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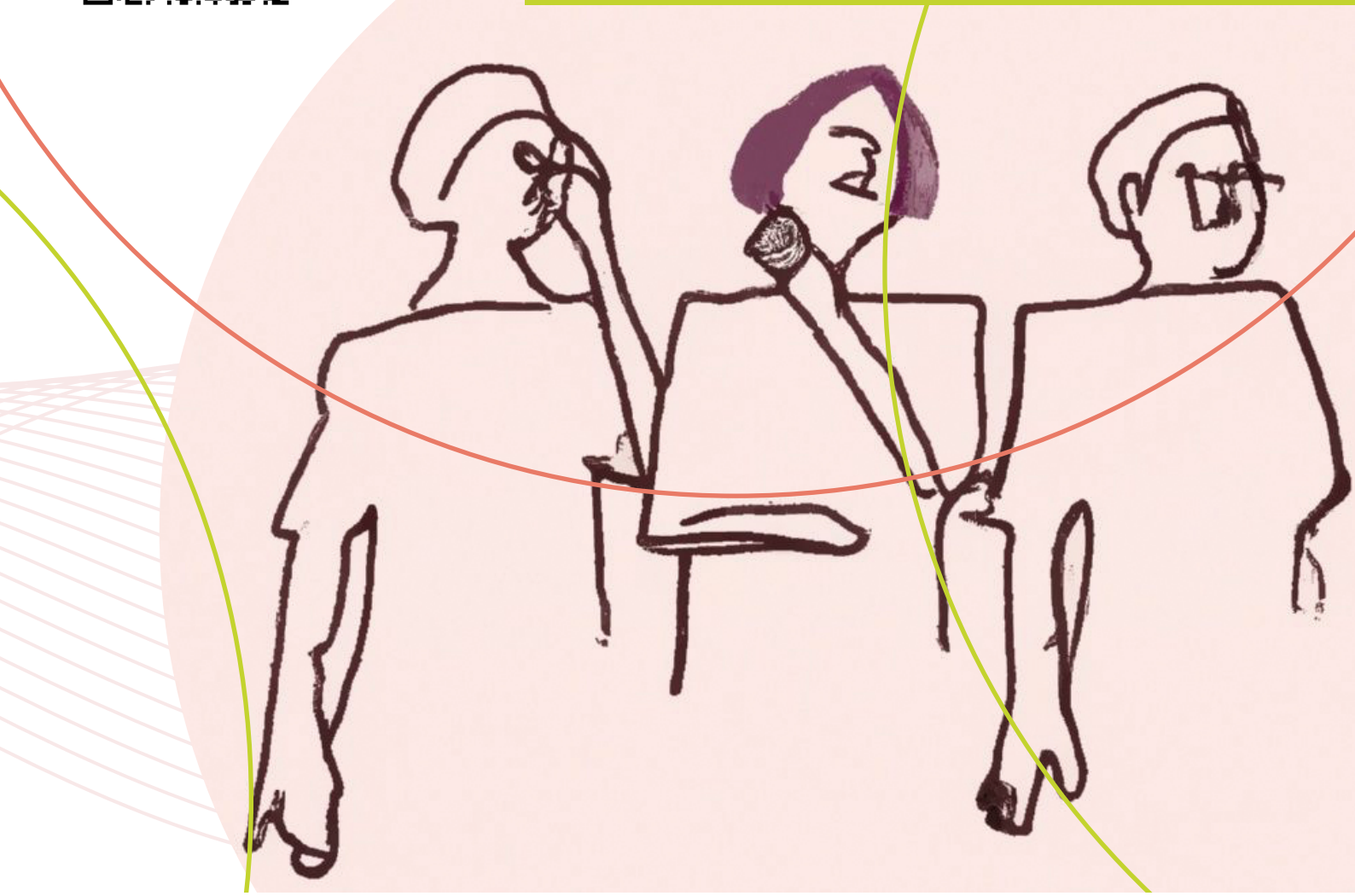
HOW YOUNG PEOPLE FACING DISADVANTAGE VIEW DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE

Antoine Bristelle, Javier Carbonell, Shana Cohen, Matteo Dressler, András Kaszás, Adam Kostrzewski, Gerry Mitchell, Kamil Smogorzewski, Kilian Wirthwein



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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 Millennial 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/.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Younger EU generations not only express increasing distance from representative democracy, but some portions of this population also share growing pro-autocratic views. Survey data has conveyed these messages, which are being brought to policymakers' attention.[1] Personal development, life opportunities and social and political engagement have been, and are currently being, heavily hit by the accumulated impact of a series of crises. These include the 2008 financial crisis, the pandemic, the cost-of-living shock after the onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the worsening outlook for the economic future of the European continent. Being a young adult in the EU, especially from a low-income household and ethnic minority, may mean delays in accessing employment, housing and more general opportunities to lead a fulfilling life, including family formation. It may mean being more likely to experience mental health distress.[2]

This report asks what impact these trends have had on the politicisation of young adults in the EU, especially those who have experienced social marginalisation and economic disadvantage. The report is based on qualitative research designed to further understand the relationship between young people with experience of socioeconomic disadvantage[3] and their perception of and engagement with democracy, politics and political participation from a European perspective. It examines what over 100 young participants from low-income households with an experience of social marginalisation said about their attitudes to politics and democracy in focus groups. The focus groups were held in both urban and rural locations in Ireland, Poland and Spain between the summers of 2022 and 2023, with some additional research in France and Hungary to test out the findings in different political contexts.

What is striking is that despite economic, political and social differences between the case study countries, young people are sending the same messages. They feel distanced from formal democratic processes, and have expressed this via more protest-based, direct action such as their participation in climate action.[4] However, they value democracy as a principle and do want to engage in a political system that affects local, tangible change in their lives. As evidenced by recent survey research by FEPS, they want their politicians to communicate better with them about how the EU is doing that.[5] They want to see political action on urgent issues that are important to them, such as the climate emergency. They also want a political system that enables them to have more of a say in the policy and political decisions which will affect their lives.

Key findings and policy implications

The report begins with an introduction setting out the study's main objectives, providing the definition of young people and socioeconomic disadvantage used in the report and a brief discussion of the trends concerning attitudes to democracy and political participation among young people. Case study chapters begin with the socioeconomic and political context of each country followed by a discussion of what young people and experts said about the perceived benefits of democracy, what's not working and what young people are asking of their political systems in each country. The discussion draws out the study's policy implications and is followed by suggested recommendations to policymakers on how to better engage young people in democracy.

Making politics relevant

Young participants from disadvantaged backgrounds were clear that they need to see politicians focusing on policies relevant to their socioeconomic challenges including:

- Higher than average youth unemployment levels
- Job insecurity and low pay
- Living in areas of the country far from major employment centres
- Caring responsibilities that create barriers to labour market participation
- Mental health issues, which have disproportionately affected younger generations in comparison with other age groups since the COVID-19 crisis.
- A cost-of-living crisis
- Housing and accommodation shortages, which have translated into living with parents and delays in family formation
- Pressures on public health and community-based support services
- The impact of regional inequalities.

Democracy is valued in principle, but the political system isn't working in practice

The participants in this research clearly valued democracy and democratic government in principle. Building on previous FEPS research, they wanted democracy protected and this was one reason that they wanted a better relationship with democratic institutions and practices. As it stands, this relationship is characterised by:

- Feeling that they are not being listened to
- A pervasive lack of trust in political representatives
- Feeling disconnected from democratic institutions and practices, such as voting, as well as other forms of engagement, like joining a labour union or volunteering for a local organisation
- Defining politics as voting in elections, about politicians and political parties, not about the issues that they face in their lives. Even though they may understand the impact of economic and social issues on their lives better than other groups, they do not frame them within a political discourse and policymaking
- Lack of familiarity with national representatives (more likely if living in rural areas)
- Lack of understanding of formal or upper case parliamentary 'Politics' (more likely in rural areas)
- Being more engaged in local, soft or small 'p' politics (more likely in rural areas)

Features of the current political system that don't work for young people

Young people expressed dissatisfaction with the practice of politics and politicians. Features of the current political system that do not work for them include:

- Politicians are viewed as self-interested, corrupt and unlikely to change
- Politicians focus on the election cycle rather than being available year-round
- Politicians don't spend time in their community
- Lack of responsiveness of institutions e.g. bureaucracy, elitism and lack of access to information
- The absence of concrete benefits from policymaking, especially at a local level; even welfare payment increases or other related policies were not accounted for because they wanted more tangible change within their communities
- Too few routes for them to become exposed to politics and to contribute to policymaking
- Too little recognition of their own concerns, such as climate change
- Lack of access to news on social media that they can trust
- Political parties, union executive committees, and other platforms often do not explicitly include them or provide them opportunities to set an agenda, influencing their interest and the resonance of politics in their everyday lives
- Their precarity, caused by low pay, unstable employment, housing shortages, among other factors, reduces the time and energy they commit to political participation and civic engagement. It also reduces their belief that the formal political system can do anything to ameliorate their circumstances
- They may have limited exposure to how formal politics works due to insufficient education in schools and related activities
- They face linguistic and cultural obstacles to participation (such as overly technocratic language used by some institutions)
- Political parties and civil society organisations such as trade unions or even NGOs involved in areas like climate change are not seen as a preferred place for connecting and socialising with others, as they may have been for older generations
- There is a perceived stigma and negative social consequences as a result of being identified with a political party
- Politics is seen as having a negative effect on their mental health.

What young people from disadvantaged backgrounds ask of their democracies

- More direct and consistent contact with politicians
- Politicians focusing on policies that are relevant to young people (see above)
- Seeing politicians respond to the issues that are most urgent to them e.g. climate change

- As evidenced from consistent positive association with youth services, greater investment in activities and platforms for engagement at a local level that focus on young people
- Recognition of the values that are important to young people, such as social justice, fairness, freedom of expression and fulfilment of human potential
- More opportunities to contribute to the policymaking process
- More dynamic, flexible and fluid mechanisms of engagement, which reflect their lifestyles and interests, being able to digitally engage, for example, at times that suits their lifestyles, which may involve irregular working hours
- Seeing positive changes in their local areas
- Less polarising social media and inversely, easier access to trusted information.

Recommendations

Below is a summary of the report's key recommendations:

European Union recommendations

1) Mainstream young people's perspectives across all policymaking, establishing a youth-test[6] for all new EU legislation and policy. This is a key demand coming not only from this research but from the 2022 European Year of Youth consultations.
2) Strengthen cooperation between EU umbrella youth organisations and young representatives of the EU political parties.
3) Ensure financial support is directed to young people with experience of socioeconomic disadvantage to increase their participation in European politics.
4) Expand participatory and consultative mechanisms for young people, ensuring outcomes are followed up and considered during EU decision making.
5) Strengthen the EU portfolio for young people by raising the profile of the EU Youth Coordinator, expanding her powers and resources, and allowing for increased youth-mainstreaming across EU institutions. For the same reason, introduce a European Commissioner for Future Generations. This must include providing more opportunities for young people to contribute to policymaking through different EU platforms, as they need to see their generation(s) represented in decision making.
6) Adapt and improve accessibility, signposting and outreach related to providing information on youth related policies, programmes and opportunities for engagement to young people with experience of socioeconomic disadvantage.
7) Support member states to gather and analyse data on the use of services such as the EU on-line youth portal, to identify whether the information it contains is reaching young people with experience of socioeconomic disadvantage.

8) Support member states by building and improving on existing practices of inclusion and diversity assessments of European Union programming related to youth and focusing funding schemes on people with fewer opportunities.

9) Increase awareness and strengthen protections on social media to support civil and youth organisations whose activities may conflict with government priorities and to counter misinformation and polarising and discriminatory behaviour.

10) Support member states in funding transparent and accessible research on youth policies, collecting gender and age disaggregated data.

Member state recommendations

1) Increase investment in line with the priorities of young people with experience of disadvantage at a national level; with policies that tackle socioeconomic barriers for political participation.

2) Invest in and strengthen youth services, including providing appropriate youth work resources to support participation from immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds.

3) Invest in citizenship and political education throughout the education system.

4) Improve participation of young people facing socioeconomic disadvantage in national politics through better representation on national youth councils, youth branches of political parties, trade unions and non-governmental organisations.

5) To promote the representation of underrepresented groups in political institutions, provide financial support to enable young people with experience of socioeconomic disadvantage to run for election and participate in democratic processes at a local, regional and national level.

6) Implement direct and deliberative democratic mechanisms. Co-design more flexible/fluid mechanisms of engagement that better involve young people in decision making.

7) Develop voting systems so that they appeal to young voters. (e.g. simplifying voter registration, using systems that provide a range of options and that are devolved.)

8) Protect the civil and political rights of young people, including their right to participate in a trade union.

9) Encourage political parties to engage better with young people, get them interested in politics and include issues relevant to them in their programs.

10) Improve cooperation between representative student organisations and unions.

11) Provide multi-annual funding for civil society organisations working with young people developing participation and providing them with political information.

12) Develop digital democracy including addressing digital exclusion; improving digital infrastructure and developing democratic digital tools that are safe, easily accessible, unrestricted and user friendly.

Local and regional-level recommendations

1) Build participation of young people in the local community, particularly in rural areas and in local politics e.g. in some countries, this would include making greater use of participatory budgeting and other mechanisms which enhance youth ownership.
2) Improve communication between young people and local politicians.
3) Improve citizenship and political education throughout the education system.
4) Ensure schools are democratic organisations.
5) Build capacity of local community organisations that can play a significant role in education and promote an understanding of democratic values, including investing in youth services.

Country-specific recommendations are provided at the end of this report.

1. INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Research outline

This policy study focuses on young people who have experience of socioeconomic disadvantage and their relationship with politics and democracy in Ireland, Poland and Spain. It analyses what they see as the benefits, flaws and ultimately the relevance of political participation and the policymaking process, and, by proxy, the political system itself.

While young people's declining trust and engagement with traditional politics has been widely observed, so too has their increased politicisation through protest-based direct democracy and a rise of votes for anti-democratic actors. This study will help dispel some myths circulating about the causes of these trends and what they may mean for the future of democracy. It presents an analysis of the accounts of politics of young people with experience of socioeconomic disadvantage, during participation in focus groups in both urban and rural locations. It also includes analysis of expert interviews, across the three initial member states followed by an additional two case studies: France, an old and established democracy and Hungary, newer and more democratically precarious than the others, to explore if initial findings still held in these diverse contexts. While the research itself is small-scale, the consistency of the findings across contexts can inform the design of future studies.

It outlines how young people from disadvantaged backgrounds engage with democracy, how it works or does not work for them, and contributes to the existing literature on disadvantage and democratic participation by providing an up-to-date European youth perspective.

Young people involved in the research discussed the effect politics has on their lives, what they see as its benefits and what doesn't work. What do they ask of the political and democratic systems in their countries? The combination of expert interviews and focus groups allowed us to provide a current, comparative European account of how young people experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage participate in politics and their desire for how politics and democracy should change to address their own needs and concerns. The choice of case study countries allowed an exploration of the impact that different socioeconomic and political contexts have on attitudes toward politicians, political parties, and political actions, like voting.

The study's main research objectives are to:

1) Examine, in the context of increasing evidence of young people's disengagement with traditional politics, the relationship between young people experiencing disadvantage and democracy in the study's main case studies: Ireland, Poland and Spain.
2) Provide evidence from two further case studies, France and Hungary, chosen for their divergent national political trends and strength of democratic institutions and processes.
3) Provide recommendations on how to make democracy and politics work better for young people, making it more likely that they will participate politically in the future.

