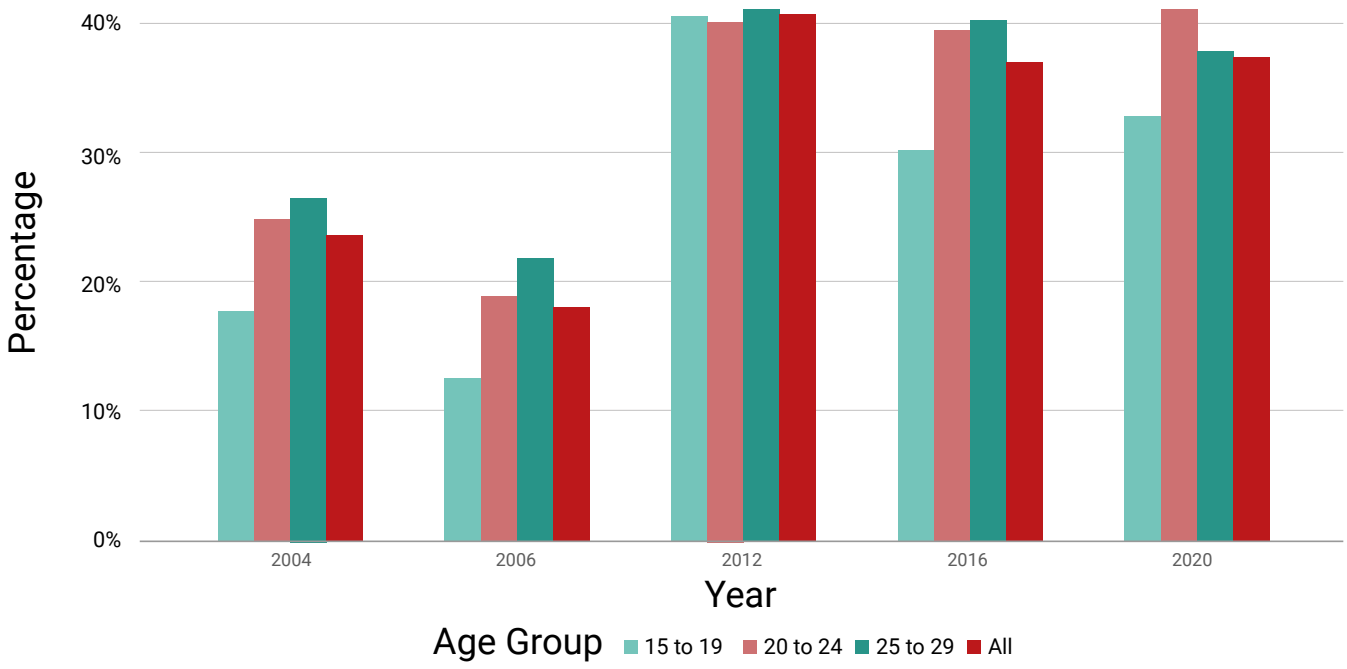
2.5 Interest in politics

The economic crisis sparked a very powerful political crisis in Spain, as young people, driven by the *Indignados* movement, blamed the political class for their economic situation and opposed their austerity measures. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish between interest in politics and the evaluation of politics because, while interest increased enormously during those years, the evaluation of politicians and the political process became extremely negative.[43] At the same time, the emergence of Podemos to the left in 2014, Ciudadanos in the centre in 2015 and the pro-independence movement in Catalonia contributed to a general sentiment of change in Spanish politics. However, repeated elections, the COVID-19 pandemic and the continuation of a sense of constant political and economic crises mean that the levels of dissatisfaction have continued to be high. Does this mean that interest in politics has decayed in recent years? The evidence is not clear on this point.

The main takeaway from the data is that the generation brought up and socialised just before or after the 2008 Great Recession (roughly speaking, Millennials) is deeply interested in politics.[44] As Figure 6 shows, young people in the 2010s showed significantly more interest in politics than previous generations, an interest that seemed to be caused by the economic crisis. Additionally, young generations display similar levels of interest in politics to the rest of their population counterparts (Figure 7).

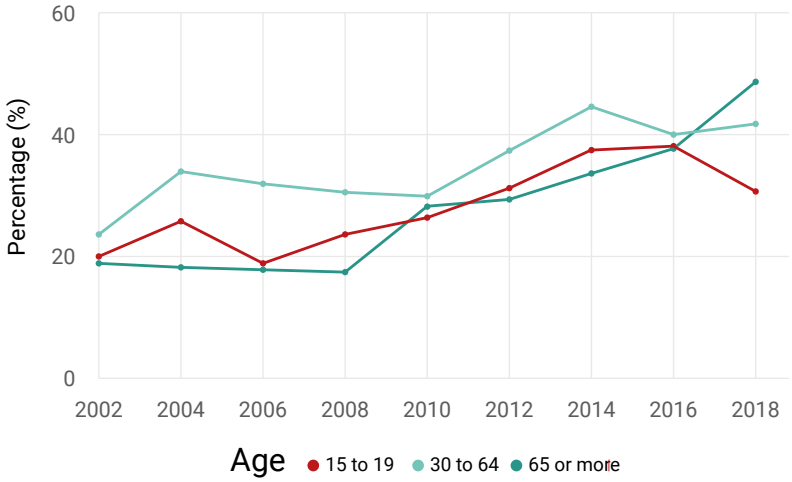
However, while all studies show a significant interest in politics, different publications show contradictory evidence on the issue of how much young people are interested in politics, and if newer generations

Figure 6. Evolution of interest in politics in Spain across different young age cohorts.



Source: Own elaboration based on data from Simón et al.[45]

Figure 7. Evolution of interest in politics in Spain across all age cohorts.

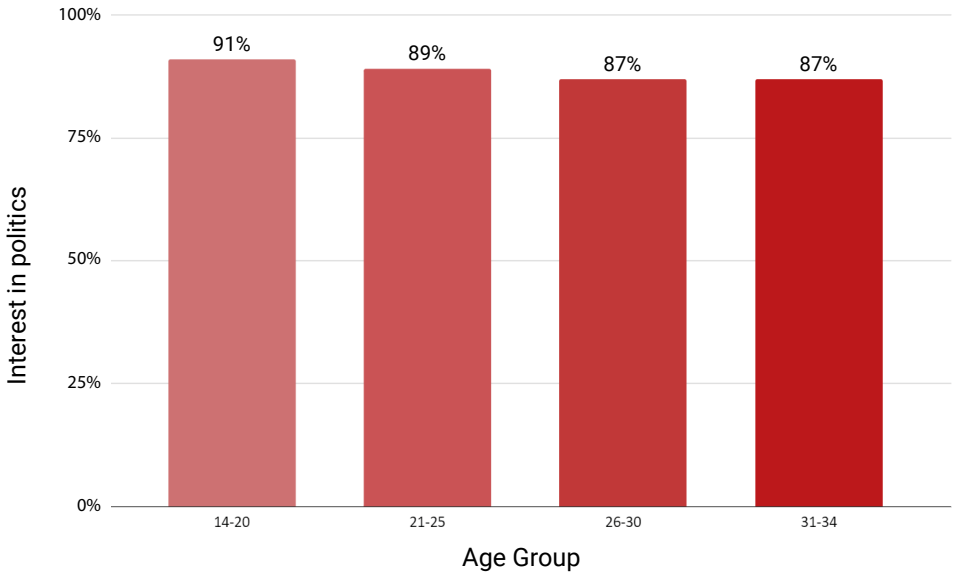


Source: Own elaboration based on data from Simón et al.[46]

(Generation Z) are more or less interested than previous young generations (Millennials).

While ESS data points to 30.5% of young people being interested in politics (Figure 3), the Consejo de la Juventud de España (Youth Council of Spain, CJE) elevates that number to 89%.[47] Moreover, while ESS data indicates a decline in interest in later years (Figure 7), the CJE shows that it is the younger generations (14-20) that are more interested in politics, which contradicts the tendency somewhat (Figure 8).[48] Again, this points to the need to go beyond quantitative measures, which have a hard time capturing such a complex concept as interest in politics at a young age. This contradictory evidence reinforces the need to employ focus groups and interviews to understand how young people view democracy and participation in politics today.

Figure 8. Interest in politics in Spain across different young age cohorts.



Source: Own elaboration based on data from CJE.[49]

3. DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE: IN CONVERSATION WITH DISADVANTAGED YOUTH AND RELEVANT EXPERTS

3. DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE: IN CONVERSATION WITH DISADVANTAGED YOUTH AND RELEVANT EXPERTS

This section includes a description and analysis of the focus groups and expert interviews, connecting to the previous literature review.

3.1 Focus groups on democracy: Disadvantaged young people and the state of democracy in Spain

3.1.1 Disadvantaged youth defining democracy

When defining democracy, explicitly and implicitly, the disadvantaged young people we interviewed tended to speak about the act of voting as a key characteristic, which is at the centre of democratic institutions, therefore, providing more mechanisms of accountability and changes in the people responsible for representing them at national institutions in Spain.

There was general knowledge of the key names of national democratic institutions, and some high-profile politicians were mentioned. It was also understood by some, but not all, of the participants that one of the key functions of government is to manage budgets for public spending and that, consequently, democracy is a way to exert accountability over how tax money is being spent in the public interest.

However, when revising the functioning of political institutions in Spain – such as how power is shared between the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government – actual knowledge of political processes and more detailed information on how laws are approved and implemented seemed to be rather limited across all four focus groups. As an example, one focus group member expressed that they "had seen this in high school but not in much detail" (Focus Group 1), referring to the lack of in-depth school education on how the democratic institutions of the country work. Other participants said that they "had no idea who the MPs are who represent their province in the national parliament" (Focus Group 2). In another focus group, it was also expressed that high schools sometimes omit the analysis of national politics:

"In high school we usually concentrated more on the study of international history, rather than our own national history and important issues such as the Spanish civil war were not studied in sufficient detail and openness."

(Young participant from one of the rural areas with the lowest income per capita in Spain, Focus Group 4)

Most of the understanding of democracy by focus group members was linked to issues of active participation, representation of their interests and political parties as key elements of democracy. At the same time, there was a strong association of democratic participation with the recent advancements in women's rights. Furthermore, particularly members of the urban focus groups, some expressed that participation and activism through local associations and other civil society organisations represents a key element of democracy. This, however, might reflect a self-selection bias, as

individuals being willing to participate in this study already indicates some interest in politics and activism. In rural areas, this idea – that local activism is essential for the functioning of democracy – was not expressed at all, and they saw politics as being "distant" (Focus Groups 2, 3 and 4).

Overall, knowledge of the functioning of democracy in Spain was very passive and mainly built around what they heard in their environment, including conversations with friends and family. Some more advanced ideas, such as the supremacy of EU law over national laws, were mentioned by some of the participants who joined the focus groups. There was a lack of habit in terms of following media, such as newspapers, and most of the information around the notion of democracy came from national television, personal discussions or news randomly picked up from Facebook feeds.