The specific objectives are to investigate the relationship between democracy and young people with experience of socioeconomic disadvantage through in-depth analysis of young people's responses on the following:

- Descriptions of politics in their countries. How do they describe their democratic and political systems? And how do they think they compare to other countries?
- The extent to which and the way in which they follow politics. What do they think about political content and messaging? How does it make them feel?
- Engagement with traditional politics.
- Barriers to participation.
- Knowledge of formal politics, its institutions and representatives. Does this differ by location?
- Perceptions of the extent to which they benefit personally from the current political system. If yes, how so?
- Attitudes to politicians and specifically whether they pay enough attention to young people. Do politicians share their values?
- What they would like to see politicians do differently.
- Changes they would make to politics in their country.
- Changes that would increase their trust in the government and its institutions (taxation, health, education, judicial system)?
- The extent to which their governments protect equal rights across gender, race and ethnicity, and religion. What would they like to see change, if anything?

The following sections briefly discuss the socioeconomic context for young people in Europe with experience of disadvantage, the political context for this study and the research methodology.

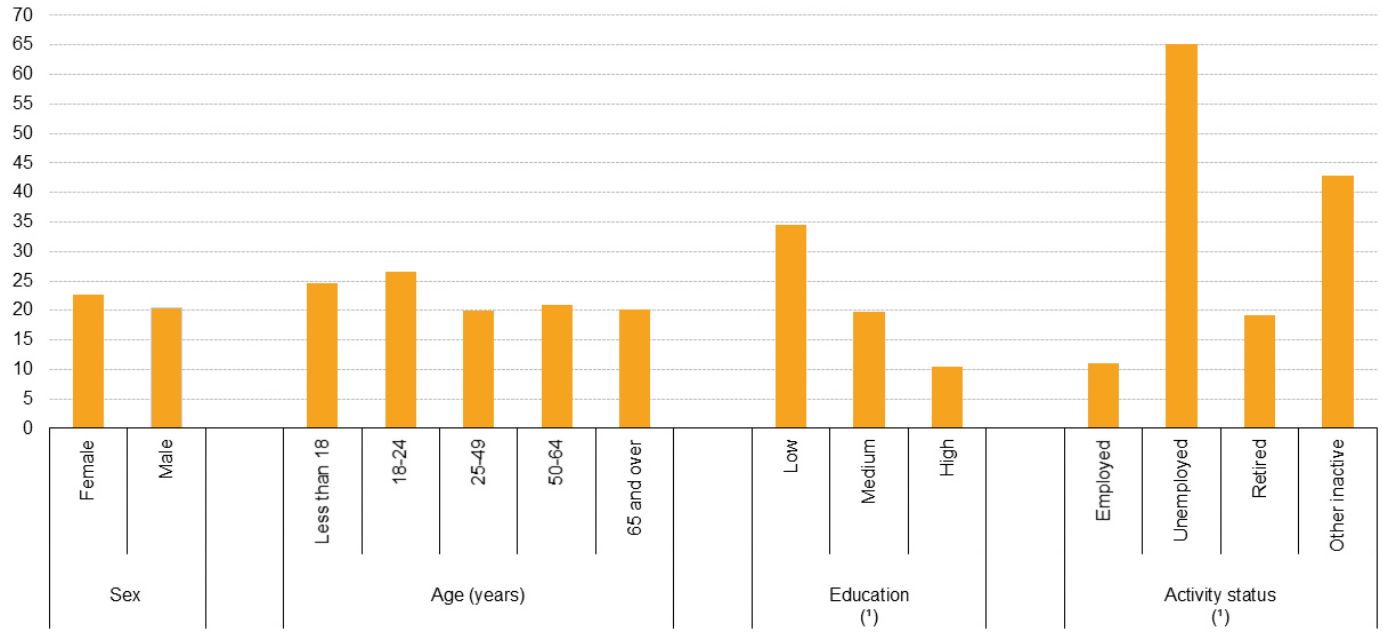
Who are we talking about?

Young people today have grown up and been politicised in an age of poly-crisis, during which "forms of climate, economic, technological and geopolitical turmoil have grown and reinforced each other to a degree never seen before."[7] Some have experienced rising income and wealth inequality, poorer health, lower and more precarious incomes; higher costs of living, lower chances of owning a home; delay in starting a family or deciding not to have one; greater caring responsibilities for parents and relatives as well as financial dependence on them. Surveys during and since Covid-19 have reported a marked deterioration in their quality of life compared to other demographic groups. With the worsening economic outlook and ongoing conflict in Ukraine, a larger proportion of young people surveyed expect their situation to worsen.[8]

For the purposes of this report, a young person is defined as between 18 and 29 years of age[9] and experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage if they live in a relatively low household income, grew up in an area of high deprivation, have not attended university (except through specific access programmes targeted at young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, as was the case in Ireland) and if not in education or training, are not in employment or are employed in low income and precarious jobs.

Figure 1 shows that in the EU, poverty affects young adults more than older cohorts, women more than men, and those with lower education levels than those with a university degree. Unemployment is also a critical factor.[10] Young adults aged 18-24 years in the EU are at higher risk of poverty (26.5% in 2022) than any cohort, including <18s, at 24.7%, and over 65s, at 20.2%.[11] Low educational attainment exacerbates this risk, as 34.5% of all 18+ years old in 2022 who had not completed secondary school were at risk of poverty, versus 10.5% of those who had gone on to third level education.[12]

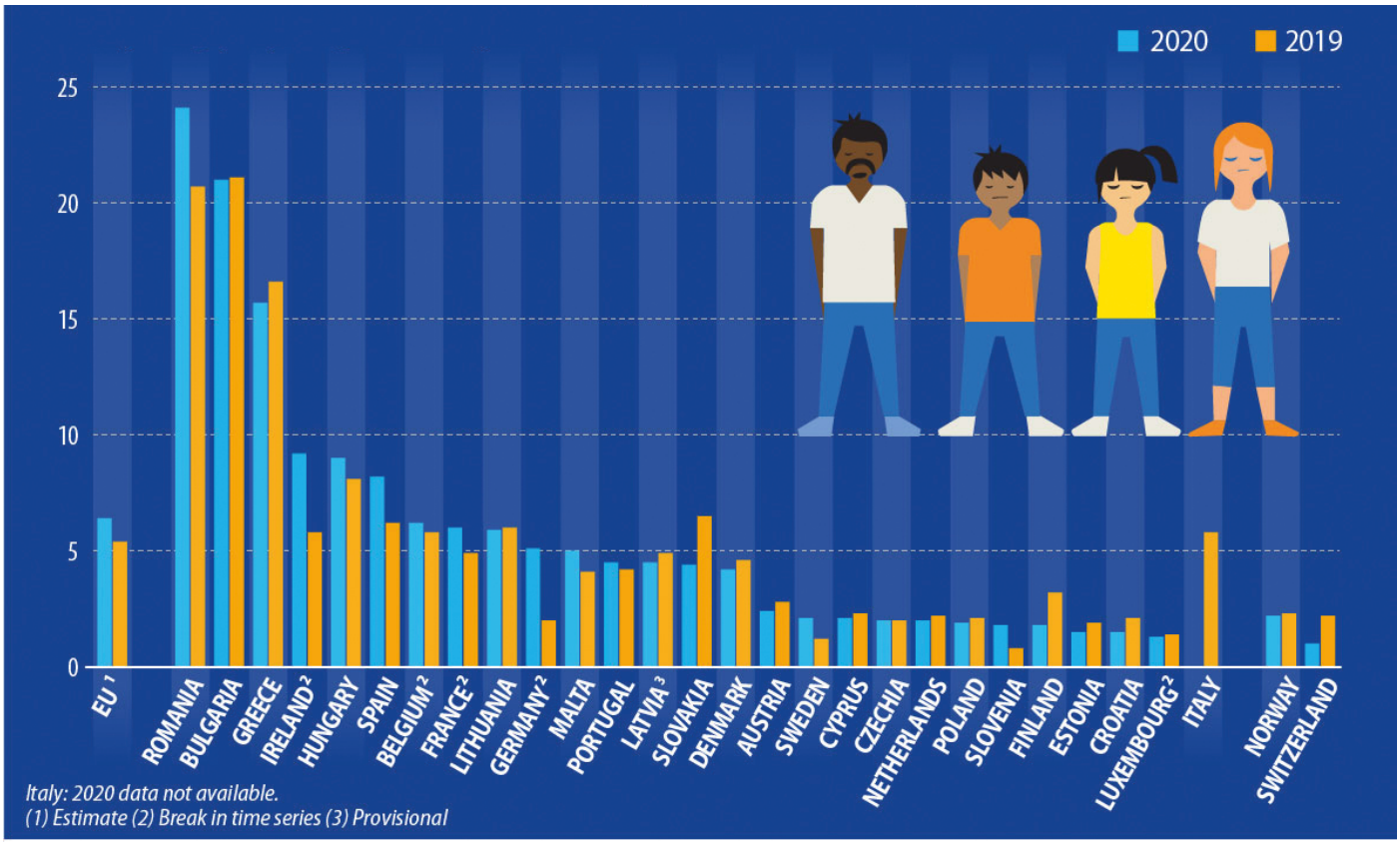
Figure 1. Share of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by socioeconomic characteristic, EU, 2022.



Source: Eurostat (2022) "Share of people at risk of poverty or social inclusion, analysed by socioeconomic characteristics, EU, 2022". Eurostat Statistics Explained.

The figure below shows levels of severe material and social deprivation for young people aged 15-29 years old in the EU, with all countries in the study except Poland showing an increase between 2019 and 2020. In addition, all our case studies, apart from Poland, show higher rates than the median value in 2020. Material deprivation indicators are used by the European Union and the European Commission to monitor progress in the fight against poverty and social exclusion.[13] Based on the limited information available from EU statistics on income and living conditions, material deprivation is defined as the proportion of people living in households who cannot afford at least three of nine items.[14] Severe material deprivation is defined as not being able to afford four out of the same nine items.

Figure 2. Percentage of young people aged 15-29 years old experiencing severe material and social deprivation, 2020 and 2019.



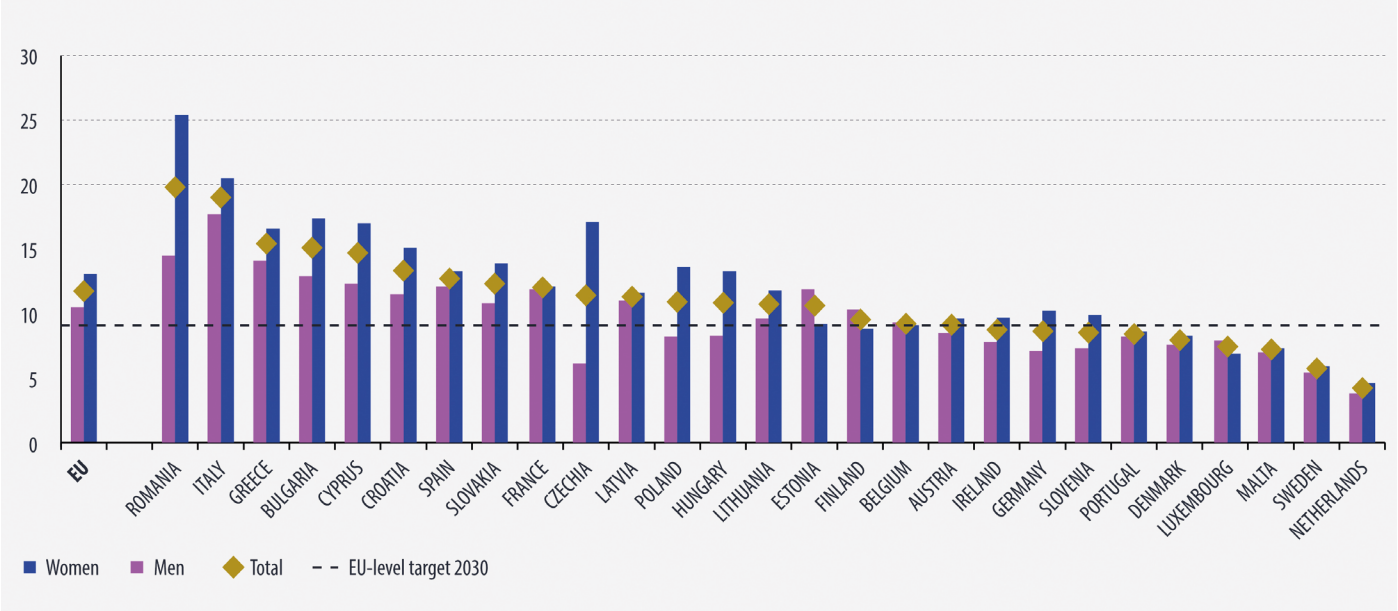
Source: Eurostat News, 'Youths: 7% severely materially and socially deprived. 10 February 2022.

Another indicator considered in the ability of young people to transition into adulthood and live independent lives is the proportion who are still living in their parental home. Ireland had the largest percentage of 25–29-year-olds living at home in 2022, or 68% of the total population. Spain and Poland had similar, slightly lower percentages of 67.2% and 63.5%.[15] Similarly, living in overcrowded housing[16] is another variable indicating that young people are at risk of poverty and material and social deprivation. The proportion of the population aged between 15- and 29-years old living in overcrowded conditions[17] shows that Poland has one of the highest percentages in the EU at 47%. The percentage in Ireland is amongst the lowest, at 4.5%, and in Spain, 11%. Other data, however, shows a more complicated picture regarding comparative levels of deprivation. The severe material deprivation rate among 16–29-year-olds in Ireland was 7.6% in 2020, up from 4.6% in 2019. This was a bigger jump compared to 6.0 to 7.9% in Spain and 4.4% to 5.8% In Poland, the percentage decreased from 2% to 1.9% between 2019 and 2022.[18]

Figure 3 below shows the percentage of young people (aged 15-29 years old) in the EU by gender who are neither in employment, education or training (NEET). Experience of NEET can have long-lasting detrimental consequences for a young person, that include a negative effect on their future employment outcomes and earnings; on their physical and mental health,[19] on the likelihood of difficulties maintaining relationships and on drug and substance abuse, involvement in criminal activities and social exclusion.[20] The chance of being NEET is affected by area deprivation, socioeconomic position, parental factors (such as employment,

education, or attitudes), growing up in care, prior academic achievement and school experiences. Being NEET therefore occurs disproportionately among those already experiencing other sources of disadvantage.[21]

Figure 3. Percentage of young people (aged 15-29) neither in employment, education or training by gender, EU, 2022.



Source: Eurostat (2022)

Ireland has the lowest percentage of NEETs amongst 15-34 years old, or 10.3% in 2022, with Poland's rate at 11.7% and Spain's at 13.9%.[22] In general, more young women than men are in this category. For example, according to Eurostat data, in 2021, 16.9% of young women were NEETs versus 10.1% of young men. The example of Poland provides some context to these differences, which may not be universal, but offers insight into the existing variations within the NEET group. Nearly one in four NEETs in Poland are unemployed. The majority are women, most of whom will be taking care of children or relatives. Men become NEETs mostly due to illness, disability or unemployment.[23] Moreover, previous research on the topic suggests that NEETs can be divided into four groups in Poland: those just entering the labour market, those returning to work after a long break, those who have lost their jobs, and those who have voluntarily resigned from their previous jobs.[24]

According to the World Health Organisation, self-perceived health is a robust predictor of morbidity and mortality of several diseases which include cancer, stress, cardiovascular disease, among other chronic health conditions. Low self-perceived health is associated with frequent use of healthcare services. Self-perceived health as very good or good among 16-29 years old in Ireland decreased from 93.8% in 2014, or after the financial crisis, to 90.3% in 2022. In Spain over the same period, this percentage decreased from 94.6% to 92% and in Poland, it decreased from 91.7% to 90.5%.[25] In other words, though income is higher in Ireland and overcrowding rates are significantly lower, these figures do not necessarily mean that Ireland fares better in terms of the number of young people living in severe deprivation or who believe they are in good health.

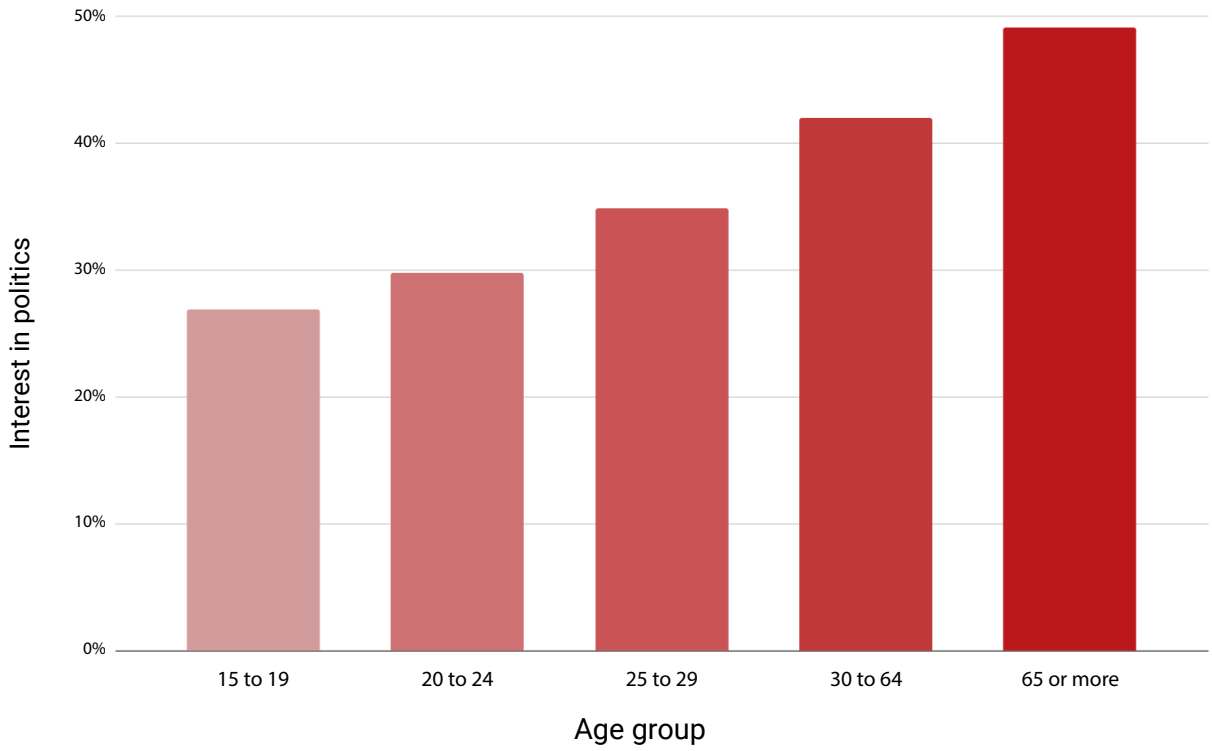
Political context: You can't eat democracy

External economic constraints and the impression that politicians can do nothing to improve young people's lives in practical terms have provoked disillusionment with political institutions. Whereas high levels of post Second World War economic growth gave political authorities considerable budgetary flexibility, enabling them to make tangible improvements to people's lives, the decline in economic growth since the crises of the 1970s, combined with the acceleration of economic globalisation and adoption of neoliberal principles in economic and social policy, has squeezed this margin for action. Limited responses to public concerns and needs have in turn affected young people's perceptions of government capacity to instigate positive change.

In his 2013 book *Ruling the Void,* the late political scientist Peter Mair described how citizens in Europe are "withdrawing and disengaging from the arena of conventional politics."[26] He noted that fewer and fewer citizens are committed to party politics and even voting in elections. Waning support for the traditionally dominant political parties amongst younger generations corresponds with lack of political participation—whether that be through not voting, joining a political party, becoming a union member or volunteering for an advocacy organisation (e.g. Friends of the Earth). The expense of such memberships in the context of economic precarity may well be prohibitive too.[27] The example of dwindling trade union membership is illustrative in this regard, not the least since unions are the political organisations that are fighting economic disadvantage. A 2019 ETUI report on union membership in the EU noted its ageing demographics, pointing to a significant increase in the average age of membership in eight countries between 2006 and 2016, including our case studies of Hungary and Spain.[28] The report also predicts a continued decline, stating, "while union density stood at 23% for 40-44-year-olds in 2004, i.e. for members born in the early 1960s, this density had declined about 3 percentage points eight years later for those born between 1970-1974, while density is predicted to stand at 16% in 2020 for the cohort born in the early 1980s."[29] As union membership typically occurs when workers are entering the job market or in the early years of their career, this trend should have a long-term impact on union density. The drop in union membership can be understood in terms of increased economic precarity and disinterest in traditional politics.

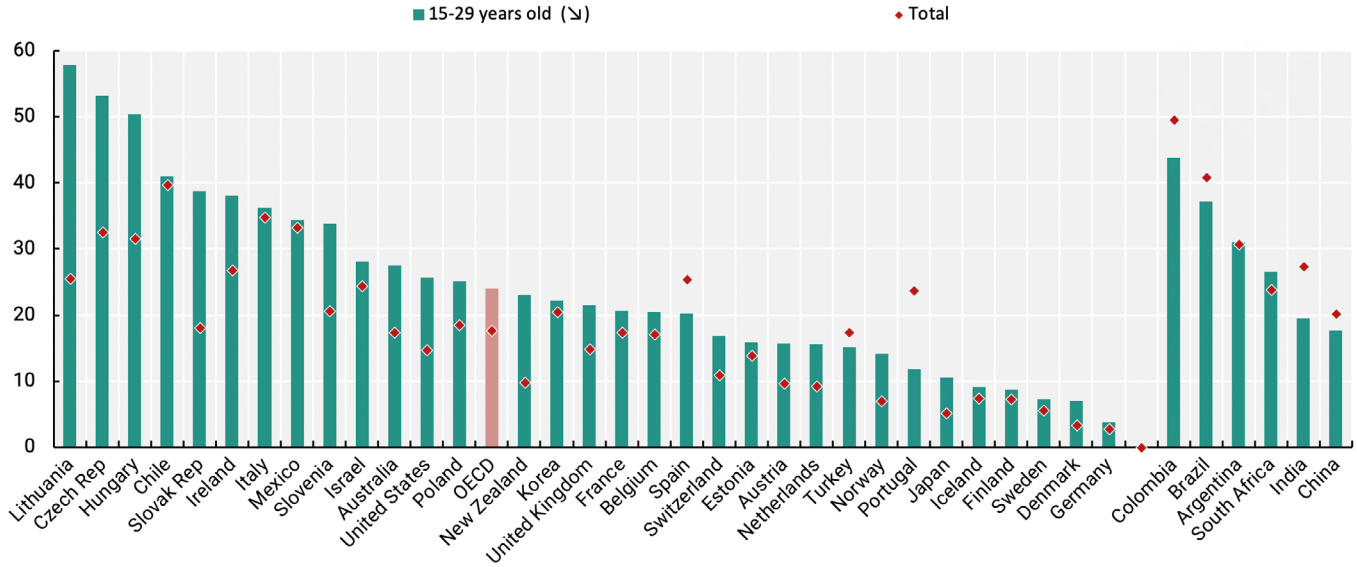
But it is not only participation: Figure 4 shows a declining interest in politics across different cohorts in Europe. A July 2023 survey from Poland provides an indication of why young people seem less interested in politics, a theme that we will look at in more depth, and in country-specific context in subsequent sections. The survey shows that 70% of respondents agreed with the statement that they "want to have a calm life without needing to engage in political or social issues" conveying a desire not to engage in politics unless necessary.[30] This suggests that young people in Poland do not perceive politics as delivering any personal and perhaps collective benefit, or at least not enough to warrant supporting mainstream parties or participating at all. Whereas the report's country analysis reflects this assessment in terms of young people experiencing social disadvantage, the 2023 elections in Poland were a striking example of record numbers of young people coming to the polls to defend democracy as a system. This distinction between favouring democracy as a system versus deep dissatisfaction with its functioning is a key theme present throughout the qualitative part of this study.

Figure 4. Interest in politics by age group in Europe.



Source: Own elaboration based on the European Social Survey (Round 9) and Simón et al. (2020, p.182).[31]

Figure 5. Percentage of people reporting to be not at all interested in politics, by age group, 2016 or last year available.

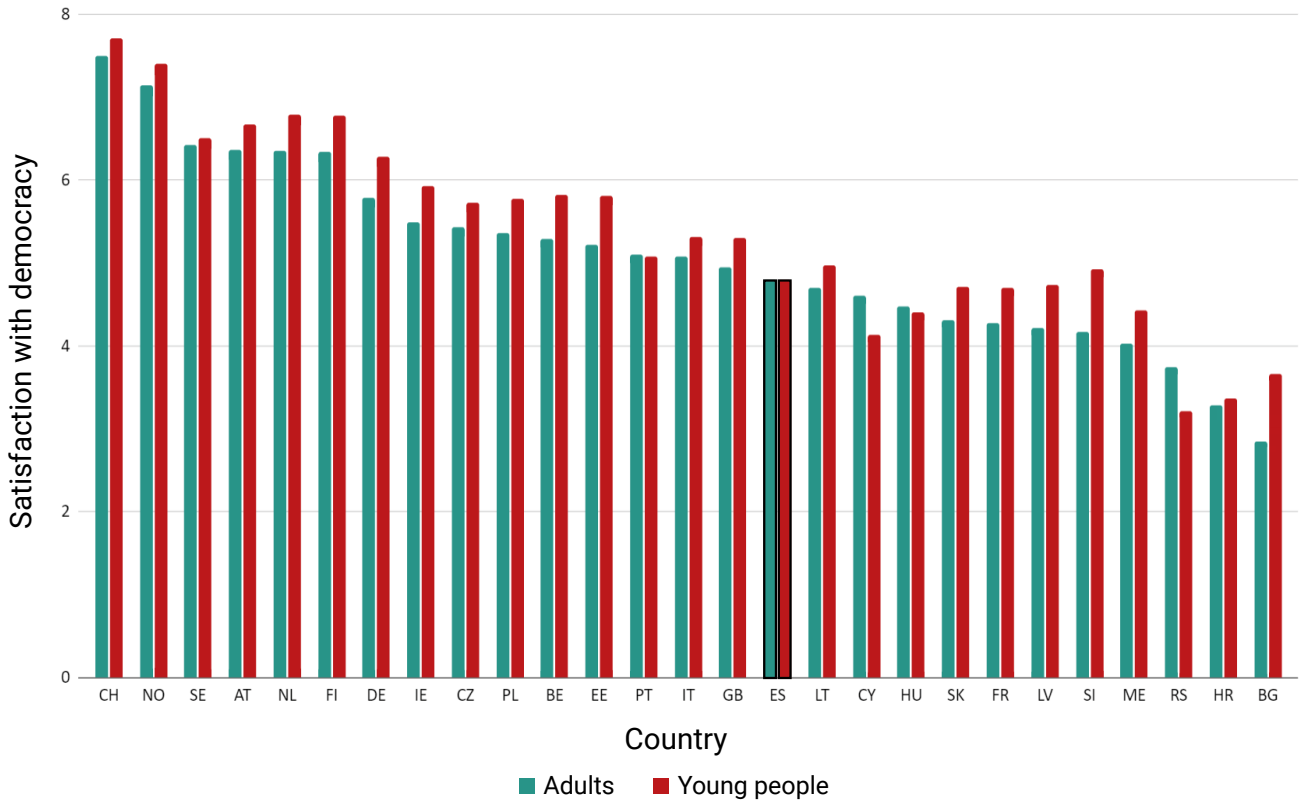


Source: European Social Survey ESS8 - 2016, ESS7-2014 and World Values Survey Wave 6: 2010-2014.https://doi.org/10.1787/888933939788

Figure 5 shows European Social Survey and World Values Survey data on the percentage of 15–29-year-olds reporting to be not at all interested in politics. Although this data is not very recent, it suggests that disinterest is relatively common across wealthy countries - with one in four young people not at all interested in politics.[32] Just under 40% of people between 15-29 years old in Ireland report to be not at all interested in politics, followed by Poland (at just above the OECD average of 24%) and finally Spain at 20%.[33]

Recent studies also show higher levels of discontent among the young than previous generations at similar life stages, partly due to the growing intergenerational divide in life opportunities, and greater dissatisfaction with democracy – not only in absolute terms, but also relative to older cohorts at comparable stages of life.[34] However, European Social Survey data from 2018 or pre-Covid in Figure 6 shows a relatively small gap between levels of satisfaction with democracy among adults and young people. This suggests that further comparative longitudinal analyses on this topic may be necessary to arrive at more conclusive results.

Figure 6. Satisfaction with democracy among adults and young people in Europe in 2018.[35]



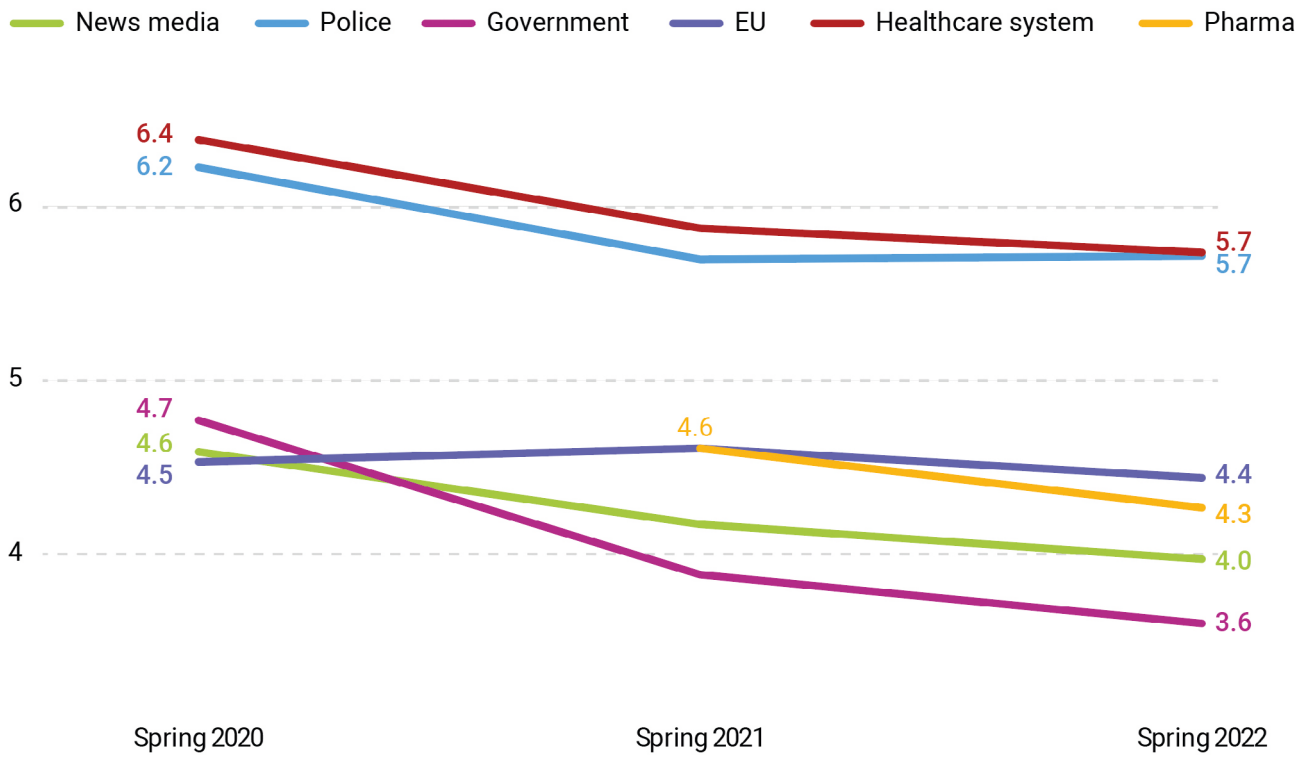
Source: Author's own based on European Social Survey data and Simón et al. (2020, p.190).