Especially in the urban focus groups, participants tended to have Twitter, Instagram and Facebook and obtained their information directly from relevant national politicians, but they "merely followed and did not engage much", for example, via tweeting themselves. In general, the urban groups were much more politicised and expressed great interest in national topics.

It was interesting to analyse a key difference between the urban focus groups and the rural focus group. While the urban groups were mostly concerned about national politics and disregarded smaller city-level debates, the rural focus group's discourse was much more centred around specific projects in their locality or even in neighbouring localities, such as a youth forum that had recently been organised for young people from the region, local political disputes between neighbours and local corruption scandals.

In the rural group, there were critical voices regarding how democratic institutions in the regional capital distributed budgets that directly impacted them, leading to a sensation that they were spending money on activities that nobody needed, and which had been planned without consultation on interest in the activity or if the money was needed for something else. Participants in the rural group felt that often activities organised by the town hall happened because funds happened to be made available by the Regional Government of Andalucía, without any sensitivity to the actual needs or interests of young people in the local communities:

"Sometimes funds are made available, and they must spend them soon. For example, recently an event was organised for young people in the region to meet YouTubers. But the organisation had to be made very quickly and the result was very bad. Until the last day, we did not know if buses would be available for transport. The dates were not ideal... They had a budget and had to spend it quickly. In the end, there were many free spots in the bus because many people had not heard about it. And the purpose of the activities was not very clear."

(Young participant from a rural area, 20 years old, Focus Group 2)

In the urban groups, debates were usually around "hard politics". For example, high levels of interest in specific policies around judicial reforms and new laws in the fields of equality, health and housing were expressed. However, while interest in specific areas of national policies was present, the level of technical knowledge of concrete aspects of the laws that were mentioned was rather low and based exclusively on what they had heard from others. On the contrary, in the rural area, there was a much greater presence of elements that could fall under "soft politics" – such as statements by several of the members of the rural group that one of the key reasons why they had become somewhat interested in their local politics was through their participation in the planning of festivities in their closest locality; it seemed to be a common practice for politicians in the region to ask for youth involvement in such events.

Furthermore, the rural focus group had a much harder time identifying concrete elements that fall under the idea of democracy, while the participants of the focus groups carried out in urban areas demonstrated a much higher command of political terminology and clear ideas on what a democratic

system means. Similarly, the rural group showed a lack of understanding of how local, regional, national and EU institutions function and how they are intertwined in daily legislative activities.

In the rural group, there was little knowledge about who the representatives – who are supposed to defend their interests – were in the national parliament. There was also a strong tendency in all four focus groups to connect the concept of democracy to free and open media – both traditional media and social media. The members of the urban and rural groups followed news on national television regularly, but they did so rather passively, such as in situations where the TV was simply on at home and national news (the *Telediario*) came on. Twitter usage was widespread in the urban area (not as much in the rural area), while TikTok usage was widespread for both the rural and urban focus groups. There was little readership of local newspapers; if any newspapers were read by the members of the focus groups, these corresponded to national newspapers, such as *El País* or *El Mundo*. In any case, reading newspapers was the exception rather than the norm. In some cases, they followed newspapers sporadically for some very concrete issues that affected their labour situation or were directly related to the task they had in their respective employment.

During the different focus groups, the same tendency was recognised: the large majority of participants accepted, without any doubt, that democratic values were solid and that the reasons for grievances by young people were not democratic institutions, as such, but inappropriate inclusion of young generations within this democratic reality. That is, the necessity and importance of maintaining democratic order was not challenged. Rather, serious doubts were expressed about the current functioning of democratic institutions, but not about democratic values in general and negative sentiments towards democracy, where focus was on *the current functioning of democracy in Spain*. When discussing this in more detail, however, the "current functioning" was usually equated to the detrimental situation faced by young people. An interesting phenomenon was observed, whereby when asked if the *political situation* was improving or worsening in Spain, many participants directly responded that it was clearly worsening but used the *economic situation* to make their point.

Question: "Do you think the *political situation* in Spain is improving or worsening?" (Focus Group 2).

Response 1: "There are very few young people with a stable and sufficient income; they either must look for the cheapest possible rent or live with their parents. The economic dependency is very high."

Response 2: "Housing prices are very high… it's very hard not to drown financially while you constantly work."

Response 3: "Salaries in the health sector are very low… Therefore, there is no incentive to study hard to work in the health sector."

When participants expressed that "democracy is not always the best" (Focus Group 4), efforts were made to find out the real reasons behind this statement. When individuals who expressed such opinions were asked why, they noted that current democracy is not solving economic problems; politicians are being "selfish", "non-inclusive" or acting "like mercenaries"; or that there is a "lack of justice" (Focus Group 4). In fact, they criticised the current democratic system for not being democratic enough. This argument is supported by the fact that, of the participants who phrased that democracy was not always good, none concluded that other non-democratic systems should be used instead. This seems to be an indication that once you leave the surface of the question of whether democracy is always preferable, when individuals are critical of democracy it is because of a perception of a lack of democratic efficiency and strong democratic values. In fact, they argue that they perceive there are democratic deficiencies, not that they oppose democracy as a system or that they would actively support non-democratic systems.

We thus read differences in support for democracy as a function of different levels of confidence and

mistrust in the political system. While all are critical of the political system and all share the same democratic ideal, some lack confidence to the point of believing the system can change at all, while most think that at least some significant changes should and can take place. Some young people are very critical of the current political system but still believe they live in a democracy, while others do not think the current political system can be characterised as a real democracy:

"There is a lot of widespread sentiment that whatever you do, you won't change anything. And I think that idea is very justified. In Spain and most other countries, democracy does not exist. They sell you democracy as the ability to have an influence over what will happen... you must vote [for] a political party that has a representative who has a political manifesto where they say what they are going to do. But then they can do whatever they want. Then, you can protest but you won't be heard. We as citizens cannot decide [about] most things that are being done. What people think does not really matter."

(Young participant, 23 years old, from a disadvantaged neighbourhood, Focus Group 1)

The existence of debates on whether the present political system qualifies as a democracy or not aligns with the experience of some of the experts, particularly those of the far-right Vox, who also mention that these discussions exist among their party's youngsters. It follows that, if they do not live in a democracy, they might be willing to explore radical changes to the political system, which might provide them with a better political system. The most serious threat is that this minority buys into actors who promote autocratic tendencies in the name of democracy.

While this is indeed worrisome, we still find that the democratic ideal is shared by everyone we interviewed and that youngsters who believe they do not live in a democracy are a minority (Figure 9). This does point to the fact that, despite a vastly critical stance towards the political system, there is scope to reengage people in a democratic system in whose values they still believe and that policies should aim to enhance their participation.

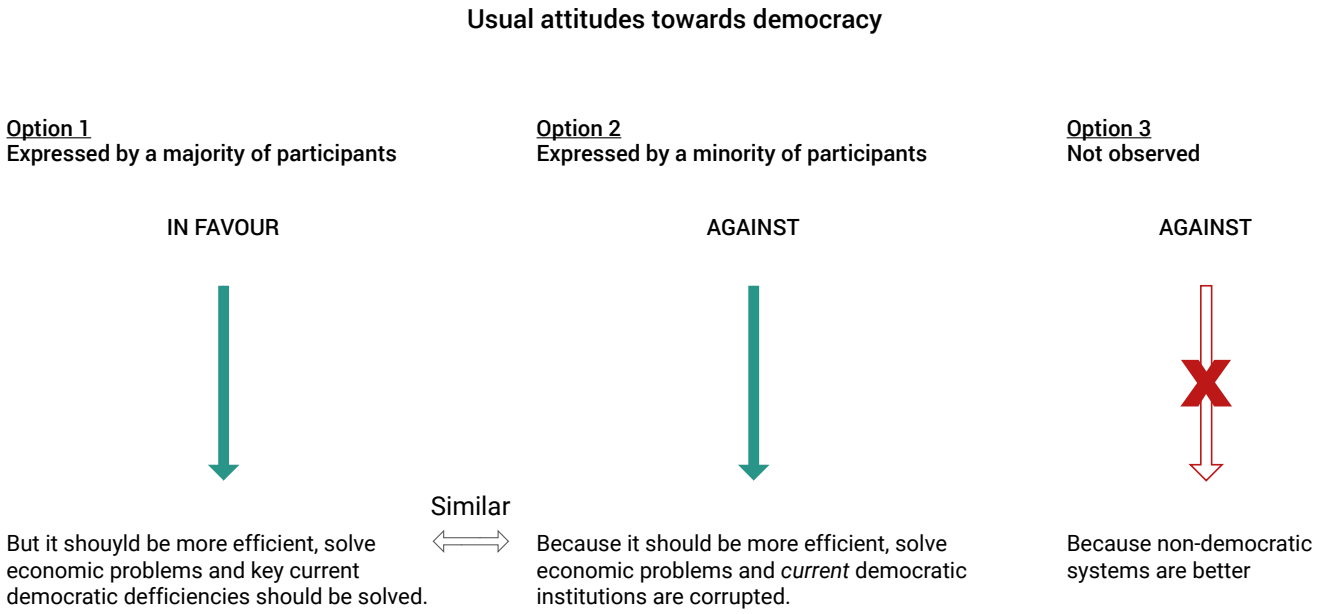
While democratic values were shared by all, liberal values were more contentious, and critical differences did arise when discussing current policies in the field of gender equality laws and immigration laws. One of the focus group members in the rural area expressed that they believed "extensive resources were being wasted [on] equality laws" and that "democracy should have other priorities" (Focus Group 2). Other participants stated that "I am in favour of equality, but not equality that favours one side" (Focus Group 4), referring to positive discrimination and affirmative action. Furthermore, other participants expressed that "the current judicial system is supporting women and going against men" and "what needs to be avoided is that the opinion of female[s] counts more than the opinion of male[s]" (Focus Group 4), but others in the same groups strongly disagreed. There was a clear trend, whereby most criticism of equality laws in Spain came from participants from rural areas:

"Politics is done for the people, but without the people. There is no effort to listen to people, even less to young people. They are spending a lot on equality laws when basic services like health and education are not very well financed. Mental health is another important problem, where sometimes you must wait two months to receive treatment when being depressed."

(Young participant from a small rural town, 19 years old, Focus Group 2)

Regarding immigration laws, radically opposed positions were analysed. Individual statements included "we should be in favour because the majority of immigrants come since they are fleeing [for] economic and political reasons"; "there should be higher controls, because sometimes they arrive and find no work"; "official processes should be implemented to avoid [them arriving on] illegal ships"; "they should only come if they already have a labour contract"; and "they are taking away jobs from

Figure 9. Attitudes towards democracy observed in the focus groups.



Source: Own elaboration.

Spanish people because they agree to work without a contract and are ready to earn less" (examples of statements within Focus Group 4).

The equality and immigration debates were by far the issues that led to the most heated discussions between participants of the focus groups. There was a clear tendency of participants from urban areas being more favourable of strong equality laws and open immigration policies, while participants from rural areas tended to be more inclined to oppose current equality and immigration laws. Attitudes against immigration were highest in the focus groups carried out in the Almería province, a province with high immigration for those working in agriculture. One local authority member from Almería, who was present at the conversation as a facilitator of Focus Group 4, expressed that "local business owners fear that the left-wing parties will increase the labour protection of the immigrants they exploit".

In summary, it can be concluded that more abstract discussions around support for democracy led to rather similar discussions in all of the groups, with a general attitude that democracy should be promoted and democracy itself is not what is wrong, as such, but rather the current situation of democracy in Spain, the economic situation facing young people and the inability of the *current* democratic system to solve key problems (mostly economic ones). Debates only became polarised when discussing key policies, such as equality and immigration laws in Spain, leading to the perception that there were very opposed views. In any case, support for democracy as a concept and a system remained very strong amongst the individual participants of different focus groups, but they asked for *more efficient, responsible and inclusive democracy* rather than calling for other systems.

3.1.2 Democratic values versus democratic efficiency?

Overall, strong support for democracy was present in the focus groups. Nobody questioned the desirability of democracy to the extent of proposing

other political models, and the participants took for granted that the real question was *how to improve their situation within the framework of democratic order*:

"If we compare it to a dictatorship, of course, democracy is better. But at this stage, it would be important to rethink how it is currently working... how could [democracy] become closer to the people... it's a comparative question. Democracy compared to what? My view is that we benefit from democracy, but we must rethink it."

(Young participant, 25 years old, from a low-income neighbourhood in the outskirts of Madrid, Focus Group 3)

In fact, the young people who participated in the focus groups tended to call for greater forms of democracy and better ways of democratic participation as key instruments to improve their situation. Consequently, they identified too little real democracy as the core problem and more solid democratic representation as one of the key elements that could improve their relationship with the democratic order. This holds both for the participants of the urban and rural focus groups. Thus, a consensus on support for democracy was strong; yet, especially in the rural area, participants were highly pessimistic that a better model of democracy would be possible at all. There were only limited ideas when trying to translate the problems that they identified into democratic reform and actual policy recommendations (Section 3.1.3).

Members of the focus groups were largely cognisant of the positive effects that democracy produces in terms of increased transparency. There was a general idea – more in the urban groups than in the rural group – that democracy was strongly associated with better policymaking in fields such as education, health and gender equality. Several of the group members explicitly emphasised that, without democracy, advancements in women rights would not have been possible in Spain.

The participants of the focus groups identified the erosion of collective action, the crisis facing political parties, the lack of responsiveness of institutions, the distance of representatives from the overall public and the inability to establish the neutrality of news agencies as elements that are currently detrimental to their trust and confidence in the political system. This distrust, however, was not directed at democracy, but rather at concrete elements they saw as essential for democracy, which, in their view, are currently in a process of erosion. In fact, when asked about the current functioning of politics in Spain, the negative comments referred to politics broadly, rather than the democratic institutions specifically:

"Politics should be something more appealing as should be the way of reporting about it... We often forget that politics is about serving and bringing about improvements. I find it myself a pity that I do not like politics and that I do not find it appealing, because it influences our lives. The image of politics is that of something antiquated... [in] the end you just decide to ignore it."

(22-year-old social worker in a disadvantaged community, Focus Group 1)

3.1.3 What's wrong with democracy?

As mentioned previously, the main concern was not with democracy itself, but rather that current democracy is not functioning the way it should and does not give young people a sensation of being empowered to influence and actively shape change. Therefore, the general narrative was that reforms and improvements were necessary.

One of the key problems with democracy in Spain identified by the young people who participated in the focus groups is that national institutions and bureaucratic bodies are characterised by high degrees of elitism. One of the main expressions of that elitism is in the language used by public institutions. This elitism is also connected to the lack of social mobility through linguistic barriers and a system that favours those with a privileged family background.

Several participants complained that language, particularly legal jargon, represents a major obstacle for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. In Spain, new laws, for example, are published in the Official Bulletin of the State (BOE, i.e., the official journal that publishes the text of new Spanish laws), the language of which and way the document is presented were characterised as very opaque and not accessible to those who, for instance, depend on new laws that grant them greater rights and economic help due to a situation of vulnerability. Some participants of the focus groups noted that there was the impression that Spanish laws and bureaucracy in general were intentionally framed in technical and legal language to work in favour of those with a privileged background:

"A key problem is that institutions and laws use very old-fashioned language that is not accessible. For example, due to personal circumstances I had to read the law for the disabled, and the vocabulary was very old... legal language should be more accessible and understandable."

(28-year-old social worker in a disadvantaged community, Focus Group 1)

Tedious legal language and cumbersome bureaucratic processes put those already disadvantaged in an uncomfortable situation, where they might not be able to properly appreciate the content of the laws that are published. Excessive technical detail or the lack of a contact person to address questions to represented a major hurdle to figure out who was entitled and who was not, if there were any exceptions, or how certain criteria could be interpreted in practice:

"Many times, it is exactly the people who need it the most who are the ones who have the lowest skills to understand the law. The same happens with the language and format used in basic things like the energy bills at home. I am sure that [none] of us sitting here fully understands their energy bills. If a receipt is already complicated, imagine the difficulty to understand laws at national level or European level."

(Young participant from a disadvantaged urban area, 22 years old, Focus Group 1)

Excessive bureaucracy also leads to vast delays in processes and several rounds of providing further documents. In Spain, it is common to have remedial action periods, where individuals who have applied for a grant or state aid are asked to revise their application and provide further documentation. Instead, the law should be made more transparent and understandable from the start, reducing the necessity to enter into tedious revision periods for applications. State bulletins are used very frequently at the national, regional and local levels and often comprise documents with numerous pages written in very technical language, when, in fact, as suggested by one of the participants of the focus groups, simpler phrasing would be easy most of the time. The problem is that most public investments benefitting disadvantaged youth – such as study scholarships – are connected to language that discriminates against, in terms of accessibility and understandability, exactly those groups in society they are trying to help. Furthermore, several members of the focus groups expressed that democratic institutions were making little effort to be pedagogic about their own laws and trying to explain them to the wider public. Young people often rely on family members to guide them and help them, for example, when applying for a scholarship:

"The lack of quality information is a huge problem we face, especially for those who have not studied and who do not have the skills. Information is not adapted to the capacity of people, meaning that even if information is available, it does not mean it is accessible. Everybody has the same right to decide, to vote, but not every person is a lawyer who understands how laws impact them or what social benefits they are entitled to."

(Young participant from a disadvantaged urban area, 20 years old, Focus Group 1)

The problem then is that their family members are likely to come from a similarly disadvantaged background and are not likely to show stronger

linguistic capabilities and practical knowledge in the legal terrain, because of not being socialised in the language and format of Spanish laws. Therefore, when asked about how the young people of the focus group felt that this linguistic and information hurdle could be overcome, they mainly said they would have to rely on people external to their environment and that key information should be provided by professionals working in the information field such as journalists:

"There should be people who are dedicated to inform about issues that really affect you. You watch the news and most of the news only show[s] nonsense... why don't they use the time to explain the new laws that have been approved, take time to explain the regulation and the process? We have a right to quality information."

(Young participant from a disadvantaged urban area, 20 years old, Focus Group 1)

Most of the focus group participants were concerned about the current quality of news media in Spain, which, in their view, has a very detrimental role in the health of democratic institutions. Participants agreed that it was difficult for them to trust different newspapers and television news, given that they constantly feared that hidden interests were at play and that coverage was inclined to be very biased and intended to provoke political reactions rather than just informing from a position of neutrality. One of the participants stated that "the information that reaches us comes already influenced" (Focus Group 1). This represented a reason for several participants not reading newspapers at all. Another concern came from the perceived negativity spread by newspapers and TV channels:

"A culture has emerged where everything is seen very negatively, everything is going bad... If, say, over 60% of the news reports that you receive are about polemics, then, of course, that has a negative impact... and the negativity starts spreading as people speak and talk to each other."

(Young participant from a disadvantaged urban area, 23 years old, Focus Group 1)

Some of the female participants also found that media reports were too negative and did not build a positive discourse around key achievements, such as in the field of women's rights, where they see that a lot of progress has been made over the last decades, but the narrative and public discourse constructed by the media do not sufficiently focus on that as a success story, which might help to consolidate the efforts of feminism and show it as one of the great achievements of our time. This, according to some of the participants, was deemed to be a good example of how negativity prevailed in the media and how a situation has been reached where media is not able to contribute to positive messages:

"The laws that are being adopted regarding women, that is real empowerment driven by politics. This, for example, should be communicated much more positively, focusing on the historic changes that are being achieved."

(Young participant from a disadvantaged urban neighbourhood, 23 years old, Focus Group 1)

In the focus groups, there was also a very negative image of political parties in Spain, which they connected to corruption and held partially responsible for the disconnection of society from participation and greater activism. Participants felt that political parties, once they had attained some degree of power, automatically tended towards corruption and to fall into obscurantism. One of the participants, for instance, said that "all political parties end up corrupting institutional dynamics". (Focus Group 2). Therefore, parties were held partially responsible for why the participants distrusted politics:

"Often there is a competition between the parties to change whatever the political opponent has adopted in the last political period, when, in fact, what works well should be maintained. They should also listen more and see what is working well for the people and what is not. They should survey people if

they are happy with how the law is working and what aspects of improvement there are.“

(Young participant from a disadvantaged rural area, 29 years old, Focus Group 2)

“It is not so much the political system as such, but the political parties... politics is usually very reactive instead of having a clear vision. In this respect, there is nothing that motivates us to mobilise“

. (Young participant from a disadvantaged rural area, 20 years old, Focus Group 3)

In this respect, several members of Focus Group 2 expressed that they were unhappy with how the irrational competition between political parties may lead to situations where public sector employees, such as teachers, have to constantly adapt to new laws, leading, according to this view, to situations where enormous amounts of resources and time are wasted on changing things that are working just fine but are changed again and again due to ideological disputes. One of the participants in the rural group stated the following:

“Every few years, the education system is changed... That means a huge bureaucratic process. After having learnt what works better and what works worse, again, another education law is enacted, and you commence from scratch with a trial and error process, where important resources are lost. Society changes quickly and we need to adapt, but if some things are working well, they should be maintained.“

(Young participant from a disadvantaged rural area, Focus Group 2)

Being asked about their lack of active participation in politics or civil engagement to defend their rights, some focus group participants expressed the idea that they would be interested and highly motivated to do so but that they lacked the capacity. They felt that, due to their disadvantaged situation, they lacked the time and energy; these were mainly dedicated to trying to survive economically.