Do a lack of interest in and dissatisfaction with politics lead to a preference for authoritarianism? In an Open Society Foundation survey in 30 countries, while an overwhelming majority of respondents (86%) wanted to live in a democracy and a majority (average of 62%) preferred it as the form of government, just 57% of 18-35-year-olds thought democracy is preferable to any other form of government, compared to 71% of older respondents.[36] Amongst 18-35-year-olds, 42% also believed that army rule was a 'good way to rule the country' compared to 33% of 36-55-year-olds and 20% of those aged 56 and above. Similarly, 35% of 18–25-year-olds believed that a good way to rule the country was having 'leaders who do not bother with

parliaments or elections', compared to 32% of 36–55-year-olds and 26% of over 56-year-olds.[37] Other studies also find this worrying inclination for non-democratic forms of governing. In 2022, a centre right UK think tank Onward report found that 26% of 18-34-year-olds believed that democracy is a bad form of government for the UK, and 75% feel that experts would do a better job at governing than the government itself.[38] The survey also found that 61% agreed with the statement 'having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections would be a good way of governing this country' and 46% agreed that 'having the army rule would be a good way of governing this country'. Both percentage figures contrasted sharply with those of over 55 years old: 29% and 13% respectively. The conclusion of the study was that young people favoured strongmen and were not necessarily against military rule, and that these trends have become more pronounced over the past few decades.

These are worrying results that must be taken very seriously by all those who want to defend democracy. However, as we will show later in our empirical research, there are nuances within these developments that can help to tease out the problem and show ways in which it can be addressed. EU survey data has revealed a sharp decline in trust in national government amongst 18–34-year-olds since the onset of Covid, also revealing that their trust in government is significantly lower than their trust in democracy.[39] This level of distrust mirrors wider trends amongst the general population, as shown in figure 7. Trust in government ranks below trust in other institutions such as healthcare services or the police. On the other hand, trust in the news media does not fare much better, as also illustrated by data from our case studies: 33% of 18–34-year-olds in Ireland and 21.3% in Poland state they do not trust news media at all. 19.2% of those in Ireland and 38% in Poland moderately trust news media.[40]

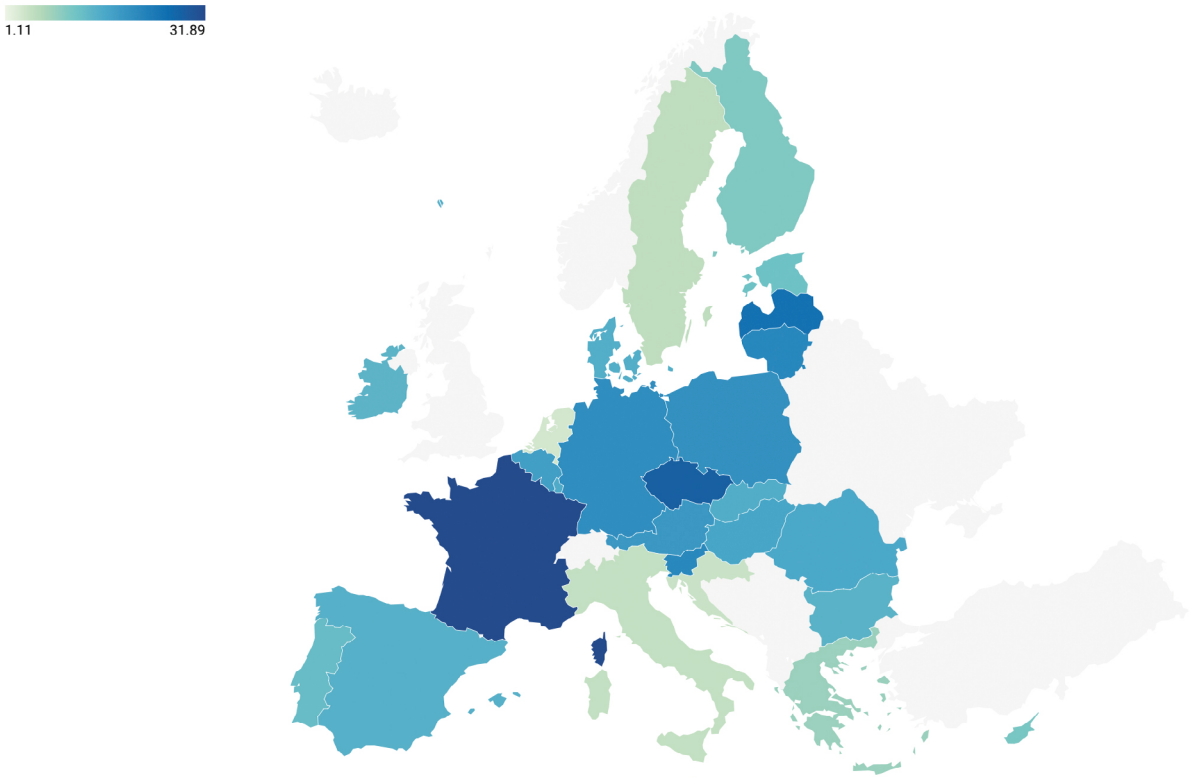
Figure 7. Levels of trust in institutions, EU-27 (Spring 2020-Spring 2022).



Source: Fifth round of the Living, working and COVID-19 e-survey: Living in a new era of uncertainty

At the same time, Arrighi et al. (2022) found that trust in local/regional institutions in the EU is significantly higher than in national institutions, which is reflected in an average trust gap of 15 percentage points between the two. The trust gap is largest in France at 31.9 percentage points, with the Czech Republic, Lithuania and Slovenia also showing big differences. In contrast, Sweden, Italy, Croatia, and Ireland show the smallest difference, ranging from 4.6 to 5.6 percentage points.[41] This means that even in these countries, local/regional institutions are trusted more than national institutions.

Figure 8. Trust gap between national institutions (parliament and government) and regional/local institutions in percentage points, Europe.



Source: Arrighi, J.F., J. Battestini, L. Coatleven et al. (2022) "The scale of trust: Local, regional, national and European Politics in Perspective". Working Paper. Groupe d'études géopolitiques.

It's more complicated

So, where do we stand? In the first section of our introduction, we analysed indicators of socioeconomic disadvantage among young Europeans, revealing extensive and intense challenges within this population group in one of the most prosperous regions globally. We then analysed data on trends such as decreasing participation in traditional politics, declining political interest and distrust of some democratic institutions and a worrying tendency towards autocratic governance. This analysis, albeit limited by the scope of the report and the limited age-specific comparative data—a topic we will return to later—brings us back to our fundamental question: How do socioeconomic disadvantages affect young people's perceptions of democracy?

Previous work does not give a straightforward answer to this question. For example, Foa et al. found that when young people took the brunt of the eurozone crisis, with 25% higher unemployment rates than average, their perceptions of democratic performance[42] remained high.[43] They may be attracted to left wing, or even radical right wing, populist parties, but this may reflect a challenge to the current political status quo rather than a warm embrace of authoritarianism or specific policies like climate change scepticism.[44]

The reasons for the appeal of far-right parties to young people—arguably the biggest threat to liberal democracy in Europe at this point—remain ambiguous and their support for such parties varies from country to country and from election to election. Sebastian Milbank, in a May 2023 article for *The Critic* entitled 'The Kids Are Alt-Right' remarks:

> *Where the Left failed, the nationalist Right succeeded in capitalising on young Europe's anger [...] Why? Italian youth unemployment hit 47% in 2014 and continues to hover around 30%. Anger has focused on international finance for its role in causing the 2008 crash and the Eurozone's imposition of austerity measures in Italy which saw a 'technocratic' government imposed on the country. It was also Italy that bore the brunt of the 2015 migration crisis and was forced to shoulder much of the expense of Mediterranean search and rescue operations. Young people are angry with the EU, globalisation, and Italy's own entrenched political classes.*[45]

Milbank argues that young people find Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni appealing as a leader because she "embodies a generation of young people who feel abandoned and limited by their parents' and grandparents' generations."[46] In other words, whereas the example of Italy, and the reasons for socioeconomic disadvantage, are country specific, the argument carries a deeper point that we will continue to explore throughout the rest of the paper; namely, that if young people support populist movements, participate less in traditional politics or express dissatisfaction with the current democratic system, their behaviour should be attributed, at least in part, to their own financial precarity and perception of being ignored. Likewise, they do have views on what works and what doesn't and any lack of participation should not be equated with disinterest.

The report *State of Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law*, published by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe 2023, argues that "[p]ublic trust in institutions and democracy as a whole will depend on the speed and effectiveness of the response to citizens' legitimate needs and expectations, including with regard to participation."[47] Young people aged between 18 and 29 years old in the country case studies, who are the research subjects of this report, cited precisely the *absence* of both policy addressing 'legitimate' needs and expectations and opportunities to influence policymaking and politicians as principal factors in their disillusionment with and lack of participation in the political system. As Pospieszna et al (2023) remind us:

> *Alongside perceptions of democracy, political efficacy is one of the most important underlying beliefs motivating people to participate. Political efficacy refers to the ability of citizens to influence political affairs, and to translate their values and preferences into policy. The greater sense of efficacy one has, the higher degree of participation in both electoral and non-electoral politics (Vráblíková 2017).*[48]

A more nuanced analysis therefore suggests that dissatisfaction with democracy should be interpreted as dissatisfaction with the way democracy is functioning rather than an evaluation of democracy as such. Satisfaction with democracy in turn is highly dependent on contextual variables such as satisfaction with the economy, procedural fairness,[49] economic perceptions,[50] voting for a winning or losing party[51] and perceived

representation.[52] All these factors driving attitudes about democracy emerged in the research for this report as did the barriers to political engagement created by social marginalisation and economic exclusion. Young people do feel disconnected from the formal workings of parliamentary party politics. However, at the same time, it must be acknowledged that they are also engaged and mobilised by both big structural issues, such as climate change and "the micro-politics of everyday life"[53] particularly the politics of their local communities.

Much of the above-mentioned literature has relied primarily on surveys and macro-level polls that frequently do not integrate the influence of social marginalisation and economic exclusion, regardless of age, in their analysis of attitudes toward democracy. This report, attempts to help address this gap through complementary in-depth qualitative methods, such as focus groups, to further clarify 1) the views of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds toward politics and democracy as a political system; 2) their motivation to actively participate in democratic institutions like political parties and/or civil society organisations that push for government accountability and protection of rights which are integral characteristics of democracies and 3) the causal mechanisms and specific drivers, and logic behind their views and behaviour regarding political life in their country. It should be noted that recruiting participants for focus groups in disadvantaged communities was challenging in some countries, reflecting the political interest of young people in those areas.

The rest of this report is structured as follows. The next four chapters provide the country case studies. They begin with socioeconomic and political context followed by what participants said about the perceived benefits of politics, what's not working and what they are asking of their democracies. The final chapter summarises the findings of the cross-comparative study, reflects on its policy implications and provides final recommendations.

METHODOLOGY

This policy study is based on in-depth evidence from over 100 young people participating in 15 focus groups across five countries, as well as 50 interviews with experts working with young people in a range of organisations at local and national levels. Case study countries were selected to be diverse in terms of their politics, democratic systems, economies and socioeconomic contexts for young people.

PHASE 1: Desk research

We conducted a literature review examining studies of young people's relationship to democracy, including surveys of their attitudes to and participation in politics and democracy.

PHASE 2: Data collection

Focus Groups

Ten focus groups were conducted in urban and rural locations in Ireland, Poland and Spain.

Participants were selected to meet the following criteria:

Age (between 18-29 years old)

Low household income

Non-graduate post-secondary education.

Organisers aimed to appropriately represent ethnic minority groups and achieve an even split between men and women. These goals were not always achievable in practice.

Participants were primarily recruited by local organisations working directly with young people.

Facilitators led the groups in their native language. Sessions took place in person and lasted approximately 60 minutes. Focus group participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their response and the sessions were recorded with their consent. Transcripts were produced for analysis.

Expert interviews

30 interviews (between 40-60 minutes) were carried out both online and in person with:

National political party representatives e.g. Members of Parliament (MPs)

Local civil society and political representatives

Academics

Representatives from local and national civil society organisations.

The experts were granted anonymity. Their names and functions are not mentioned unless authors have been granted explicit authorisation.

PHASE 3: Data analysis

Transcripts from focus group and expert interviews were analysed to identify common themes and patterns, answer the research questions and provide suggested recommendations.

PHASE 4: Additional data collection and analysis

Focus Groups

Six focus groups were conducted in urban and rural locations in France and Hungary.

The participants were chosen according to the same criteria as used for Phase 2 focus groups.

Expert interviews

A further 20 interviews (between 40-60 minutes) were carried out both online and in person with representatives in France and Hungary from the same types of organisations as in Phase 2.

Transcripts from focus group and expert interviews were analysed in the same way as Phase 3.

2. IRELAND

1. IRELAND

Introduction

The 2020 Irish election was a surprise, in that *Sinn Féin*, which had not performed well in the EU and local 2020 elections, won more seats than *Fianna Fáil* and *Fine Gael*. It was the first time in Irish politics since 1923 that one of these two parties did not receive the most votes.[54] A contributor to *Sinn Féin's* success was the 'youth vote'. According to the *Irish Times* exit poll, *Sinn Féin* was the first preference for 31.8% of 18–24-year-olds and 31.7% of 25-34 -year-olds.[55]

The continued popularity of *Sinn Féin* since the 2020 elections has signified a shift to the left for the Irish public and disenchantment with the two historic parties of power. The riots of November 23, 2023, while reprehensible, revealed continued alienation from the political order and a susceptibility to anti-government mobilisation.[56] The demand for policy solutions, especially in relation to housing and health, has become more acute. 45% of young people between 25-29 years old live with their parents, one of the largest increases seen in Europe since 2010.[57] This is unsurprising, considering that the average rent nationally in the second quarter of 2020 was EUR 1,256 and EUR 1,758 in Dublin, against an average income of EUR 1,176 for young people aged 15-24 years old.[58] They also face discrimination in looking for housing. A 2021 FEANTSA/FAP survey found that young people in Ireland were six times more likely to be discriminated against than any other age group when looking for a home. Moreover, young people in Ireland are facing a mental health crisis, as individuals aged 18 to 24 years old are eight times more likely than older people to have a mental health disorder.[59]

The research for this report occurred primarily in the summer and autumn of 2023, or almost a year before the local and EU elections in 2024. The national elections must be held before March 2025. Though polling companies relentlessly assess the chances of each of the three major parties, those young people involved in the focus groups, or interviewed separately, demonstrated scant interest in any of these parties, with the exception occasionally of *Sinn Féin*. The young people grew up in relatively low-income areas in Dublin (e.g. the Liberties) or areas outside Dublin; were migrants to Ireland from countries as diverse as Afghanistan, Romania, and Somalia, or were from the Travelling community.[60] Regardless of their biographical differences, most displayed little faith in the political process. The exceptions were young people looking to carve a career out of youth work, which they themselves had benefitted from when they were younger.

The expert interviewees included several academics specialising in deliberative democracy; union representatives concerned about younger membership; representatives of youth organisations and climate and political activists. They argued that some of the disaffection was based on new, more individualised ways of being political; continued class bias in social movements; lack of role models within politics for young people as well as access to information about policies; and insufficient focus on policies that directly affect young people.

The focus groups proved challenging to organise and all three were set up through programmes directed at young people from socially marginalised and low-income households. One intended focus group fell apart because the would-be participants did not understand why someone would talk to them about politics. This experience points to the need for social inclusion in politics, for targeted efforts to reach these groups, so

that they perceive they are influencing the policies that affect them. While no one spoke of any alternative to democracy or the appeal of 'strong' leaders, they still distrusted the way in which their political system operated.