Lack of time and energy was very much connected to all of the aspects for why focus group participants felt the current democratic model was not working (Figure 10): the lack of time to actively engage in their communities and participate in public and civil action also meant a lack of time to be informed about politics and read newspapers more frequently; the lack of time to get involved in a political party; or the lack of time to cross-check several newspapers with different inclinations to find out a more balanced view on political affairs in Spain.

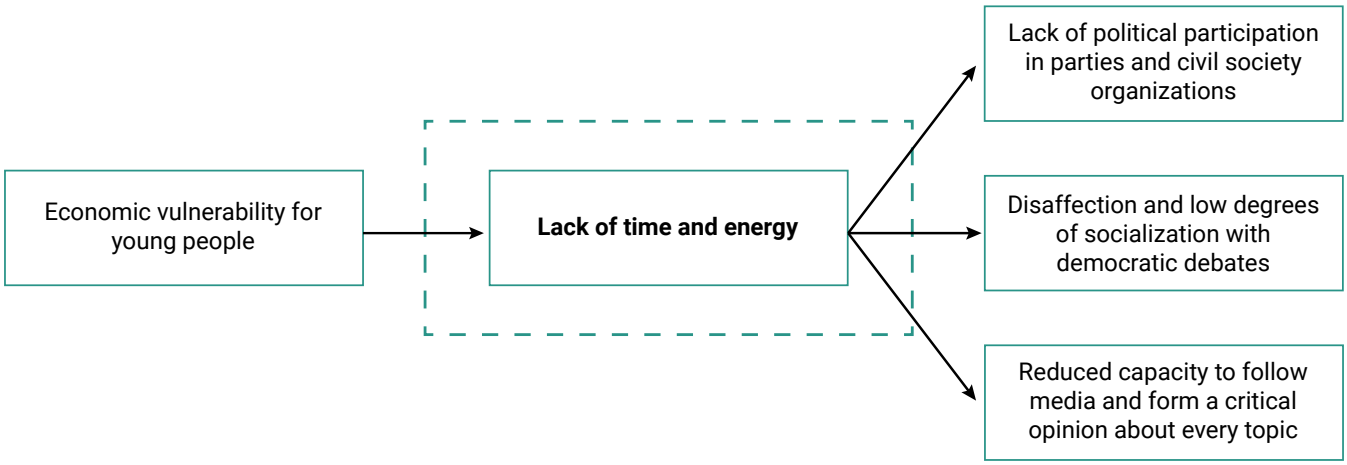
Lack of time was strictly connected to economic vulnerability, meaning that they also could not find the energy to stay on top of policy developments (especially Focus Group 3). Therefore, one may speak of chronic fatigue, where vulnerability and economic uncertainty are directly related to the inability to integrate these young participants into the practices that sustain democratic order. The participants felt that nowadays only the privileged can dedicate several hours of their day to following political news and getting involved in politics and other engagements that do not pay bills, unless you are lucky enough to be elected as a political representative at some point.

“It is very hard to participate. People who participate have certain basic needs covered. If you are in misery, you do not have time to participate in an increasingly precarious situation, increasingly working for more and more hours... in the end, you end up [with] complete disconnection.“

(Young participant from a disadvantaged neighbourhood in Madrid, 25 years old, Focus Group 3)

Furthermore, when asked about the phenomenon that economic vulnerability might lead to a different time allocation and lower prioritisation of the importance of getting involved and being an active member of the democratic system, it was also noted that, in addition to what we could label as “poverty of time”, there was also a strong fear of the negative consequences that active participation politics in politics might result in for young people who suffer from economic vulnerability, as a result of being

Figure 10. Reasons for focus group participants being disaffected and feeling excluded from democratic debates.



Source: Own elaboration.

personally associated with a specific party and, as a result, being stigmatised by people with other political opinions and world views (Figure 11).

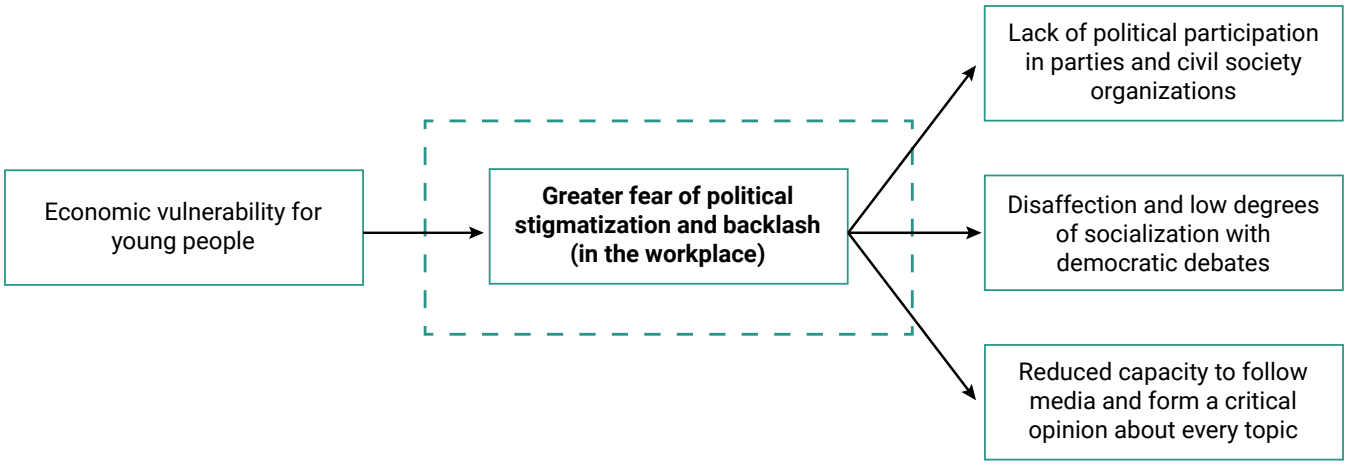
The problem that economic vulnerability increases the fear of the stigma generated by being identified with a specific political party might be more pronounced for females. The relationship between gender discrimination, economic vulnerability and fear of political stigma should be investigated further and could represent a key area of research within gender studies in political science that could help to find practical solutions on how to overcome the gender gap on the economic and political level. At first sight, given the relationship that was found in this study between economic vulnerability and fear of political stigma, it seems logic that economic discrimination based on gender leads to a direct impediment for females to participate in party politics and democratic activities overall.

Therefore, there might be a situation whereby the increasingly negative perception of political parties leads to greater fears for disadvantaged youth getting involved in democratic processes and their political preferences being exposed in their community. According to this logic, only people with a solid and stable economic situation will be willing to take risks. On the contrary, those who have little and are already struggling to survive economically show greater fear of receiving backlash, for example, from an employer that might have strong opinions about parties that call for progressive taxes.

While legally it is not possible to fire someone or discriminate against them for their political opinions, in practice, it was perceived to be a frequent phenomenon that people who are politically active and express their opinions openly faced backlash in their workplace in Spain. This might be especially relevant in situations where someone's job is tied to public funds and they fear the possible backlash that might be derived from the election of a local government with different political attitudes. Furthermore, if, over time, the economic situation of someone who suffers from economic vulnerability does not improve and continues to be marked by strong vulnerability, there is the threat that they develop a life-long culture of democratic apathy:

"Increasingly, there is a fear to participate and people in your environment tell you to

Figure 11. Key reasons identified by experts interviewed for why disadvantaged young people might have greater obstacles to democratic participation and seeking membership of political organisations.



Source: Own elaboration.

shut up and not to get into trouble. That fear exists again... you are either right wing or left wing and there is no tolerance, no possibility of exchange."

(Young participant from a low-income rural area, 23 years old, Focus Group 4)

This view that fear is preventing higher degrees of participation by disadvantaged youth is a major threat. Researchers have also had experiences of similar statements from people who, because of complicated economic situations, have greater fears of being associated with a particular political party. Even if the economic situation of someone improves as they grow older, they will have missed the chance to get involved politically at a younger age, which is perhaps the most formative time and one that shapes long-term attitudes most. If socialisation with democratic institutions such as political parties is postponed, it becomes harder for the person in question to develop strong ties, solid attitudes of democratic activism, or a social network of friendships and personal connections that might help to guarantee enduring democratic involvement. Disaffection is then more likely amongst individuals who do not participate early on; this might also be connected to lower incentives and, over time, the capacity to stay informed about key democratic developments.

Additionally, focus group participants felt that the democratic system in Spain performed very poorly when listening to the voices of young people in general. There was a general attitude in previous generations not to open up space for generational change and access for young people to initial positions of public responsibility. Some of the participants alluded to a demographic problem connected to the so-called baby boomers, meaning that there were simply many people of this generation currently competing for access to political occupations and, therefore, making access for younger generations difficult.

Participants reported several real-life experiences where older generations disregarded or disrespected their opinions simply based on age. As one of the participants noted, when talking about politics, they would usually receive responses such as "you can't talk about this because you are very young... you don't know what has happened, so you cannot talk about [politics]". This statement received general approval from other members of the focus group in

question. It had been phrased in a family context, but they agreed that it corresponded to a more general attitude affecting their daily lives. In a nutshell, the participants of the focus groups were highly unsatisfied with the possibility that young people must talk to power and make themselves heard:

"The opinion of young people does not count for older generations. They don't listen because they don't want to listen... it makes you lose faith."

(Young participant from a disadvantaged urban area, 28 years old, Focus Group 1)

Focus group participants generally claimed that there needed to be cultural change at the national level. In their view, democratic institutions should focus primarily on avoiding a situation where an extensive part of the population, including young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are being left behind economically as well as in terms of skills to adapt to current changes, such as the ones connected to the digital transition.

Access to information needs to be greater for those who come from a disadvantaged background and, in that regard, other bureaucratic models – with greater flexibility and better pedagogy towards the population – should be promoted. Digital tools should help to unify different processes and create a space where citizens can easily manage all their correspondence, applications and administrative proceedings that concern any liaisons between individuals and bureaucratic bodies that execute the laws of democratic institutions.

Linguistic obstacles and non-transparent information flows should be eradicated, and, in the event that more legal information is a requisite, additional information explaining the processes should be provided. Most importantly, the information flow needs to be improved, guaranteeing equal access for everyone under the principles of openness, transparency and inclusive communication. Unified online portals, again, can play a critical role.

The key dimension identified was to reduce the time burden associated with the present tedious processes that are required for any public sector service. This would significantly restore faith in efficient functioning of democratic institutions in Spain.

Similarly, the time component was deemed to be the key element in allowing individuals to find greater motivation to actively participate in the democratic system and get involved in social and civil activities in their spare time. As expressed during the focus groups, currently, the relationship between disadvantaged young people and democracy is highly passive as a result of being "trapped" in a socioeconomic reality where surviving until payday is a higher priority than forming ideas about abstract political discussions.