Socioeconomic context

Senator Tom Conlon argued in a speech to the Irish *Seanad* (Senate) on September 28, 2022, that, "the housing crisis, the cost-of-living crisis, and the inability to provide adequate care to people with disabilities, medical and mental health issues has led to a situation in which young people are emigrating for better educational and living opportunities."[61] He then listed examples illustrating how acute the crises facing younger generations in Ireland had become. He referred to "reports of students being homeless, living in tents, sharing rooms with several people or having to couch-surf because they are unable to pay rent" and the impact of the housing crisis "on young people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and people who are impaired by medical issues, disabilities or mental health issues." He added that young carers and young parents are particularly vulnerable.

After the financial crisis, emigration became a common phenomenon amongst young people, as they could not find work in Ireland. An Oxfam report published in 2013 discussed how the cost of living, including rent, had made living in Dublin untenable because the government had reduced or eliminated benefits while expanding the reach of taxation by lowering the standard rate tax band. Unemployment in 2013 reached 13.7%, 17.7% amongst men. In February of that year, almost 31% of under 25s were unemployed. Underemployment was also prevalent, and the IMF calculated that more than 23% of the population in April 2013 was unemployed or underemployed.[62] Yet, state support halved for 20 - 21 years old and unemployment benefits decreased from €204.30 to €100 per week for that population and to €144 per week for those between 22 - 24 years old.[63]

Economic pressures certainly influenced emigration trends. Between 2009 and 2015, slightly less than 265,000 Irish citizens left Ireland while 120,000 returned, a difference of 143,000. This emigrant population was notable because of its higher levels of education, as well as its proportional size out of a population of approximately five million. At the time, 47% of Irish citizens aged 25-34 possessed a tertiary degree of three years or more, but 62% of migrants during this period had this qualification. Overall, emigration after the financial crisis in 2008-9 was concentrated amongst 20-29 year olds. About 70% of the emigrant population between 2008-2013 was between these ages, with far less (11%) amongst 30-34 year olds, and even less (about 7%) amongst 35-39 year olds.[64] The primary factors influencing the decision to migrate related to work. The study conducted by the Migration Policy Institute, and referenced above, found that 47% of recent migrants had full time work while 53% were unemployed or underemployed. The percentage citing work as the reason for migrating shot up between 2012 and 2013, following a dramatic increase overall from 2008.[65]

Economic growth has since improved dramatically in Ireland. The country's unemployment rate at the end of 2022 was 4.3%, or 4.1% for men and 4.5% for women. The youth (15-24 year olds) unemployment rate was 11.5% and 3.3% for 25-74 year olds.[66] Ireland's GDP grew 12% in 2022 and was projected to grow by 5.5% in 2023 and 5% in 2024. In comparison, the EU economy was expected to grow 1% in 2023 and 1.7% in 2024, and the Eurozone, 5.8% in 2023 and 2.8% in 2024.[67]

Yet, despite the resilience of Ireland's economy and relatively low unemployment rates, younger generations are still facing the long-term consequences of austerity for investment in public services like mental health, housing, and tertiary education. Successive governments over the past five years have raised the minimum wage and expanded apprenticeship possibilities.[68] In response, the government has committed €100 million

to improving the infrastructure of four universities and eased up on hiring restrictions imposed during the austerity period, enabling universities to commit to employing 1500 more staff. The government has also invested in an action plan for apprenticeships aiming to expand upon the 60 programmes now available that lead to qualifications to reach 10,000 apprenticeships by 2025.[69]

However, the cost of living, the housing and university accommodation shortages, and pressures on public health and community-based support services mean that these policies will have limited effect on improving quality of life for young people. The National Minimum Wage (NMW) in 2023 was €7.91/hour for under 18s, €9.04/hour for 18-year-old employees, €10.17/hour for 19 year olds, and €11.30 for all those over 20.[70] For those under 20, the NMW is calculated at 70, 80, and 90% respectively of the legal minimum wage. The absolute increase between 2022 and 2023 was slightly higher than between 2021 and 2022. Yet, at the same time, the current living wage is €13.85/hour, which itself reflects the rising cost of living, especially in cities like Dublin, and illustrates the disparity between the NMW and the income that is needed for necessities. The Living Wage Technical Group explains in its report for 2022/23 that:

> Over the past year, living costs have increased for almost all the areas of expenditure included in the calculation. Energy costs (+35%) and transport costs (+12%) increased the most despite various government interventions to dampen these impacts. Large areas of weekly expenditure also grew in cost including clothing (+7%), food (+2.4%), and social inclusion[71] (+7.5%)."[72]

The group adds that "housing costs (rent) continue to represent the largest component of weekly expenditure in the Living Wage calculation and increased by an average of 4.3% (almost €8) per week. If housing costs had stayed at 2021 levels, the 2022/23 Living Wage would be €13.50."[73] This calculation reflects the importance of housing policy for young people and suggests how significant the shortage of affordable housing is on trust in government.

As already outlined, Ireland has a high percentage of young people aged between 25 and 29 living at home. The costs of accommodation and the scarcity of places, especially for the technological versus traditional universities, can affect capacity to attend university. Collette Murphy, the Vice President for Welfare of the Union of Students in Ireland was quoted in the online newspaper *The Journal* before the start of the academic year 2023 as saying "We know the budgets that students are living on, with minimum wage jobs and trying to work upwards of 20 hours-a-week, on top of doing their coursework, to try and fund their education as well as their accommodation." She blamed long-term underinvestment and reliance on private accommodation opportunities. The broader argument is that financial constraints may prevent students from lower income households succeeding, despite the range of supports in place.[74] A 2018/2019 study conducted by the Higher Education Authority found that there were fewer students from areas characterised by socioeconomic disadvantage compared to more affluent areas. There were about five students from disadvantaged areas to every 10 students from affluent areas, with some institutions, such as Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin, and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland possessing the lowest proportion of students from disadvantaged areas. The study also found that men from these areas were less likely to pursue higher education than women, and that in general, professions with higher levels of remuneration, like banking and medicine, attract students from more affluent backgrounds.[75] These figures suggest that assistance needed for social mobility, or to attend the most prestigious universities in the country and enter high-paying occupations, is missing or too weak.

Other areas relevant to young people, like mental health services, have suffered similar trends in underinvestment, leading to long waiting periods to access services, whether in the public or charitable sectors. The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) waiting list in August 2023 numbered

4361 across the country, an increase from 2115 in 2020. Importantly, lack of access to sufficient support as a child has knock-on effects for young adults, who may face even more limited opportunities to access mental health services. The charity Jigsaw provides an online service and a set of in-person sessions for young people and other charities offer more intensive support, but chronic understaffing due to underinvestment has limited service availability.[76]

Predictably, young people supported the opposition party *Sinn Féin*, which is left-leaning and has promoted housing as one of its central policy issues. The research indicated that *Sinn Féin* was the most popular party, and several TDS (*Teachta Dála* or MP in Irish) were cited as the only ones willing to help when constituents approached them with problems. Participants in one of the urban focus groups were angry that *Sinn Féin* was not invited to join the current government, despite their electoral success in the 2020 elections, where they won the most first preference votes. One person remarked, "we expressed our voice, and we weren't listened to." A poll conducted by RedC in February 2021 found that 34% of young people aged 18-34 would vote for *Sinn Féin* as their first preference (proportional representation), compared to 14% for *Fine Gael* and 13% for *Fianna Fáil*, the traditional parties of government.[77] RedC concluded:

> Behind the growth appears to be the belief that Sinn Féin has the answer to some of the issues that are most worrying voters at the present time. Housing has been seen to be the most important aspect among voters at this election, and among those under 45 years old *Sinn Féin* are seen to be the party that they believe has the best policies to solve the housing crisis in the next five years. Likewise, when we look at health, *Sinn Féin* also performs very well in this age group. We are even seeing *Sinn Féin* nominated as the best party among voters under 35 to manage the economy.[78]

This analysis resonates with the desire for more effective policymaking, to witness tangible benefits from supporting one political party or another.

Political context

Ireland is similar to the other countries discussed in this report, in that it is a parliamentary representative democracy with a head of state. The *Oireachtas* consists of two chambers, *Dáil Éireann* and *Seanad Éireann,* the former of which is directly elected and the latter, appointed by different vocational panels, the Prime Minister (or *Taoiseach*), and six universities. The voting system used in Ireland is proportional representation, which allows for voters to rank their candidate preferences on the ballot and for a single vote transfer to the second-choice candidate. Ireland is one of two EU member states requiring all voters to register ahead of an election.

The *Taoiseach* is typically from the largest party in the *Dáil*, unless there is a coalition. The president of Ireland, currently Michael D. Higgins, serves a seven-year term, whereas elections are required for the *Dáil* every five years. The *Seanad* must be appointed within 90 days of a general election. Ireland has been governed by *Fianna Fáil* and *Fine Gael* since its independence in 1922. The former is a self-declared centrist party and the latter, a centre-right party. The Labour Party has frequently been in coalition with one or the other, but its participation in the austerity government after the financial crisis has arguably negatively affected its electoral chances over the past decade. On the other hand, *Sinn Fein's*[79] popularity has grown, and it regularly tops polls as the most popular party in the country. The current government is a coalition between the two historic parties of independence, *Fianna Fáil* and *Fine Gael,* and the Green Party. *Sinn Féin*, which won the most seats in the 2020 elections, is currently the primary party of opposition.

Similar to the other case studies in this study, the public have relatively low levels of trust in politicians. For example, in table 1, respondents were asked to rate their interpersonal and institutional trust levels on a 0-10-point scale from '0 Not at all' to '10 Completely.' The mean score for each trust level indicator was calculated by adding individual scores and dividing the total by the number of individuals. The table shows that every institution and other members of society are trusted far more than political parties in Ireland. The police, the civil service, the legal system, and 'other people' are trusted substantially more than political parties, despite their role in maintaining democracy, which is trusted in Ireland. A 2023 study of changing social and political attitudes in Ireland finds trends in satisfaction with democracy, political trust, and judicial trust have remained stable among younger cohorts (while increasing for older ones) but their perceived political efficacy and media trust have begun to decline; and social trust has remained low over the 21st century.[80]

Table 1. Respondents' trust in people and institutions in Ireland.

Extent to which respondents trust people and institutions mean score, December 2021

	TRUST							
	Most people	**National government**	**Local authority**	**Political parties**	**Gardaí**	**Courts and legal system**	**Civil service**	**News media**
Respondent mean trust score	6.7	5.1	4.9	3.8	6.7	6.5	6.2	4.8

Source: CSO statistical publication (2022) "Trust Survey December 2021: Trust". Central Statistics Office, 24 March.

Democracy: Valued in principle but not working in practice

Echoing the survey results, most participants in the research, whether in the focus groups or interviewed separately, were critical of how politics functions in Ireland. A few individuals had received help from individual politicians and some participants cited policies that benefited communities directly. A young woman spoke of how, after speaking with several TDs,[81] one had offered to help. For her, his willingness to listen to her had been very important. It should be said, though, that his actions had not inspired her to consider voting for him in the next election. A man attending one of the focus groups with his children shared the same experience of approaching multiple TDs for assistance and only finding one willing to intervene, for which he appeared grateful. Like the young woman, however, the TD's actions did not convince him to vote for him. The influence on their voting habits was intergenerational and may reflect political culture as well as disaffection. The young woman's mother had never voted and the man voted for the party his parents had supported. His children, however, did not seem interested in politics.

If one perceived benefit of politics was the capacity to ask for assistance on an individual level, another was the opportunity politics offered for strengthening social values and for representing the interests of minority communities and/or disadvantaged areas at a national level. For the focus group with young Travellers,[82] Senator Eileen Flynn, who is a Traveller and the first Senator from that community, represented a possibility

for themselves, whether to enter politics or as someone who could make things happen for the community. A community worker attending the focus group described her as:

> *[A] young mum. And in that role, she's had a child even since she started as a senator, which is unusual across senators even so she's breaking the mould already. Like she is a trailblazer.*

A young man interviewed in North Dublin spoke similarly about a TD who came from the area. In general terms, politicians for him "are only out for themselves," adding, "I don't trust them. They don't tackle problems . . . people think politicians are there for the payslip, but no work is getting done." Yet, he also liked the TD originally from the area, whose motivation seemed more genuine.

A participant in the Traveller focus group stressed that "there are actually good TDs out there" but if they were not the local TD, then the community would not be exposed to their work. She was critical of one local TD, who had made comments she believed were discriminatory toward Travellers. For her, when a TD expresses a negative opinion, this could influence others to express similar opinions. This reinforced her support for having a Traveller represent the community directly.

If the focus group participants were largely sceptical about the motivation and impact of politicians, the experts interviewed were more generous, though they still argued for more effective platforms connecting young people with policymakers. Their generosity was founded on the exercise of politics itself, which was wider than individual politicians or political parties. Civil society offered a platform for skill development, advocacy, and contact with policymakers and political institutions. Even if young people preferred individualistic activism, they could rely upon CSOs for support and information, as well as the organisation of activities ranging from demonstrations to workshops and conferences.

Indeed, the research itself appeared to provoke greater interest in politics amongst participants and a desire for skill development and formal participation. After two of the focus groups and, in one case, a separate interview, two individuals expressed interest in registering to vote and even more wanted greater knowledge of how politics works and the policy positions of the various parties. A young woman in one of the urban focus groups asked for a comparative description of the policy agendas of the political parties before the local and national elections in 2024 and potentially 2025. The young woman, mentioned above, who had received assistance from the TD, had never participated in any political activity, such as crowdfunding, signing a petition, or joining a protest. However, when asked about engaging in a political activity that would lead to local improvements, for example, building a playground, she reacted positively, saying, "I'd like that for my younger brother who needs a place to play rather than hanging out on the street." In other words, both the experts and focus group participants distinguished between the possibilities of politics, whether informal or formal and their political representatives.

The Iranian American scholar Asef Bayat has analysed the political importance of individualised, spontaneous actions, especially amongst disenfranchised and dispossessed populations. He contrasts their actions with structured, more durable social movements and collective action, both of which may follow specific leaders and convey ideological positions. In contrast, 'ordinary' un-politics consists of "strong elements of spontaneity, individualism, and inter-group competition, among other features. They place special emphasis, moreover, on action over meaning."[83] Bayat calls this action the "quiet encroachment of the ordinary", "marked by quiet, atomised and prolonged mobilisation with episodic collective action."[84] Bayat is referring to countries governed by repressive regimes, without the opportunity for political participation that exists in democracies. However, his work is still relevant for the Irish context. In this case, action is localised, individualised, and

sometimes spontaneous. It is identified with shared social values, which are in turn contrasted with those of far wealthier, elitist politicians (true or not). At the same time, it is explicitly not a politics of affiliation, but rather an effort to instigate even incremental positive change within the community through a combination of individual and collective actions. To a young woman determinedly not interested in voting, this explained the appeal of local efforts to build a playground or of politicians coming into the community to talk to residents in their own time, or utilising youth services to cultivate desire to give back to the local community. As one participant in the rural focus group, a woman from the Travelling community, stated, politics is "day-to-day life, you see the stuff [results]."

What's not working

Criticism of politics and the political system amongst research participants focused on five themes:

1) politicians not listening to young people in general and to those with experience of socioeconomic disadvantage;
2) politicians largely interested in personal benefit and remaining in office;
3) they and their families not perceiving enough positive change in their lives due to policy and politicians and, inversely, the obstacles faced by communities and families when they want to bring about change, whether regarding the protection of rights or something far more immediate and tangible, like building a local skateboarding park;
4) their reliance on social media for news, though without necessarily trusting the news they read or how politicians present themselves on various platforms; and
5) disengagement from formal, collective political participation, which is reflected in low levels of voting and joining either explicitly political actions, such as a signing a petition, or what could be regarded as politicised activities, like becoming a union member.

The combination does not necessarily suggest dislike of democracy, and preference for another system. Instead, the research indicated a desire for the political system to change, so that the participants believe that their own concerns and interests are important to policymakers and that when they express their needs and ambitions, they are heard by their representatives.

On the other hand, as a staff member of a community-based organisation in Kerry mentioned, young people need more education in how democracy functions to become more interested in participating. He warned not to be alarmist but to expose young people through their education to how democracy functions:

> *You obviously need to look at the key reasons and then have actions to counter those reasons as to why people are not engaging. But I think it's, it's hugely important, you know? Yeah. Because like, I think like, we're getting overly sort of alarmist, but for several years, like, we kind of take democracy for granted . . . what's happening in society at the moment is the confluence of factors, which I think could lead to an unravelling of it, if we don't mind it. So, you know, starting with young people seems to be a sensible idea.*

The manager of the university access programme, who helped to organise the first focus group, claimed that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds may be inherently political in their actions. As evidenced in this focus group and throughout the research with young people, those involved in youth services remained committed to their existence even after they stopped using the services. This commitment could be reflected in a simple respect, participation in occasional activities, or in a longer-term plan to become a youth worker themselves. However, the manager explained that this population was not connecting this commitment to formal political activities, from joining a party to voting. Education could fill this gap, illustrating how involvement in local change is politics, and both this involvement and participation in more formal politics, like voting, were part of the same set of behaviours, knowledge-seeking, and expectations.

Not being listened to enough

All focus group participants and interviewees criticised politicians for not paying enough attention to young people in general, much less those from disadvantaged backgrounds. One expert, who works for an advocacy organisation for young people, called for political parties to devise specific policy agendas for young people and to provide examples of young people, especially from diverse backgrounds, succeeding in politics. He noted that Ireland lacks these examples, except for a few TDs, such as Holly Cairns, the leader of the Social Democrats, who, as of 2023, is in her early thirties.

In the focus groups, participants stressed that any local improvements (e.g. in services or infrastructure) happened close to elections, when TDs were focused on securing votes. They contended that if even older adults struggled to secure time with TDs between elections, as young adults, they stood little chance of being heard. One participant asked rhetorically, "Do you know what it is like as a young adult coming into life and looking at that thinking, if that's my parent or if that's our relative or a friend or whoever that can't get help? As a young adult, like, what chance do we stand?" Another participant chimed in, "Who's going to take advice from a 22-year-old?" A participant in the Traveller focus group explained that "as a young person, looking into the world of politics, there isn't much out there to actually grab you and pull you in."

She offered as an example the incidence of car crashes involving young drivers, and the role of alcohol in accidents. She explained that politicians claim, "it has a lot to do with us. But they're directly pinpointing young people and making them feel like they're the cause of it. When you do go to actually look [at the cause], you're not going to want to vote and give your opinion where you don't feel it's needed. Instead, TDs listened when they perceived it as beneficial for themselves. A participant in the same focus group, echoing the previous quote, noted that:

> *We can walk into a local TD's office and ask for him. To be honest, if you were to ask anybody properly, there is nothing being done until it's coming up to the next election for them. Like that's politics. You know, they want to do it for you when they're getting a vote.*

In general, participants across the focus groups mocked local TDs for becoming more active and visible close to elections. One participant remarked, "Politicians campaign and are in the community, but once they are in power, they don't know you, they are not in the community." Another contended that politicians pursued short-term gains, noting that "there's a lot of false promises […] I can tell you a list of names of people who, it's only when it comes up to the next election, that stuff is actually done for them." Underpinning this cynicism was a perception of lack of consistent communication and interaction, of politicians coming into the community to listen to constituents and prioritising their needs over their own interests.

Politicians largely self-interested

Very few of the young people participating in the research perceived politicians as civil servants. In her recent book *The Abuse of Power* (2023), former UK Prime Minister Teresa May pushes for those with power to listen to the 'powerless' and laments that "too many politicians today see being Prime Minister as a position of power when, in fact, it is a position of service." She adds:

> *The problem with this view is that it can lead to a sense of being able to make decisions in one's own personal and political interests rather than in the interests of others. If you see being PM as a position of service, then every decision should be taken in the collective or national interest.*[85]

Her observation resonates with the findings of the Irish research. The urban focus group conducted near Dublin differentiated their own values from those of politicians, who were viewed as earning a sizeable income and not empathetic to how they lived. One participant, the most cynical, remarked, "a politician shouldn't come to this [focus group] because they won't leave." The participants referred often to their own values, learned through years of interacting with youth services, but never voluntarily explained their substance. Only that they contrasted with those of politicians. Implicitly, their values consisted of solidarity, community, belonging, respect, fairness, transparency, and equality. Those needing help deserved care and attention, regardless of what they could offer the person in return for paying that attention.

A staff member at an international climate NGO echoed this point. In her own work, she found in her efforts to mobilise climate action that community and youth workers were trusted. She explained, "community and youth workers [...] are really the ones who are working with the most diverse community, the most disadvantaged communities."

Several politicians were viewed as exceptions because they were seen as 'being from the area' or particular community, as in the case of Senator Eileen Flynn, who, as we referenced above, is a Traveller.

Reliance on social media for news

For the most part, the focus group participants did not follow the news closely. There were a few exceptions, as one young woman made the effort to watch *Dáil* proceedings and another followed the news in his area of North Dublin. These were the same two young people who asked how to register to vote.

A community development worker based in Kerry commented that "most kids and most adults under a certain age don't get the news from the *Irish Times*, or BBC or RTE, or, you know, they get it from online sources. Yeah, they don't discriminate between sources." He cited the anti-migrant protests during the summer of 2023 as an example of the pernicious effect of social media, saying that "the stuff that was going around, the information that was going on around migrants around the time of the protests, it was unbelievable stuff, you know, what I mean, essentially, migrants were being depicted as sexual predators, you know, and totally made up, you know, accusations of assaults." [86]

For him, the pervasiveness of incendiary disinformation coupled with disengagement, like that expressed by the young people involved in the research, posed a danger to democracy. He remarked, "that's a big issue. I suppose, [media disinformation] coupled with the kind of disengagement of the population in general, from politics due to cynicism, and maybe not seeing the relevance." He also believed that young people were

noticeably less engaged with politics than older generations. He explained that in the past, the limited options for accessing news, essentially through a few television stations, meant that politicians were more familiar faces:

> *When I was growing up in Ireland, you had a narrow media access. So you couldn't avoid politicians [...] So it was just in the ether. It was in the environment a bit more. I think politics - it was harder to avoid.*

Echoing comments made throughout the research, for him, the lack of exposure to politicians has contributed to the breakdown between personal lives and policy. Politicians skilled at social media may reach more young people, but in the absence of tangible policy impact at a local level, social media posts will have only limited success. He mentioned the substantial effort required to build a local skatepark as an example of tangible impact, and emphasised that, regardless, engagement amongst young people in democracy needs 'practical examples.'

Disengagement from formal, collective political participation

The staff member for an international climate organisation described the difficulties recruiting young members, especially from more economically and socially marginalised populations. "They are not interested in a sustained way" in becoming part of an organisation, she explained. Younger generations would organise and participate in protests or demonstrations, for instance, Fridays for Future protests outside the *Dáil* in Dublin. They would enrol in training offered by NGOs but prefer to continue as an individual activist, rather than belong to a larger, established body. Union organisers interviewed echoed this trend, citing challenges regarding the recruitment of younger members, one commented that only 13% of their total membership was under 30. Younger employees, one interviewee commented, tended to view unions as 'worker insurance' rather than workplace democracy.

Political parties, as mentioned above, also face the same scepticism and disinterest in recruiting younger members. A politician interviewed said that all the parties were struggling to recruit candidates for the local elections in 2024, much less attract younger generations. Similarly, commitment to individual activism did not necessarily translate into digital activism. The climate NGO staff member remarked:

> *I think technology and digital platforms have opened things out quite a lot. But there certainly are quite a number of barriers with that as well for young people in terms of access and digital fatigue, and just kind of the onslaught of, you know, so much information coming in. How do you, you know, see the wood for the trees? That's a constant kind of issue and also just the lack of coordination.*

Structured organisation of a protest can falter if conducted through social media because "everything is so flat [...] there's no way to disseminate information to everybody other than through hashtags." For a single day of action, this approach can succeed, but not for more sustained engagement, especially if organisation efforts are centralised.

At the same time, though, younger activists underscored the importance of inclusion of more marginalised groups, like the population targeted in this report. Both climate activists interviewed for the report spoke of how young activists they encountered from a more middle-class background insisted on efforts to reach

members of minority groups. The climate activist working for an international NGO reflected on a new youth group she had helped to create:

> *[T]here's quite a lot of diversity in that group, many of whom have previously been involved with Fridays for Future. They're quite politicised. They're really active, they're really engaged.*

The diversity, however, referred to neurodiversity,[87] disability, and sexuality, and not income. She added:

> *I think class has still remained a major difference. And then various ethnicities. I think there's still a number of people who are in higher education, things like that, who've had those experiences.*

As mentioned above, involvement in youth services led to a greater understanding of citizenship, motivation to act, and recognition of diversity, including class. The second climate activist interviewed, who now lives outside Ireland, claimed that "[y]outh work helped a lot. Youth work taught me activism." She continued, "[t]o put it simply, there was a moment in my life where it clicked, that there was something wrong with our society." This recognition originated as a personal reflection but "then as it grew, it became bigger and bigger and bigger." For her, youth work meant that she now understood different forms of inequality:

> *I understand inequality because I understood my own inequality, like how inequality impacts me, but then I couldn't stop at me. So I understand, for example, like the fight, and I joined the fight of the LGBTQI+ group, because I know what it is. I don't need to be a member of the community. But I understand it, because I'm a member of another community [the Black community in Ireland] that it's [discrimination] been done to. So intersectionality is like that - a word that is not too popular, and people don't necessarily use it, or they just throw it out these days. But that's what intersectionality looks like in my head. It's me, understanding that there are so many different ways in which the system which we're in rejects, or like leaves behind certain people, it blocks, puts barriers, or gives the capacity for those people to participate. So at the core, it's always about participation.*

Her evolution as an activist shows the gradual interconnection between different forms of exclusion and marginality, but as the first climate activist suggests, it occurred as a personal journey, not within the guidelines and structure of an established organisation, especially a national or international one. Instead, it was local youth services that inspired her and facilitated her progression as an individual actor.

The disinterest in voting reflected the localisation of politics and the identification between community-based activities and activism. For instance, though most participants in the focus group outside Dublin, who were enrolled in an access programme at university, were registered, they did not necessarily vote. Some of the participants felt that Ireland was not a democracy for them, and they rejected affiliation with political parties, as it enabled parties to take their votes for granted.

What young people are asking of their democratic governments

Public policies that improve life

Politics and democracy in Ireland were associated overwhelmingly with voting in elections and with personal interaction with politicians, primarily to resolve a problem. The interviewee based in Kerry explained that in rural areas like where he worked, adults would view politics as being about politicians and political parties, "as opposed to [...] the view of politics as being about issues and policy and economics and social issues." He added that any kind of political education should not focus narrowly on the process as it may not resonate, which is fundamental. Importantly, politicians had to recognise that the public can sometimes understand policy issues better than they do, even if they cannot frame their understanding within a policy discourse.

For young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, this gap between public understanding and political language is important to acknowledge. As one of the experts interviewed, who works with the Traveller community in a rural area, pointed out, this population is significantly affected by policy, whether related to benefits, education, health services, or access to housing. The distance from politics is not necessarily in their self-interest.

The young woman who had never voted and never intended to but showed interest in a political initiative that would yield a positive, tangible result for her family demonstrated the importance of direct impact. The interviewee from Kerry, with the example of the skatepark, as well as the union organisers' remarks that young people viewed membership as an insurance plan, all underlined the significance of personal material benefit.

Being heard by bringing politicians and politics closer to home

Participants in the research, especially the focus groups but also the expert interviewees, stressed the importance of politicians spending more time within communities talking to young people (and their families) from disadvantaged backgrounds. Politicians tend to neglect younger voters, who vote in relatively lower numbers than other cohorts, in general. As one of the climate activists noted, this neglect has occurred over years and is not specific to marginalised young people. She underscored, though, that "it's double for marginalised young people." She suggested that politicians have become too distant in the public imagination, which has meant that their own status as citizens and their role within a larger collective body, is obscured. She remarked that often she has heard:

> *[P]eople talk about politics and be like, oh well, these politicians are like doing this for us. And I'm like, no, they're just the part of us like, like, literally, they are just elected elements of the politics that we all create together. And if we're not happy with it, we have to do something about it together.*

This understanding evolved through activism, not education, and youth work. For her, politics became "something that you do within your community. It's how we structure society together. And people have given a lot of power to what I call structural politics and forgotten about community or citizenship." She regarded deliberative democracy[88] as a potentially effective response to political alienation because it offers a platform

for advancing the practice of citizenship. Direct involvement in policymaking would offer young people the platform for feeling more connected to politics and empowered. She explained that:

> *[I]t's bringing it back again to the people to feel like it's not a decision being made for them, but its decision making. By them, with them. And if they're not okay with it, we can change an entire system so that it works for us to get us what we want.*

Making participation in politics more viable and rewarding does not have to entail building local platforms, though this recommendation came across as the most popular option in the research. A long-time activist in deliberative democracy in Ireland wanted to create a national citizens assembly whose members would be young people tasked with recommending policies explicitly for young people. Another interviewee, who himself had come from a 'working class' background, had been exposed to politics through an EU initiative.

The underlying argument, as one interviewee put it, was that "we need to include young people in leadership positions and youth strategies." Another stressed that "mechanisms of engagement have to be more flexible and fluid, not just for retired people with time." Finally, several of the interviewees called for lowering the voting age to 16 to encourage participation and exposure to politics at a younger age.

Fund at a community level and for the long-term

The climate activist now working in movement building viewed more expansive and longer-term engagement at a grassroots level as "a meaningful way" to attract participants. Even if an NGO itself cannot mobilise at a local level, namely, attract motivated volunteers and participants, she felt that staff could "work with people who do have those relationships, where trust already exists with those communities that are underrepresented." She attributed their success in training peer educators and developing relationships to multi-annual funding. This funding made a difference because it enabled longer term vision and training for a small group of people, who would in turn work with a larger population. She stated "the three-year funding has allowed for stages and with small numbers of people building a pure education approach. And I think that that's going to be really crucial."

She explained that short-term funding, or a year or less, represents "really one of the biggest barriers for us in relation to, to trying to engage communities or people, young people who have been, who are experiencing, you know, are living through like systemic, multiple layers of systemic oppression, and disadvantage, because it's slow work." Beyond the funding cycle, impact measurement could be difficult for a population encountering 'multiple layers of systemic oppression.' This work, she noted, is "not something that necessarily has shiny outcomes and impacts in an annual cycle. So that's been a major barrier."

Invest in youth services

Funding for youth work organisations has just reached its pre-financial crash levels, but simultaneously not kept pace with population growth and has not accounted enough for the impact of the pandemic, the influx of Ukrainian refugees, and the rise of far-right politics.[89]

Yet consistently, focus group participants praised youth programmes because these services offer emotional support, access to social mobility, and avenues for participation. One of the young men interviewed commended an initiative he had participated in through a local youth programme that had funded him

travelling to Morocco. Critically, youth services reflected their own values, as discussed above, and were considered 'apolitical.'

At the same time, though, during the focus group outside Dublin, participants came to agree that these services are implicitly political because of the influence of policy and specific politicians, especially if from the area in question, on funding and activities. The challenge then was to acknowledge the influence of politics without diminishing the integrity represented by youth services.