Furthermore, the different groups expressed a need to be better informed from a culture of neutral reporting to avoid the hazards of navigating through numerous politicised news media to construct a well-informed view. Participants had the impression that the quality of journalism has decreased significantly because clear political leanings have been adopted. This phenomenon has created tedious realities for those who wish to remain well informed. One of the urban group members expressed the opinion that "we need to think big, but act small" (Focus Group 1), meaning that democratic activity should be present in every corner of Spain. At present, politics is perceived as something that mostly happens in Madrid and is rather disconnected from their personal reality.

3.2 In conversation with experts: Reinforcing democracy through better inclusion of disadvantaged young people

While the focus groups (Section 3.1) aimed to gain a deep understanding of the current challenges for disadvantaged youth to develop more positive attitudes towards democracy, the expert interviews were carried out with the aim of connecting different debates to overarching political objectives and institutional realities of the country. This

combination of focus groups and expert interviews also has the benefit of producing a more realistic assessment of the type of conceivable solutions, given a specific institutional and political reality that needs to be incorporated into the analysis to produce relevant policy recommendations with a chance of being adopted and which are much more specific in technical detail. In other words, while the focus groups offered insights into the root causes of the issues that disadvantaged youth face regarding democratic values and democratic participation, expert interviews are an instrument to translate more general political debates into concrete policy discussions.

3.2.1 Key ideas and proposals

Overall, the general idea that can be distilled from different discussions with experts is that democracy in Spain is in strong need of the perception that politicians are acting in good faith. Firstly, political representatives should demonstrate a real interest in the problems that disadvantaged youth face through regular presence in the different localities that they represent and not just appear during an election campaign when they need to get reelected. In the short term, this practice might work to get them reelected but sets the foundations for general distrust and discontent in the future, as the presence of politicians will be unwelcome, even if intentions are to listen and solve problems.

One idea expressed by several of the experts interviewed included the possibility to use digital tools to vote more often on policy matters of key interest that affect the livelihoods of everyone. As such, the government could find ways to use a digital format when consulting on democratic processes, beyond the general elections that are carried out every four years. While it might be overly optimistic to believe that citizen participation would reach a high level at all times if frequent digital consultation methods were employed, digital tools might allow for more active participation, so it might be conceivable to explore formats that move in the direction of connecting new democratic reforms to consultations in the digital sphere. There are numerous ways that could be explored to use the digital transformation to support the development of other forms of democratic involvement. The key challenge would be to make the usage of such platforms frequent and widespread amongst citizens. What seems clear is that the democratic institutional framework in Spain (and elsewhere) has not adapted to a new reality of socialisation through the internet:

"Democracy continues with mechanisms from the past century... previous generations of democracy created frameworks that do not adapt to the new generations that have mobile phones and socialise through them. It's another model of socialising and institutions haven't adapted to the new models of socialisation."

(Víctor Camino, secretary-general of the Socialist Youth of Spain)

In any case, the individuals who were interviewed were clear about the fact that the root problem was the condition of being disadvantaged. In other words, the level of affection or disaffection relates primarily to economic conditions. Therefore, what needs to be done is to protect the economic interest of disadvantaged youth more clearly. This, under the reasoning identified above, would be a catalyst for more trust in the effectiveness of the democratic system. At this point, nonetheless, it is important to differentiate between a passive and an active relationship towards democracy.

As stated above, one of the key factors that shapes the degree of engagement in democratic processes is simply how much time individuals have at their disposal beyond that needed to maintain their economic survival. This idea follows a very simple logic that resembles a Maslow pyramid: if young people need less time to fulfil their basic needs, they will start allocating time to other activities, including a healthy participation in public and civil activities.

While some experts felt that previous generations also experienced this reality of a lack of time, the main difference might be that nowadays the group

of young people suffering from economic hardship (in terms of access to housing, for instance) seems to be increasing significantly:

"There have always been young people who show disaffection with the democratic system due to their economic vulnerability. What might be different nowadays is that, while the attitudes as such in this group have not changed, the number of people who belong to this group of young people who suffer from economic vulnerability has grown significantly."

(Pau Mari-Klose, MP for the PSOE and researcher in the field of inequality)

Therefore, any solution to the current levels of disaffection and critical attitudes towards key elements of the democratic framework in Spain, such as negative connotations towards political parties, need to start from policies that tackle the root cause of the economic vulnerability that disadvantaged young people suffer from. Especially in a situation where the number of people within this group of disadvantaged youth has grown significantly since the Great Recession of 2008, better economic policies for young people need to be a top priority.

Again, as was the case during the focus groups (see Section 3.1), experts concluded that the real issue of distrust and dissatisfaction was not primarily political, but the real roots were mainly economic. The view that young people blame democracy for their problems is not the case at all. However, if one asks young people about the level of dissatisfaction they have with the current political system, they might be very critical of the way democracy is working, not because they are against democratic values, but because they feel their economic situation is far from the one they had been promised in return for their educational and labour efforts. Young people, thus, have normalised the presence of democracy and have taken it for granted. Yet, even if they are prone to express criticism of democratic institutions, it is usually a result of discontent with their economic situation and not because they are antidemocratic:

"You only talk about the referee if there is a problem. Young people have taken the democratic system for granted. Rather than disaffection, there is a lack of connection. Millennials and Zoomers have not conquered democracy. This generation lives in a freer and more horizontal world... but from [an] economic point of view we are a generation that was made many promises... but then has not been given material progress. We do not live better economically than our parents; yet this economic situation is not leading to a mobilisation of the youth."

(Nacho Catalá, MP for the PP in Madrid's regional parliament)

All experts agreed on this interpretation of the causes of the dissatisfaction, but some went further and denied that we currently lived in a fully democratic system. They did so from the point of view of reinvigorating democratic values, but their deep criticism of the system resonates with those youngsters that also do not believe theirs is a real democracy:

"I have never heard any debate where the options are democracy yes/democracy no. The debates we sometimes have is whether we live in a democracy. If the system we currently have is truly a representative system or not. Do we really live in a democracy? Are we really all equal under the law? And regrettably the answer is no. We do not live in a democracy; we are not all equal before the law. There is a political elite above the law [in reference to pro-independence leaders that might be pardoned] and then the rest of the people are under it. The issue is not to question democracy but to try to recuperate the democratic values that we have lost."

(Javier Pérez Gallardo, former MP for the far-right Vox party in Madrid's regional parliament)

Another aspect previously discussed in the focus groups and reinforced by expert interviews is that rural areas are where young people show the greatest disconnection from national politics. As

happened during Focus Group 2, where no one knew a single name of a national MP who represented their province, the same trend of disconnection seems to be evident and hold across other rural areas in Spain:

"Additionally to the general disconnection of young people from politics, rural youngsters feel that they are far both geographically and institutionally from the sites of power. They generally know no one who they trust that participates in decision-making bodies."

(Diego Loras, representative from the rural party Teruel Existe)

In addition, another aspect first discussed in the focus groups but also confirmed by experts is the view that young people are increasingly in a situation where they fear becoming actively involved in politics because of the potential social stigma that they could face in their family or work environment. This trend was confirmed by experts in urban and rural areas:

"Some don't want to spend time in politics because if you join a union you might get fired. Legally this should not be the case, but it does happen. The precariousness makes it unclear whether you want to be marked politically at the public level in a political party or a trade union. Fear is a clear mobilising factor... for example, the first thing my family asked when I started in politics was if it would be good for my job... be careful [not to] make your political leanings too explicit."

(Marc Hidalgo, member of the Catalan Socialist Youth and town councillor)

"This fear is very problematic... and it represents a hurdle for involvement for people who are considering getting involved in politics."

(Diego Loras, representative from Teruel Existe)

Lastly, one point raised by the far-right Vox representative was that of identity. In trying to explain why his party fares relatively well among the Spanish youth, he pointed to the common shared values:

"Because there is a lack of identity. All young people seek to identify themselves with something. And that is something important for young people because they search for meaning. When you are more adult, identity is either more established or this search for identity is not so important. And that search for identity, they don't receive it from the institutions and that's why they go to the party. And what they are looking for in VOX is not so much about VOX but about Spain. Of all the issues and demonstrations we do, nothing mobilises the youth as much as when we raise the Spanish flag and claim that common identity."

(Javier Pérez Gallardo, former MP for VOX in Madrid's regional parliament)

3.2.2 What needs to be done to integrate young people and protect democracy?

All members of the focus groups and experts interviewed had a very strong view that democracy should be protected and that all other political systems are less desirable. At the same time, there was a strong consensus that many key elements of democracy in Spain were not providing the desired results that one would wish for in a well-functioning and stable democratic order. Therefore, there was unanimity that democracy should be protected and improved.

During the expert interviews, several ideas were proposed on how democracy could be protected through measures that help to foster more active participation in democratic life, as well as the development of more positive relationships between disadvantaged youth and democratic institutions. Of course, part of the picture of how to promote stronger support for democracy by disadvantaged groups will be related to the ways in which democracy can support these groups in leaving their condition of being disadvantaged. Furthermore, solutions will

also largely depend on the ways in which democracy can engage young people more broadly.

Regarding young people in general, who, as we have discussed, have been increasingly in a position of vulnerability in Spain since the Great Recession of 2008, one of the ways to protect a democratic culture amongst this age group would be to actively mainstream their views into all relevant policy dimensions. Youth policy should not happen in a silo and national youth organisations should not only be invited to the table when concrete youth policies are discussed. Several of the experts interviewed agreed that the practice of mainstreaming youth issues would be a very important advancement that would help to filter youth interests into every policy area. Representatives from the youth organisations of the main political parties in Spain stated that their parties should include the interests of young people as a cross-cutting issue that affects all policy areas:

"Youth issues should have a greater presence in the agenda of the parties. We defended, for instance, that in the electoral program of the Partido Popular there should not be a specific section on youth but, rather, youth should be a cross-cutting issue, a transversal aspect. It should be part of all policy proposals."

(Bea Fanjul, president of the Youth Branch of the PP)

Therefore, the young perspective should be present in all areas of policy planning, including macroeconomic policies, housing laws, green and climate policies, and both domestic and foreign policy more broadly. Currently, it seems like youth organisations are only involved in very specific areas, usually at late stages of the legislative process, and mainly at the more symbolic and ceremonial level:

"We are usually involved at advanced stages of the legislative process where it is already difficult to propose any changes, even changing a comma... they do involve us and we are present, but there is a tendency to invite us in a decorative way because it looks good for the photo."