Youth services combined several factors listed above that generate trust and motivation to contribute to a collectivity, whether working for a local non-profit organisation or mobilising to build a skatepark. The climate activist who explained that youth work exposes participants to inequality, how it is generated, its multiple dimensions, and the barriers it creates, argued that youth work itself figures into a larger effort that attempts to lower these barriers and demonstrate alternatives to the current reality. Youth work, for her, "shows where [participants] are at." They can then translate their frustrations into action, as "frustrations won't go away unless they act, they have to see an alternative."

Conclusion

The findings from the research in Ireland resembled both those of other countries and from relevant activities targeting young people in Ireland. The *Comhairle na nÓg*[90] Five Year Development Plan cites observations from young people and other key stakeholders in the child and youth councils (for 12–18-year-olds) that take place in Ireland across the 31 local authorities.[91] These councils were established in 2002. Other, similar initiatives have been the national youth parliament, *Dáil na nÓg* (DNN),[92] also for 12–18-year-olds, which is held every two years, hosted by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), and the National Youth Assembly (12-24 years old), which was established in 2022. The consultations revealed that young people wanted to protect their voice on issues that affect them, better relations with the local councils, and more inclusive processes of decision making.[93] The consultations also indicated a need to reach young people from less affluent areas and that "face-to-face meetings are the most effective form of communication."

The findings from the Irish research were similar to these comments. Young people who participated in the research and the academics, activists, and policymakers interviewed would all concur with the observations mentioned above. Despite Ireland's economic performance, younger generations, and not just those from low-income households and an experience of social marginalisation, face obstacles in accessing housing and health services, and struggle to develop trajectories leading to an independent, financially secure adulthood. The policy response should thus focus on these obstacles and the disaffection it has generated, including integrating young people into the policymaking processes so that they gain greater confidence in the political system and feel that they are important to it.

3. POLAND

2. POLAND

Introduction

The 15 October 2023 Polish parliamentary elections saw the highest turnout in post-communist Poland, won by what has been described as an "eclectic liberal-centrist agrarian" electoral coalition who spoke to voters' desire for change.[94] Change, however, does not imply that young voters dominated the agenda of these elections. Poland is an ageing country and as keen observers noted, "middle-aged voters living in less-fashionable towns out of the media glare may not have been as photogenic as young urban hipsters, but their votes counted too and there were many more of them."[95] In fact, since the early 2000s, there has been a decline in the under-30s in Poland from 10 to 4.5 million.

This is also reflected in an ageing political class stemming directly from the lack of smooth generational exchange and the gradual ageing of society. The lack of representation in the form of younger politicians in Poland is not an exception, as a similar situation exists in other wealthy countries (i.e. the current U.S Senate is one of the oldest in its history.)[96] The lack of democratic voice felt by Polish young people was arguably manifested in the huge 23.5% increase in turnout among younger (18-30 year-old) voters from just 46.4% in 2019 to 69.9% in 2023, compared with the overall average increase of 12.7% between the two elections. Controversial changes to abortion law, economic fallout from the pandemic and the war from neighbouring Ukraine, and 25-year high inflation eroding the value of welfare payments all contributed to the defeat of the far-right, nationalist Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS), who had been in power since 2015. Surprising to many, the radical right free market Confederation party (*Konfederacja*), which had scored well in pre-election polls, only secured 7.2% of the vote. Not enough to achieve a far-right majority coalition in the new parliament.[97]

Three focus groups were conducted in spring 2023 in both urban and rural areas of Poland, against the backdrop of a heating up election campaign leading up to the October elections. They took place in Warsaw (the capital), Krakow and Małopolska province (a traditionally conservative-liberal region), and Rzeszow and Podkarpackie province (a traditionally conservative region). Expert interviews were conducted with representatives of The Civic Coalition (*Koalicja Obywatelska,* KO), the main opposition force, including Christian democrats, a member of Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*, PO) and representatives from *Lewica,* the Left political alliance including Left Together (*Lewica Razem*). They also included academics, activists and local NGOs specialising in working with migrants, women and young people.

Socioeconomic context

Research on young people experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage is limited in Poland and difficult to access, as are studies on their attitudes to and participation in democracy and politics. While youth unemployment rates are relatively low compared to other EU countries,[98] nearly one in four Polish young people are NEET i.e. not in education, employment or training.[99] As already alluded to, Polish society is ageing. One in five Poles is older than 60[100] and Poland's birth rate has been negative since 2012. In 2022, Poland had recorded the lowest number of births in the post-war period. According to Eurostat, by 2050 about 45% of Poles will be 55 or older.[101]

As a post-communist country with accelerated modernisation, changes in education have not eliminated barriers or inequalities in life chances. This is because they are rooted in socio-cultural capital, family material status and macro-social conditions.[102] Inequality manifests itself in the choice of school and university with young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tending to go to vocational or technical schools, while students from better-off families attend high schools and are given tutoring and take extracurricular activities.[103][104]

According to Eurostat, Poland has the second highest share of workers with temporary contracts in the EU (24.3% in 2018 for those aged 15–64 and 62.6% for the youngest population, 15–24 years old). Young people in Poland are also more often employed with civil law contracts that may exclude them from certain labour rights, such as minimum wage or working time regulations. They are often overqualified with a mismatch between their education and their jobs. Poland also has one of the lowest trade union densities in the EU (10-12%) and many young workers will tend to be non-unionised, viewing membership indifferently or in a negative light.[105]

In addition, economic conditions in the more neglected regions of the country can cause young people to leave to seek better opportunities. This brain drain perpetuates the inequality that characterises peripheral regions, creating further challenges to regions adapting to global changes. It is frequently young men who choose to stay, and if they attend university, go to lower status local ones. Regional inequalities between Mazowieckie, Łódzkie, Wielkopolskie and Dolnośląskie provinces and the least developed Podkarpackie, Podlaskie, Świętokrzyskie and Lubelskie are widening as a result.[106]

Political context

Poland joined the EU in 2004 and the Schengen area in December 2007. It is not yet in the Eurozone, unlike Ireland and Spain. Poland differs from the other two countries as a unitary parliamentary republic with a directly elected president who possesses at least limited powers. Ireland is also a parliamentary republic but the president is largely a ceremonial figure. Spain is a parliamentary monarchy, similar to the UK. Ireland joined the EU in 1973 (along with the UK) and Spain, in 1986. Spain joined the Schengen Area in 1995.

More specifically, in Poland, the president, Andrzej Duda, of PiS, currently serves his second and last term. The president is the commander-in-chief and can veto legislation and dissolve parliament. The president nominates the prime minister, currently Donald Tusk of the Civic Coalition, and the cabinet, after approval of the *Sejm* (lower chamber of parliament).[107] Deputies in the *Sejm* and Senate (upper house) are elected to four-year terms. The *Sejm* appoints the members of the constitutional tribunal, the ombudsman, and chairman of the state audit commission, and the president of the Bank of Poland (*Narodowy Bank Polski*). The prime minister is from the party that holds the most seats in the *Sejm* or a coalition and is the main executive, along with the Council of Ministers. The judiciary is supposed to be guaranteed its independence by the constitution, but the far-right Law and Justice Party challenged this, pursuing similar erosion of judicial independence in other countries like Hungary. Politically, they championed contentious issues like restricting abortion rights that affected their popularity and relationship with the EU. The economic impact of Covid and the war in Ukraine, alongside more specific legislation like animal protection laws affecting the livelihoods of farmers, undermined their popularity.

What, then, are the most important features that characterise young people's relationship to politics and democracy in Poland? Young people represent a demographic minority in Poland, with relatively fewer young Poles voting for the Left and the Confederation—the parties that performed best among young voters in the

last elections—compared to the greater numbers of older people who are more likely to vote for centrist or populist parties. Therefore, it is argued political elites have little interest in addressing young people's needs,[108] leaving them feeling misunderstood and even ignored by older generations. Young Poles have faced challenges that their parents did not. The neglect of issues facing the youngest voters is reflected in the attitudes of young people, who perceive politicians as untrustworthy and guided by partisanship. Machalica and Potocki (2021) found that they sometimes viewed the entire political environment as patriarchal and averse to women.[109]

Previous research has identified that women in Poland are more likely to show a willingness to defend their rights, as evidenced by the demonstrations on the tightening of anti-abortion laws; young men are much less vocal. Young people in general tend to be more supportive of leftist politics than their parents. This shift is clearly visible in young women, who tend to have greater support for an active role for the state and expansion of public services. In contrast, free-market and individualistic attitudes are more pervasive among young men.[110]

Younger generations in Poland have also stressed their concern about climate change, education and improving its quality, and worldview issues such as tolerance towards LGBTQI+ people and support for abortion.[111] In a 2022 European survey, when asked 'thinking of the future, which of the following pillars do you consider to be the most important with a view to building a sound and sustainable society?', 44% of young Poles identified health and medicine, the environment, and science as the most important.[112] The survey also revealed a noticeable difference between Poles aged 18-24 (Generation Z) and those aged 25-35, (Generation Y). 48% of Generation Z replied health and medicine while 46% of the older group chose responsible production and consumption compared to just 31% of the younger group.

Similar concerns were also confirmed in the exit polls after the recent national elections conducted by research institute IBRiS on Election Day (15 October 2023). When asked whether the issues given caused fear or a sense of calm/stability, 72% of respondents said the issue of pregnancy made them fearful. As we will explore below and in the qualitative analysis, this shows the concrete fears that (young) Poles have in relation to abortion rights after being repeatedly attacked and rolled back by successive PIS governments. Other issues indicated as causing more fear were much more universal and abstract (the state of the Polish economy (90%), the future of my country (81%), my influence on the government (76%), freedom of speech (74%)). Also in the fear category, 68% of respondents chose women's rights and 67% chose climate and environment.[113]

Prior to the 2023 national elections, young people expressed increasing frustration concerning politicians' lack of awareness of their needs, combined with their perception of being ignored. In research by the New Democratic Institute (NDI) in 2020, two thirds of respondents were dissatisfied with the current political situation in the country, while satisfaction was felt by only one in four respondents. Similarly, 64% of respondents gave a negative response to the question "To what extent are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the current government?"

The NDI research also included information on the forms of political activity in which young people participated, the most common of which were voting in elections at the state and at the local level (57% and 54%, respectively).[114] In addition, the most frequently chosen forms of political participation were those that could be accessed remotely, such as crowdfunding campaigns (40%) and online petitions and protests (39%).[115] When it comes to traditional political engagement, only 239,900 Poles belonged to a political party in 2021, a low number given a population of 38 million. [116] In 2014, union density rates among 16–25-year-olds in Poland were a tenth of those in Ireland, and half what they had been in 2000.[117] However, density

rates are calculated as the proportion of union members in employment. Hence, these percentages do not consider the large number of full-time students or the unemployed in this age group. While they may not be as involved in traditional political engagement as older groups, Polish young people are mobilised not only by issues concerning their international peers such as environmental struggles and climate change, but also those specific to Poland, such as the intensifying protest against the current government, which became most evident during protests against tightening abortion laws.[118] This was a moment identified by some researchers as pivotal or 'foundational' especially for young Polish women.[119]

The dramatic increase in the participation of young Polish voters in the recent national elections (15 October 2023) mentioned in our introduction further challenges the notion of apathy and disinterest. This prompts us to briefly examine the voting choices and motivations of these young voters to gain insights into their political affiliations and demands. Left-wing parties have enjoyed a large increase in support among the youngest voters, with 30% of Poles in the 18-24 age bracket declaring they had left wing views in 2021, up from 17% in 2019.[120] However, the most popular party in 2023 was the centrist KO, which was voted for by 28.3% of the youngest voters. The flow of young voters to the KO can be explained by the leftward turn the party signalled during the campaign. Its programme included proposals such as the introduction of a bill on civil unions, legalising and decriminalising abortion up to the 12th week of pregnancy, and a rent subsidy of 600 PLN. In this way, KO took over some of the proposals that distinguished the Left from the other parties. This made the social agenda unpopular with opposition voters, whose main common characteristic was a desire to distance the United Right (*Zjednoczona Prawica*) from power. According to IBRiS exit poll results, as many as 45% of opposition voters were motivated by a desire to see the defeat of a party they disliked.[121]

In July 2023, the extreme right Confederation party had its highest recorded support of 15% in national polls, but during the elections in autumn 2023 gained only 7.1%. Such a low result for Confederation, which, after all, was vying for the votes of the youngest voters, was influenced by the rightward turn of the agrarian, conservative *Trzecia Droga*, a coalition of the PSL and Poland 2050, with separate caucuses in the current parliament which began to position itself to the right of the centre of the political spectrum offering voters, among other things, voluntary social security contributions for entrepreneurs and a promise to simplify the tax system (which was the flagship demand of one Confederation leader, Slawomir Mentzen). In addition, the Third Way, effectively positioned itself between PiS and KO, causing them to weaken the Confederation's rhetoric as a "party of protest." Be that as it may, it demonstrates that right-wing parties who self-declare themselves 'freedom-oriented' - focused on individualism and limiting the role of the state - also enjoy twice the support of Poles aged 18-24 than among the rest of the population.[122] Some researchers believe that young people hold more radical views than their parents, partly due to the poor state of the Polish public debate and fatigue with the dominance of the two largest parties (PIS and KO).[123] Finally, the ruling Law and Justice party received only 14.9% of votes among the younger electorate, far less than their overall result of 35.4%.[124]

The brief exploration of how young people view politics and democracy leaves a somewhat complex picture of disengagement (as also noted in the introduction to this report) and engagement. In the following section, we hope to bring some more clarity to this conundrum for the specific subset of young people facing socioeconomic disadvantage.

Democracy: Valued in principle but not working in practice

When asked to talk about democracy, young people in the Polish focus groups were reminded of slogans learnt at school about the rule of the people, the system of the state, the ability to take part in elections and

choose one's representative, or the tri-partition of power. They foremost associated it with the principle of respecting freedom. The media's role was repeatedly pointed out probably due to the ruling party aligning Poland's state media corporation *Telewizja Polska* with party lines. Other topics mentioned included the right to assembly; the ability to assert their rights in various courts and tribunals; the existence of civil society; a sense of the common good and participation in democratic mechanisms such as civic budgeting.

Participants were clear about the theoretical meaning of democracy with one representative of the Civic Coalition noting that "democracy is the will of the majority while respecting the rights of the minority." Any democratic benefits were acknowledged by contrasting Poland with other less democratic regimes, with one participant pointing out that "no one removes us because we are inconvenient as in Belarus." While Poland was still believed to be a democracy, respondents felt that it had been balancing on a thin line for several years, after which it would become a "mafia state, like in Hungary." A female focus group participant with a secondary school education living in Warsaw had no illusions about the inequalities in the political system, remarking that "in Poland, not every citizen is equal." Similarly, a male respondent pointed out its inequities:

> *In the People's Republic of Poland, government politicians are able to avoid criminal responsibility. In order to make a good living, you have to be in the right party.*

Furthermore, the spatial distribution of the Polish population does not support the political and social activism of the young. There are clear regional differences between different regions of the country. Respondents from Warsaw and Kraków, Poland's main cities, paid more attention to values such as the rule of law and democracy, while interviewees who were not from urban areas more often pointed to the lack of opportunities or the need to move to a larger city for a better education.

One expert interviewed, a professor at the University of Warsaw, a political scientist and expert in political communication, described young people's attitudes towards politics:

> *Politics is no longer something interesting for young people, as it was in the generation of today's 40-year-olds. Nowadays, there is a lack of role models, such as a father or grandfather coming back with a newspaper and talking about politics. On the other hand, there is a group of young people who see a future in politics, but there are fewer and fewer of them. If they do get involved in politics, they usually do so because of ideas or issues that concern them, not because they are attached to a party logo and colours.*

Participants in the urban focus groups were more connected to formal party politics while those in the rural focus groups were more engaged with local community activism.