(Andrea Henry, president of the Spanish Youth Council)

The reasons for this lack of representation are manifold. Firstly, while specific organisations exist to represent the perspective of young people in Spain, they do not seem to be endowed sufficiently in terms of financial resources and membership. Secondly, despite their existence, these organisations are not activated sufficiently by policymakers in legislative processes. Thirdly, one direct reason for the low presence of the youth perspective in the legislative process is that the number of people under 35 who are representatives in democratic institutions, such as the national or European parliaments, is very low and constitutes a very small minority:

"Young people do not identify with institutions because they do not feel represented. In the Spanish parliament, there are around 14 young people. In the European parliament, there are only five... so there are around the same number of people called Martin as there are people who are young."

(Andrea Henry, president of the Spanish Youth Council)

Therefore, so that young people play an active role in protecting the democratic system, they need to feel represented by it, meaning that the number of young parliamentarians and national politicians should increase because that will also facilitate a youth perspective in legislation proposed for a variety of fields. This would also be highly relevant for positions of responsibility within political parties:

"There is a tendency to appeal to youth simply by invoking them or sending someone to represent them but that is not enough... SUMAR puts young people in leadership positions. Myself, being 27, I am an example for this. There are many young people holding positions of responsibility and young people elaborating the political program."

(Carlos Corrochano, spokesperson of the party SUMAR)

Other expert interviews, centred around the aspect of economic vulnerability more broadly, concluded that civil society organisations play a fundamental role in protecting and fostering democratic values amongst disadvantaged communities. In fact, when speaking to experts from local NGOs and associations, interesting information was shared that greater levels of electoral participation were observed in places with high levels of economic vulnerability where there is a high presence of civil society organisations, compared to other places of similar economic vulnerability where such NGO activities are more limited:

"Since the start of the project Transform with your Voice a few months ago, we have seen a 20% increase in electoral participation during the recent elections in the polling station that corresponded to the district where this pilot project was carried out."

(Javier Poleo, president of INCIDE)

Therefore, according to representatives from local NGOs, networks of civil society organisations that are present in vulnerable areas might be a key instrument to foster more positive attitudes towards the democratic political system and active participation in it by people who live in vulnerable economic areas, including young people who grow up in this disadvantaged background. Furthermore, the local experts noted that the current budget for these types of projects is limited, and this could represent a possible avenue through which civil society organisations could focus more on programs that help to promote an active culture of participation in democratic processes and provide a space to turn socialising into political activism. Young people who participate not only benefit from this type of social intervention but also potentially become ambassadors for political activism and civil engagement with other members in their community. Therefore, great attention should be dedicated to how multiplier effects can be constructed through programs that aim to engage young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in greater democratic participation.

An important issue in this regard is the lack of funding and resources of these civil society organisations, which have been harshly hit both by the 2008 economic crisis and by legal and political decisions. The most representative expression of this situation is the funding of the Spanish Youth Council (Figure 12). While funding is not the only way to support youth organisations, without it, these associations cannot fulfil their function:

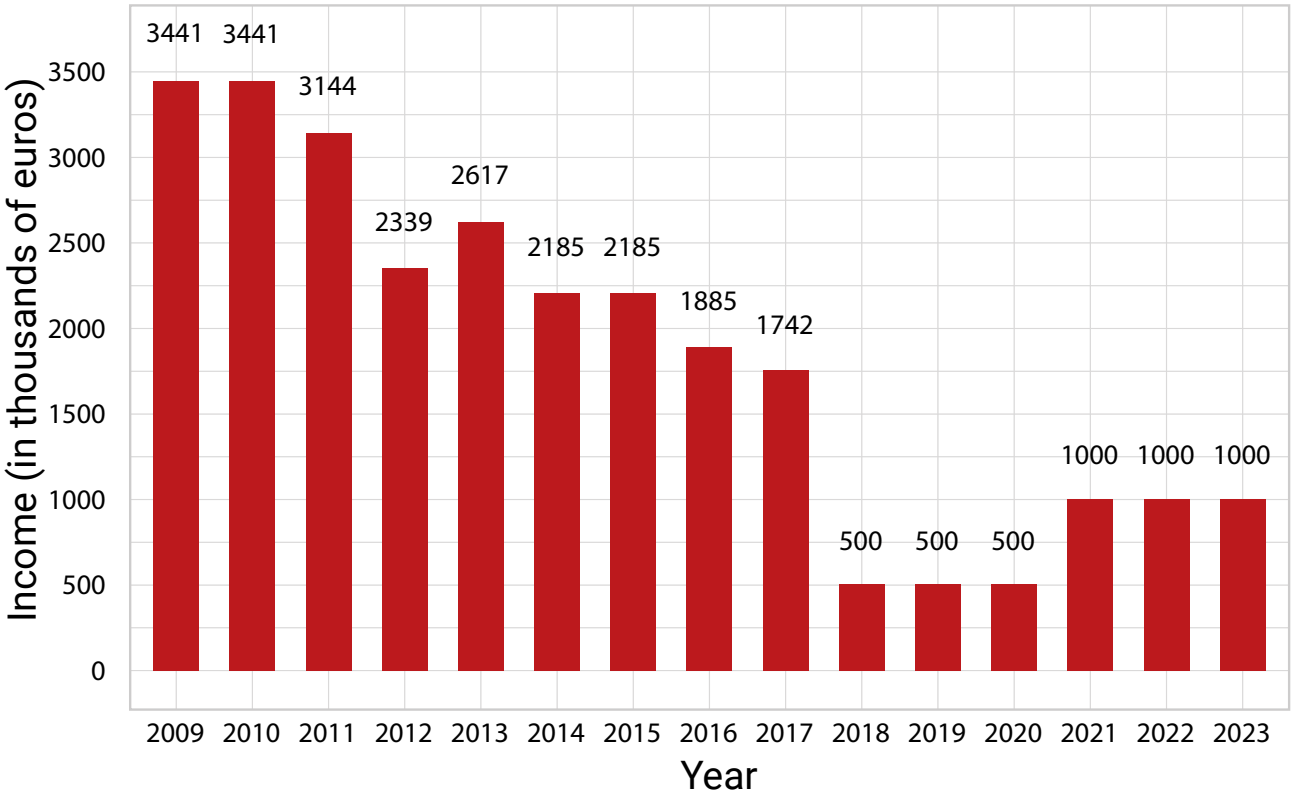
"Associations are one of the main ways that young people have to pool resources and participate in politics. And we have seen our funding and, more importantly, that of all our partner organisations and regional youth councils, decline grossly over the last decade at a time when it was needed the most. We are very far from recovering to previous funding levels. Supporting youth associations in any way possible should be an absolute priority."

(Andrea Henry, president of the Spanish Youth Council)

One aspect that was also mentioned as a problem by several of the experts interviewed is that political parties no longer serve as a space for deep socialisation for young people or, rather, they do not serve that function to the same extent as in the past because society has become more individualised and new spaces for socialisation, such as on social media, have emerged and are heavily affecting the time that young people dedicate to offline activities and more traditional spaces of socialisation. In this process, the political party loses prominence for many young people as a preferred space to build a social life and construct important social connections. Improving and finding new ways of deep socialisation within parties would be a very important element, so that young people have incentives to become politically active:

"There is a huge gap between older generations, many of whom come to the party meetings to socialise, and the younger generations, who come to the party out of political interest. But it is the activities and the possibility of knowing other people [that]

Figure 12. Budget of the Spanish Youth Council provided by the Spanish Government.



Source: Own elaboration based on data from the General State Budget of Spain provided by the Spanish Youth Council.

makes people remain in party organisations. There are a lot of people [who] got interested in the party through open events and then decided to join.“

(Víctor Camino, secretary-general of the Socialist Youth of Spain)

At the level of fostering electoral participation, according to some of the experts, an improvement could also be achieved through measures like reducing the barriers for migrants being included in the electoral register. In this regard, experts note that the current system in Spain is discriminatory, as nationals are automatically registered, but foreigners who have the right to vote due to bilateral agreements with their country of origin need to seek inclusion in the electoral register. Again, civil society organisations are of critical importance here, as they are often the contact point for young migrants from a disadvantaged background to enable democratic participation and access to relevant information about their rights and ways to exert and effectively benefit from them:

“The reduction of participation costs is also key. For Spanish people, there is no problem because we have an automatic registration, but it is a problem for young migrants. Young migrants have to register explicitly. There are organisations that help with the papers... It would also be important to reinforce the active role of third-sector organisations, as they compensate for the lack of individual resources of many young people.“

(Pablo Simón, associate professor at the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid)

Overall, there are numerous ways in which the democratic system can be protected from the unhealthy habits of a lack of democratic participation, a reality of decreased party affiliation, important levels of lack of trust and lack of a feeling of belonging by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The previous analysis of the focus groups and the expert interviews carried out during this study have led to a series of concrete policy ideas that are listed and explained in Section 4.

4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 From youth policies to youth perspective

As we have outlined throughout this policy study, young people are not disengaged from their social and political contexts. They favour and support democracy as their preferred political system and show high support for democratic values. Youth are, however, extremely critical of the current political system's functioning, in terms of how politics, political parties and politicians behave and how political actors treat and deliver for the youth. Lack of political trust in the current functioning of institutions and political parties, not the rise of antidemocratic values, is, as we see it, the big challenge for today's politics in Spain. On an optimistic note, we find that, given the chance, a significant number of young people would participate more in politics.

We also found that the three main obstacles to participating in politics were (1) a complicated economic situation that prevented the youth from having sufficient time, resources and energy to participate and greater fears of stigmatisation (including at the workplace); (2) the structure of opportunities provided by political parties, institutions and civil society organisations, which have little youth engagement, particularly for disadvantaged youth; and (3) lack of accessible, easy to understand and objective information. The structural nature of these causes means they cannot be solved through the implementation of a few policies but that they need a fundamental rethinking of the place of young people in politics and a long-term transformation.

We believe this transformation can be summarised by the motto "from youth policies to youth perspective", which resonates with the strategy of youth mainstreaming proposed by the EU Charter on Youth and Democracy.[50] Similarly to gender equality claims to apply a gender perspective to all policy areas (not only those deemed "gender issues"), we must apply a parallel youth perspective to all policy areas, particularly one that takes into consideration disadvantaged youth. This is because all policy issues have different effects on different population ages, and these must be taken into account when designing and evaluating the policies. Housing bills, education laws, labour market bills, climate policies and budget decisions all have fundamental implications for the young, probably more than targeted youth policies. Youth voices, thus, must be heard and participate in the evaluation, implementation and – more fundamentally – design of these policies. This youth perspective must be taken into consideration in all economic bills proposed by the government. We believe this change of perspective is needed to bring about fundamental structural changes that make the political system more responsive to youth needs at the same time as it implements long-term measures to improve the dire situation of the young and provide them with the resources to participate.

In the following subsections, we propose a battery of policies that address the structural factors that hinder youth engagement with democratic institutions and that would help to establish the youth perspective. These are political reforms, economic policies and changes that parties and civil society organisations should apply. We also address some reforms that we found ineffective. However, before we delve into these, we wanted to flag the two most important measures that we have identified. These two measures could be applied within a short time span but would have long-lasting effects on youth engagement with democracy.

4.2 Priority policy proposals

- **Pass a law in Spain that formalises the youth test put forward by the European Youth Forum and makes it concrete.** Several European countries, such as France, Austria or Germany, have implemented their version of the youth impact assessment tool. These tools include qualitative consultation with representatives of young people from youth-led organisations, as experts on youth-related topics and the youth; impact analysis of the draft proposal; and the outline of mitigation measures in case of a negative impact on the youth.[51]

    - **Make it compulsory to carry out a youth impact assessment of the general state budget (PGE).** In current Spanish legislation, all PGEs are followed by a gender impact assessment.[52] We propose to do the same from a youth perspective.

    - **Ensure permanent representation by the Youth Council within the Spanish Council of State.** This will ensure that it can be consulted at the highest level by parliament when introducing new laws (which would necessitate increased resources for the Spanish Youth Council, as described under the next point).

- **Increase funding for youth organisations, both political and non-political.** We have identified the lack of a strong environment of associations, groups, local NGOs, clubs and parties' youth branches as a major source of youth disengagement from politics, as it is through collective organisations that people pool resources to overcome individual limitations, learn about politics, socialise, organise themselves to defend common causes, help each other navigate the relationship between citizens and the administration, engage in discussions about current affairs, create expectations about participating in collective actions, and feel part of a common project. However, the association environment in Spain, which has traditionally been low, does not meet these expectations, which implies that many young and disadvantaged people are left alone against a political system that they deem to be hostile and uncaring. Financial resources are crucial for these kinds of organisations and helping to build stronger associations would enormously benefit the participation of disadvantaged youth in the democratic life of the country.

    - **Increase financial support for the Spanish Youth Council and other related youth organisations**. The government budget to support the Spanish Youth Council has declined by more than two thirds in the last decade and still has not recovered to its pre-Great Recession levels. Supporting youth organisations that target disadvantaged youth or are simply located in low socioeconomic neighbourhoods would significantly increase youth engagement.

4.3 Political and administrative reforms

- **Reduce legal jargon and improve bureaucratic procedures that hinder youth engagement with the administration.** Administrative procedures and legal jargon have been identified as major disengagement forces of the youth. Difficulties in dealing with the government reproduce the image of the state as inefficient and far from citizens' needs.

- **Introduce an automatic voting registry for migrants who have the right to vote.** Of the 1.8 million foreign residents in Spain with a right to vote in the last local elections, only 22% of them registered to vote.[53] While an automatic registry exists for Spanish citizens, it does not for migrants, which imposes extra hurdles for participation on an already vulnerable and disengaged population, with a very significant number of young people at risk of social exclusion. Automatic registration would lower the barriers for youth participation.

- **Lower the voting age to 16.** As one of our interviewees explained, "the limited electoral power of the youth compared to other age

groups implies that parties in government pay less attention to their needs compared to other groups" (Pau Mari-Klose). Moreover, earlier socialisation into politics can have important consequences for young people's interest in politics and political engagement. While there is an ongoing debate on this issue and results tend to be modest, research suggests they are generally positive.[54] Thus, lowering the voting age to 16 could help enlarge the share of the electorate at a young age and help attract an interest in political parties for these voters. This measure is increasingly pressing, as the Spanish population is experiencing a strong process of ageing.

- **Mainstreaming the need for gender-inclusive language** throughout public administration and institutional communication, as well as representative institutions at local and national levels, such as town halls, regional parliaments, national parliament and other organisations. We found that young women were particularly supportive of democratic institutions and that many participants regarded governmental language as outdated and in need of reform. Continuous and regular institutional efforts should be made to monitor, identify and solve current shortcomings in the inclusivity of institutional language and communication.

- **Create a "unified citizen's folder"**, where all certificates, information and procedures a citizen needs in relation to the administration are located in one place.

4.4 Recommendations for economic policies

- **Address the housing market crisis**. Housing is the biggest financial challenge faced by young people to be able them to become emancipated, create a family and establish a life.[55] Moreover, it is the main source of wealth inequality between young and old people.[56] It is necessary to establish a housing-first policy for the disadvantaged, where accessing housing is considered a priority of government action.[57]

To achieve this goal, several measures can be taken. We point here to the most relevant:

  - **Rent control.** Rent control could be explored as a potential measure and has been applied in several European cities. It is a low-cost measure to ensure low prices. However, the viability of this measure should be studied in each city on a case-by-case basis. While some of the literature on the topic has identified negative effects from these measures, more recent literature has pointed out that these undesired effects can be prevented through careful policy making.[58] For example, the rent control law would not be applied to the construction of new houses or significant renovation, so it would incentivise the construction of new houses and the increase the overall housing market.[59]

  - **Expand social housing.** In 2020, only 2.5% of all accommodation were social housing in Spain.[60] While the recent housing law has significantly expanded social housing, we propose to expand that number to 30% by 2030, in line with other European countries, and ensure access to a home for every young person, which is the group that will be most affected by this expansion.[61]

- **Labour market reform.** The Spanish labour market has been identified as a major source of problems for the young, as it offers low-paid and precarious jobs. This hinders the youth's ability to enjoy resources of time, money and energy to engage in political activities and participate in an active democratic culture. This has become one of the priorities of the current Spanish government, as exemplified by its recent labour market reform. We identify three main measures, among the many structural reforms needed in this area:

  - **Reduce temporary work.** Temporary work is extremely common among young people, who find it extremely difficult to find well-paid and long-term occupations. Recent labour

reform laws have restricted companies' ability to use these kinds of contracts, and the result has been a significant increase in long-term employment, which has particularly affected the young.

- **Ban unpaid internships.** Unpaid internships are a source of precarity and free labour among the youth.[62] We propose to restrict internships to educational contexts, to formalise the relationship through a written contract, to always provide some financial restitution for the work being done and to provide financial incentives to encourage employers to hire interns permanently. The government is currently working on an intern statute to improve their situation.

- **Reduce working hours.** Enforcing legislation to ensure labour rights are respected and work is circumscribed to the legal number of hours per week seems necessary, because many young people work longer hours than stipulated by their contracts because of the precariousness of their situation. Moreover, measures such as the four-day week would allow young people to enjoy more free time that could be used to participate in political activities.

- **Reduce inequality.** Social inequality, particularly inequality between age groups, has been increasing in Spain, mainly as a function of home ownership. Moreover, inequality has been identified as one of the most relevant factors explaining youth dissatisfaction with democracy. Further research on the relationship between economic inequality, gender discrimination, and fear of political stigma is required.

  - **Explore the establishment of a universal inheritance.** The proposal of a universal inheritance would involve a minimum donation by the state to every young person to reduce opportunity inequalities between young people. The money could only be used for a socially beneficial activity, such as creating an enterprise, developing a philanthropic activity or financing postgraduate studies. There are different versions of how much money would be granted to every adult, at what age would it be provided and how it would be funded. Future Policy Lab's report on the issue follows Thomas Piketty's proposal of providing every 25-year-old person with the average wealth per capita of the country (which would be €176,200 in Spain) and finance it with a mixture of inheritance and wealth taxes.[63] However, this is just one implementation of the policy and other possible amounts could be considered.

  - **Measures to promote the hiring of young people at risk of exclusion.** These measures could include incentives for companies to hire young people at risk of exclusion or targeted active and training policies for these young people.

  - **Finance an independent study that explores the relationship between gender, economic vulnerability, and fear of political stigma**. Given the general relationship between economic vulnerability and fear to participate in political parties that was found in this study, it would be logical to expect that gender discrimination, such as in the workplace, accentuates this fear of stigma even further and, therefore, places even greater hurdles for females to decide to become active within a political party. Understanding this relationship could represent a key avenue in the efforts to eradicate economic and politically driven gender inequality. A detailed and exhaustive study in this field could be highly beneficial in developing policy recommendations favouring the political participation of disadvantaged females in Spain.

4.5 Recommendations for political parties and civil society organisations

- **Improve spaces for deep socialisation with parties.** Throughout our interviews, we have

noticed that one of the main unspoken elements of participation in parties and civil society organisations is personal relationships. The literature on the decrease of social capital has been widely studied, and our interviewees mention the COVID-19 pandemic period as leading to a reduction in participation that has not yet recovered. Political parties used to involve more than just politics. They involved deeper forms of socialisation, such as sports, festivities and social debates. Politics constitutes just one aspect of a much richer social life that is currently enjoyed only by the most senior militants. Reengaging the youth, especially the disadvantaged, through social and team-building activities within the party, and creating spaces for deep social interaction beyond the strictly political, stands out in our analysis as being profoundly more fundamental than previously expected. Deep socialisation not only has positive effects on political participation, but it would also help youth at risk of social exclusion to find spaces and people to help them in their interactions with the administration.

- **Topic-based political engagement activities.** Politicisation among the youngest generations seems to be driven by concrete topics of interest, more than by overall ideological commitments. Thus, parties should invite the youth and citizens to participate through the organisation of sectorial and topic-based activities instead of general ideological actions.

4.6 Measures that have shown limited effectivity

Throughout the interviews with experts, several policies have been identified as ineffective. Youth issues have been a topic of public discussion in Spain for some time, and several policies and ideas have been put forward to address youth concerns that we have found not to be effective. We discuss two that are representative of particularly problematic ways of thinking about youth issues. The first problem is providing avenues for participation without taking into consideration the resources needed to engage in those spaces. The second problem refers to considering the disaffection of the youth with politics as mainly an issue of miscommunication that could be solved with more effective messaging. We believe these policies are insufficient and explain why they might not be cost effective to implement.

An example of participation spaces without considering resources is represented by **participatory budgets**, where the allocation of the city or region's budget is openly decided through public online consultation.[64] According to our experts, this method attracts very little citizen engagement because of the time and complexity required to navigate the participatory system. In line with much literature on the subject,[65] interviewees have pointed out that, in general, only already active citizens participate in these initiatives, which reproduce social inequalities. Moreover, no young person that lived in a city with participatory budgets knew of their existence. Given that the main obstacle to youth participation is the lack of time, money and cultural resources to be able to participate in politics, opening channels of participation is counterproductive if the problem of lack of resources is not addressed.

The idea that youth disengagement is an issue of miscommunication can be represented by the claims **to speak to the youth through social media and adapt to their codes**. However, focus groups did not express lack of use of social media as a grievance. Instead, they complained about bureaucratic procedures, the specialist jargon used by the administration and outdated governmental websites. This is particularly problematic for disadvantaged youth. When there is a policy that directly affects them, such as the "*Verano Joven*", a three-month period in summer when the government subsidised travel tickets in Spain, they pointed out that their social media channels already informed them of that policy. Moreover, interviews with experts, particularly those actively engaged with politics, also point to the fact that social media campaigns often fail because they are often unsubstantiated. Thus, we argue that a user-friendly government website is more cost effective than many governmental social media campaigns and criticise the notion that the problem of youth engagement is primarily one of a lack of new means of communication.

5. CONCLUSION

5. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the mechanisms at play in the trust and affection of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds towards democracy in Spain. The research for this study, involving four focus groups and around 12 expert interviews, leads us to conclude that the assumption that disadvantaged young people are prone to develop attitudes contrary to democracy does not hold from the evidence that could be gathered. Rather, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds maintain a strong preference for a democratic system, but they are very critical, nonetheless, of the current functioning of democratic institutions in Spain, which they see as being unable to perform in a way that has an active role in mitigating their economic vulnerabilities and lack of effective representation. Their negative view of the politics of the country does not translate into a questioning of democracy altogether, but the vision that democracy in Spain is imperfect and needs major reforms and renovation. While some youngsters have expressed a questioning of democracy, this is a very limited phenomenon. Moreover, when this was further explored, they continued to be committed to the democratic ideal and expressed very similar concerns and arguments to the rest of the young people. We see this not as a distinction between pro- and antidemocratic youngsters but between different degrees of political mistrust and confidence that the system can be reformed. Some still believe the current political system is a (flawed) democracy, while others do not consider it a true democracy. While this implies a risk that some young people might favour authoritarian options in the name of enhancing democracy, we also see ample scope to involve young people in the current democratic system. This is because, overall, positive attitudes to democracy were shared by almost all participants and prodemocratic attitudes had a strong consensus across genders and specific ages, as well as between participants from rural and urban focus groups.

While there might be the sensation that disaffection of disadvantaged youth is a new phenomenon in Spain, some experts identified that there has always been a group of disadvantaged youth with strong levels of disconnection, distrust and lack of confidence in the democratic institutions of the country. Therefore, what has changed is not so much the attitudes of disadvantaged youth, but the share of young people considered to be disadvantaged and economically vulnerable. Especially since the Great Recession of 2008 – as this study has discussed and illustrated with various data – the group of disadvantaged youth has grown significantly. In Spain, 33.5% of youth are at risk of social exclusion;[66] thus, significantly more young people have entered a situation of economic vulnerability and risk of social exclusion over the last years.

Furthermore, this study has examined concrete aspects that are directly associated with democratic culture, such as the degree of confidence, trust, direct participation and activism; attitudes towards political parties; and the willingness of disadvantaged youth to become democratically active through party affiliation or engagement in other forms of political activism, such as through NGOs, associations or other civil society organisations. Focus group participants tended to agree that economic vulnerability was usually associated with lower participation and more disaffection due to a situation where they lacked time and energy to get involved, given that their main priority was economic survival. Another line of argumentation identified in expert interviews, and which might be of key importance, is that being identified with a political party in Spain might lead to stigmatisation, including in the workspace. Therefore, those who do not have a solid and stable economic situation will have greater fears of the potential backlash of political activism.

A key objective of the focus groups and expert interviews was the discussion of potential solutions to the current problems that disadvantaged youth face in their current relationship with the democratic system in Spain. The final aim of this study was to propose a series of possible reforms and policy recommendations. In summary, in a longer list of concrete policy recommendations, such as improving administrative language and expanding social housing, one overarching recommendation is to move from youth policy to a youth perspective. Instead of treating youth policy in a silo, all policy areas and legislative processes should start to incorporate a youth angle. This also means that young people need to be at the table when all policies that affect them are being discussed, including climate, economic planning, housing and education.

Young people need better representation in Spanish national democratic institutions to make sure that the young perspective is present in all legislative processes. At the same time, better representation of young people in national institutions will also have positive spillover effects on the ability of other young people to connect with democratic institutions and feel more connected to the language and communication styles of parliamentarians who use the same signals and linguistic codes. Numerous participants of the focus groups felt that the same logic should apply to gender equality as well: institutions need to adopt a more gender-inclusive language and style of communication, including in legal texts such as the BOE.

Furthermore, this study has discussed the key importance of local civil society organisations in carrying out programmes that help young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to improve their ability to become active members of their community and get involved in democratic practices and activism. Key experts noted that the presence and incidence of local NGOs in disadvantaged neighbourhoods lead to a greater democratic culture and directly result in important increases in electoral participation. Therefore, one key recommendation is to increase the budget that public actors allocate to the national network of civil society organisations.

In conclusion, although the disadvantaged youth's disengagement with democracy has deep structural causes, we believe that there is much scope for policy action to reengage young people in Spain.

ANNEX

ANNEX

Expanded methodology box

Overall, this study has employed a very inductive approach, since one of the key objectives was to identify new trends and produce insights not covered previously by other studies. In the first step, four focus groups were held with young people from urban and rural areas to gain a broad picture of the current debates that are likely to resonate with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The selection was carried out in areas and neighbourhoods with high levels of economic vulnerability and focused on young people (up to 29 years old) from disadvantaged backgrounds. Criteria included a maximum of high school education, long-term unemployment or overqualification.

In the second step, expert interviews were carried out with political party representatives, academics and representatives of civil society organisations that work with disadvantaged young people or are involved in the design of policies and legislation affecting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Interviewees included those with high-level national profiles in Spain and local representatives more exposed through their more direct and practical work as members of local civic organisations. Therefore, a balance between the macrolevel and microlevel of analysis was a continuous endeavour of this study.

In the third step, inductive insights from the focus groups and interviews, in combination with previous insights found from a literature review, were used to determine what young people, especially those at risk of social exclusion, currently think about the functioning of democratic institutions in Spain.

Focus groups	
Details of focus groups	
Focus group	Main criteria for selection: young people (up to 29 years old) from disadvantaged backgrounds. Key criteria for the selection of participants included: - Maximum education level: high school. Alternatively, those with further education but in a situation of long-term unemployment or overqualification. - Participants were selected from areas and neighbourhoods with important levels of economic vulnerability and the presence of minority groups. - To mitigate geographic and ideological biases, the groups were organised in areas with different political contexts in terms of whether the neighbourhood is traditionally right or left leaning. Young people with a background of migration or self-identification with a minority group were also invited. There was also a priority to include a gender perspective, with a focus on women's rights (over 50% of the participants were female). Individuals had diverse professional backgrounds, several were unemployed or overqualified. Anonymity was agreed with the participants of the four focus groups. Each focus group lasted approximately 60 minutes and included 7-10 participants per group.
Focus Group 1 (urban)	The first focus group was carried out in the facilities of a local NGO in the neighbourhood of "*Cruz Verde*" in Málaga, where, given a context of high economic vulnerability, this organisation actively promotes several programs that aim to reduce the risk of social exclusion for (young) disadvantaged people. The members of the focus group were selected directly by the NGO, which had been briefed on the criteria of this study and selected participants accordingly. Some of the members of the focus groups came from another disadvantaged neighbourhood called "*Los Asperones*".
Focus Group 2 (rural)	The second focus group was carried out in the village of Villanueva de Algaidas in the region of Andalucía. The focus group was organised in the facilities of a local youth association, which selected participants based on the criteria explained above. The young people who participated in this focus group came from a rural background and represented distinct political attitudes, expressing right-wing, left-wing and apolitical tendencies.
Focus Group 3 (urban)	The third focus group was organised in the headquarters of a foundation in Madrid with national reach in Spain and which carries out numerous programmes in the field of mitigating the risks of social exclusion, with a strong focus on young, disadvantaged people. The focus group members were selected based on the criteria set by FEPS for this study.
Focus Group 4 (urban-rural)	The fourth focus group was carried out in the municipality of Adra, with participants from different places in the province of Almería, including the localities of Adra and El Ejido. There was diverse participation from distinct municipalities in the province, including participants from urban and rural areas. Local authorities from the province facilitated the selection of participants according to the criteria explained above.

Expert interviews

We conducted 12 interviews with experts. Interviews were carried out both online and in person and generally lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. The interviews took place between May and September 2023, periods which coincided with local and national elections in Spain.

Andrea Henry	President of the Youth Council of Spain
Víctor Camino	Secretary-General of the Spanish Socialist Youth
Bea Fanjul	President of the Youth Branch of the People's Party
Carlos Corrochano	Spokesperson of the party SUMAR
Nacho Catalá	MP for the People's Party in Madrid's regional parliament
Pau Mari-Klose	MP for the PSOE in the national parliament. Professor of Sociology and former High Representative against Child Poverty in Spain
Pablo Simón	Associate Professor of Political Science at the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid
Javier Poleo	Chair of the local NGO INCIDE
Juan Carlos Espejo	Chair of the local NGO PRODIVERSA
Marc Hidalgo	Member of the Catalan Socialist Youth and town councillor in Sant Joan Despí
Lilith Verstrynge	Former Secretary of State for the Agenda 2030 and Secretary-General of Podemos
Javier Pérez Gallardo	Director of the Interparliamentary Office of VOX and former MP in Madrid's regional parliament
Diego Loras	Secretary-General of España Vaciada and candidate of Teruel Existe, a movement and party from a rural region that was represented in the National Congress until 2023

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ABOUT FRIEDRICH-EBERT-STIFTUNG (FES)

As a German independent public institution, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung shares views and basic principles with the international social democratic and free trade union movement. Activities of the FES office in Madrid promote bilateral and European policy dialogues on a variety of topics in fields such as democracy and welfare state, labour relations and future of work, triple transition, as well as peace and stability.

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ABOUT FUNDACIÓN FELIPE GONZALEZ

The Felipe González Foundation was established with a dual purpose: learning from the past and contributing to the future. Based on this principle, it is responsible for managing Felipe González's document archive so that every citizen can access it. It also organises and supports activities and projects that contribute to progress and provide society with tools to tackle the challenges of the 21st century.

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This study is part of the FEPS-led Builders of Progress series of research outputs that explore the key concerns and aspirations of young Europeans to bridge the gap between them and the policy world. In its current work, the series turns a keen eye on young Europeans engagement with democracy – through the lens of socioeconomic disadvantage in Ireland, Hungary, France, Poland and Spain.

Kindly supported by FEPS members Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (Madrid office) and Fundación Felipe Gonzalez, this present study dissects the Spanish context, contributing to a wider comparative analysis, and underscores a disquieting paradox: a youth that is politically interested yet lacks opportunities to participate in traditional political formats; critical of political mechanisms, yet supportive of democratic ideals. Through focus groups and expert insights, the study peels back layers of economic, social and communicative barriers, highlighting the increased need for a systemic rethinking of youth participation in politics. It suggests a transformative policy shift – from isolated youth policies to an inclusive youth perspective across all legislation – and champions robust support for youth organisations. With a suite of recommendations, spanning political, administrative and economic reforms, this study is a call to action, asserting that the answer to reinvigorating democracy lies in empowering the very generation poised to inherit it.

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