Despite the lack of opportunities for political participation, especially in rural areas, there are also glimmers of hope, with some of the experts interviewed pointing to local involvement as a hub. One interviewee working in an NGO commented on a noticeable increase in interest and involvement in politics and saw that as an indication that young people realise its impact on their lives and want to have a voice in it:

> *Youth city councils are being formed, and about 15% of young people are involved in youth groups, NGOs or community activities as a way of expressing their values, views, and desire to make a difference.*

Finally, one expert on young people and democratisation processes, a Professor at the University of Rzeszów, also commented on the different avenues of participation that young people tend to choose, in light of their political leaning.

> *Many young people gain a fuller understanding of the nature of politics only in college. For many, this is a period of opinion formation. Political science students, who tend to have right-wing or far-right views, naturally want to shape politics and tie their careers to it. Young people who hold more liberal and leftist views tend to get involved in social activism rather than politics. For some young people, politics is also a fascinating spectacle. They see it as a struggle for power.*

Some focus group participants, mainly young men, sought community and found it on the (typically far) right. Those aligned with the far right in our focus groups appeared quite cohesive in their political identity, which allied with Confederation party ideas, with a focus on the common enemy and associated extreme attitudes and resentment toward other social groups. One Confederation leader, Sławomir Mentzen, is particularly popular, especially on TikTok. Content published by party activists is geared towards outlining an "us vs. them" narrative, discouraging support for other political groups. Focus group participants in support of Confederation politics referred to the promise of reduced taxes, little state interference and increasing privatisation of public services. They were convinced by the political message conveyed mainly via YouTube and TikTok, that the 'Polish dream' will be fulfilled only if the tax burden is removed and, subsequently, workers receive a significant increase in income.

Other focus group participants, mainly young women, had begun to take an interest in politics because of the women's strikes and the abortion law debate and sought their place and representation in leftist and liberal parties. The women's strikes that took place across the country, regardless of the size of where they lived, transformed women's thinking about politics - as they noticed that it began to affect them directly. A representative of the Civic Coalition interviewed for the study felt that this was because "women are more radical, energetic, represent a more decisive attitude and approach issues without compromise." It should be remembered, however, that despite the nationwide upsurge, only a few of the female participants in the focus groups showed any serious interest in actively working for women's rights.

Regardless of political affiliation, focus group participants demonstrated unity in their demands for a decent wage, employment opportunities, and living standards. The means differed, as young right-wingers concentrated on neoliberal values and left-wing women and men pushed for a well-functioning state and public services. This latter group wanted better redistribution of taxes to improve quality of life.

What's not working

In each of the focus groups conducted, regardless of place of residence, occupation, age, gender or political preferences, participants were unequivocally negative about politics and for some it meant that they had no interest in it at all, considering it unable to produce anything constructive. Politics was described variously as "dirty", "hypocritical," involving "constant cheating, lying" "causing resentment, pain and disgust," "lies," "nepotism" and "a field full of corruption." Two respondents commented on the negative impact of politics on their mental health. This impact occurred both directly through the political tensions present during both terms of the Law and Justice party and indirectly, through the creation of laws that do not correspond with the views of younger generations, including the abortion law and those targeting the LGBTQI+ community. While there is hope that the new coalition will bring discriminatory practices such as the previous government's LGBT

Free Zones to an end, as Dunin-Wąsowicz has said, this still depends on the ability of the new government's ability to navigate compromises between the three political groupings and negotiate the conservatism of Duda, Poland's president, until 2025.[125]

Experts on human rights and politics have referred to Poland as a democracy and parliamentary oligarchy, a form of power which is often characterised by one-man rule, the weakening of the judicial system, a fight against the media and nepotism, with politicians of the ruling party reaping substantial financial benefits from remaining in power. One woman in the Warsaw focus group, with a secondary education, described the state of Polish democracy:

> *The constitutional court, the state tribunal, and the supreme court are not functioning, which is a denial of democracy. The pillar of democracy, the judiciary, is being trampled.*

The focus group participants did not convey any perceived benefit from the democratic-authoritarian hybrid in Poland. They expressed fears that the country could end up like Hungary, with too few people fighting for democratic values. Participants also referred to the lack of influence that citizens have in shaping reality in the country. Elections were celebrated, especially in smaller towns, but as one respondent put it, "the politicians we elect are not held accountable for their promises." They were concerned that the elections could be rigged, which affects voter turnout and limits the democratic system. Respondents pointed out that in 2015, during a demonstration in defence of the constitutional court, the opposition was already shouting that this was the end of democracy. Focus group participants also felt that the public was easy to manipulate at election time, because the rest of the time they are not particularly interested in the quality of democracy and political affairs or are unaware of them.

Politicians do not pay attention to the young

Focus group participants viewed the political impact on their daily lives primarily in terms of financial issues and living standards. They referred to high inflation, high interest rates and increasing loan instalments. At the same time, participants conveyed a lack of agency in their inability to influence the situation:

> *Politicians do not pay attention to the young, because they do not constitute a significant voting group.*
>
> *We go and protest, and they still do their own thing and push what they like behind our backs.*

Politics is seen as a conflict between political parties and even politicians themselves, and as factional and highly polarised, where there are "two ideologically different nations" as one participant in an urban focus group said. Critically, the focus group participants lacked hope for any better political system. For example, one respondent commented, "there are no politicians in Poland who care about improving the quality of life [here]." Participants recognised that this has been the status quo for many years.

Restrictive media

Most participants, regardless of their location, gender and age, access politics through social media, mainly from Facebook, Twitter (now X), TikTok, or Instagram. Younger users prefer TikTok, while older participants

use Facebook. Respondents note that TikTok can be a difficult medium for politicians, since its users have a low attention span, and the message on this medium must be simplified, perhaps to an extreme. On the other hand, experts interviewed felt that a presence on TikTok can be a good way to reach the young electorate. Social media influences the political views of young Poles, regardless of their economic situation and education. The 2023 summer surge in support in the polls for the Confederation was born, among other things, from its successful campaign targeting young voters on social media platforms such as TikTok and YouTube.

As social media works on the principle of a friend bubble however, if a young person's circle of friends doesn't include someone interested in politics, political information will not reach them. Young people's opinions also depend heavily on what they have heard at home and their parents' opinions. "Only a small group of young people seek in-depth information on social and political issues, while most rely on messages from the web" said one of the expert interviewees, working at University of Warsaw. Participants across the focus groups realised that politicians, particularly those on the right, are increasingly targeting them via Instagram and TikTok. However, they do not feel that these efforts have been successful. In fact, there have been only two examples of political figures who have found social media recognition: Adrian Zandberg, one of the leaders of the left-wing *Lewica Razem* party, and Sławomir Mentzen, leader of the far-right *Nowa Nadzieja* party (the largest part of the Confederation party). Warsaw focus group participants were critical of the lack of diversity in political broadcasting and the political bias of editors. They had moved away from accessing politics through television in favour of online platforms, typically with specialist content.

Rural and urban

The research in Poland found clear differences in young people's political attitudes and participation, and how they formulated what isn't working with society broadly, and democracy specifically. In the urban focus groups, young Polish people talked about those living in small towns and cities as discriminated against minorities "who have no way to get to work" due to the poor quality of public transportation. At the same time, they used stigmatising language describing them, for example, as poorly dressed and implicitly worse off financially. Young people from the more neglected regions of the country have tended to leave them to seek better opportunities and life prospects. Those whose families can financially support them move to the larger cities, while young men remain in towns and rural areas, maybe choosing to go to a local college or a lower status university.[126] And as mentioned earlier, as a result, regional inequalities have deepened in Poland between the least and most highly developed provinces.

While all participants, regardless of political affiliation, gender, or place of residence, recognised the issue of lack of minority rights in Poland, it was those participants in the urban focus groups who were more liberal on, for example, LGBTQI+ rights. They felt that LGBTQI+ couples should be able to marry and to adopt children, while respondents from smaller towns and cities, especially in the Podkarpackie province, only accepted that they could form civil unions.

Respondents from the Warsaw and Kraków groups paid more attention to values such as the rule of law and democracy, while those from small towns or rural areas believed that politicians often make promises mainly aimed at urban residents, which only adds to the impression of being ignored. They focused on the lack of economic opportunities outside of urban areas, made worse by poor quality or lack of transport links; they spoke about the need to move to a larger city for a better education. Where an issue was seen to directly affect young people in towns and rural areas, they were willing to act. The women's strike was an example, where protests, for the first time, took place in small towns as well as larger cities.

According to the expert representatives interviewed for this study, Polish politics lacks a debate on regional inequalities. A representative from the Left commented:

> *Aid should be decentralised and from the local level, where it is easier to understand the specifics and needs of the people. For example, the Left has a programme of transportation exclusion, so that every village gets a bus, and every county town gets a railroad.*

A social activist was also keen for authorities at the local government level to take action, but also described some of the challenges:

> *Local governments are best versed in the specifics of their region and are closest to the people who require help or who are worth activating. On the other hand, experts stress that local governments are unable to solve most problems due to a lack of adequate resources.*

To prevent the digital exclusion of young people outside of urban areas, experts recommended improving the broadband networks with the support of NGOs. They also suggested that decentralising aid to local authorities should go hand in hand with empowering local young people by involving them in decision-making about spending the funds in their local area. In Warsaw, as one expert pointed out, it is already possible to vote for initiatives in the city, through civic budgeting, and therefore participate in democratic mechanisms.

Differences between the politicisation of young people in urban versus rural areas was also attributed to the differences in their exposure to the media. Urban areas were seen as providing more opportunities to interact with more nuanced information, looking for specialised channels on YouTube, TikTok or Twitter (now X) whereas people from more disadvantaged backgrounds and living in rural areas relied more on mainstream media such as major online publications (onet.pl, wp.pl) or TV stations (TVN, TVP) and were felt by experts to be more exposed to, for example, anti-immigrant messaging.

Refugee and minority rights

In the past year, there has been a scale of migration in Poland unprecedented in the country's recent history, because of the refugee crisis related to the war in Ukraine. Several million Ukrainians, mostly women and children have crossed the Polish border, creating a large group that faces a different dimension of disadvantage. This humanitarian crisis is more visible than previous ones, as it affects a bordering state and directly affects Poles. Almost all respondents who had contact with refugees pointed to several problems, such as discrimination, stereotyping, lack of support and difficulties in education, which require further work and action. As the President of Dom Otwarty,[127] an organisation that helps refugees in Poland commented:

> *There is a strong need to understand the perspective of newcomers and their needs. Looking at the situation from their point of view helps understand why they may need more support.*

It is difficult to engage young Ukrainians with politics in a country that they see as a temporary stopover, where they are staying only until the war is over, at which point they will return to Ukraine. In addition, there

are internal differences among the refugee community, as discussed by an interviewee who works at an organisation supporting refugees in Poland:

> *Tajik youth, the majority of whom are political refugees, are more aware of political issues than Afghan youth. Chechen youth, on the other hand, while aware of political issues, look at them from a tribal and clan perspective, as do their parents. For Ukrainian youth, politics boils down to one issue - the war in Ukraine.*

Focus group participants from migrant communities described how cultural norms affected their political perspectives. For example, Chechens spoke about it being less acceptable in their culture for young women to speak out on political issues, but this was not an issue among Tajik and Ukrainian young people. The difficulties with helping refugees were also apparent. On the one hand, Polish focus group participants recognised that it is necessary to help people who are fleeing from war. On the other hand, they were suspicious, and occasionally discriminatory, in their comments about how a person should look and behave to be recognised as a refugee. Some believed that a refugee must be living in poverty or committing crimes. They also found it difficult to define the scale of assistance that should be given to refugees. Such statements were consistent across all focus groups.

Young people participating in the focus groups were clear that excluded and minority groups are not a priority for the Polish state. When asked to elaborate who was included in these groups, participants most frequently referred to people experiencing poverty, unemployment, homelessness, and loneliness. Participants from Kraków and Małopolska province recognised that some political parties focus on socially and economically excluded groups and felt that "the unemployed are the target" for the current government. All respondents, regardless of political views, gender or place of residence felt that minority issues were only raised on the Left, for example by Robert Biedroń of the New Left party—formerly an MP and now a MEP—who has a high profile as the first outed politician in Poland at the national level and is outspoken on LGBTQI+ rights.

The focus group participants also talked about discrimination against religious minorities in Poland saying, "we don't live in a secular state, we live in a Catholic one." They argued that followers of other religions do not have days off on their religious holidays. The last minority group noted in the focus groups were ethnic minorities. Young people felt that they were non-existent in the public debate, mostly due to the very small share of non-white people living in Poland.

What young people are asking of their democratic governments

As mentioned earlier, the most important and motivating issue for the focus group participants was their livelihoods: the extent to which the political system is supporting them in their maturation into adulthood and enabling practical opportunities to succeed. In other words, their political expectations were dominated by the topics that concern them, which include fair pay for work, increases in tax free allowances, and assistance for developing a business and more general employment.

They spoke of the need for more places in nurseries, more affordable housing; concern about women's rights, including their reproductive rights, and the role of the church in the state (the Sunday trading plan for example), restrictions on internet freedom and the climate strike. They discussed reform of the National Health Fund, which was currently most associated in their minds with death, rather than supporting well-being.

In terms of their specific concerns about democracy and participation and what they expect from their government, protecting democracy as a system and providing education and enabling participation were the most important points. Democratic freedoms, judicial independence or protection of minorities were also mentioned. Hence, despite concerns with the practice of politics, focus group participants strongly believed that it was worth doing everything to protect democracy and that it was necessary to participate in elections, because "otherwise someone will decide everything for us." Moreover, they recognised the important role of civic education:[128]

> *It is necessary to protect democracy by raising public awareness, because people do not understand certain mechanisms. And so they might take to the streets, like women did during the women's strike. People need to know what rights they have.*

Respondents spoke of the importance of increasing young people's civic participation and sense of influence over their lives by being introduced to politics early on. A professor interviewed at the University of Rzeszów similarly called for reform of political education in schools, the lack of which is a main reason for the under-representation of young people in the democratic process:

> *Before granting young people the right to vote, civic education should be improved and knowledge of political processes should be increased, and adequate courses should be introduced in schools.*

The debate was heated about the age at which young people know enough about politics and democracy to participate in elections and therefore should co-decide on those who also represent their concerns. Some respondents argued that 16-year-olds were not mature and informed enough to make responsible electoral decisions; that they were easy to influence and that they were more likely to hold extreme views at that age. Some even wanted to raise the voting age to 21.

Those in favour of changing the law argued that if an 80-year-old can vote, a 16-year-old should be able to vote too; that young people are active and interested in public affairs, and that granting them the right to vote would increase their participation in the democratic process. They also point out that the population is ageing, and young people are underrepresented in elections. Additionally, by granting young people the right to vote, their sense of influence over their lives and society would increase. Political parties would also then focus more on the young, as they would comprise a larger voting group.

Conclusion

If the last elections in Poland have shown one thing, it is that young people can be mobilised if they care. However, the record turnout of young people after the communist era has also shown that their share of the total electorate is small and, as Poland is one of the fastest ageing societies in Europe, declining. If it had been up to young voters, the majority of the elected governing coalition, which will most likely replace the far-right PIS and the far-right *Konfederacja* in government, would have received two-thirds of the vote (instead of the 57% of the total electorate).

A strong motive that drove many young voters to the polls was the desire to oust the PiS from power. It is also no coincidence that the parties that advocated the liberalisation of abortion laws, campaigned for a secular state and offered various solutions to the housing crisis in Poland, received the most votes of all opposition parties (KO and the Left). The young, socioeconomically disadvantaged people we interviewed for this chapter

also voiced many of these concerns. Young voters will be watching the new government's actions closely and holding it to account for the implementation of its election promises. However, this analysis should not obscure the fact that the far-right Confederation party won over almost 18% of young voters, demonstrating the extreme beliefs of a significant minority of young people (mostly men) in Poland.

Taking the recent election manifestos and demands of the committees that will form the new government at face value, the potential change of power in Poland is good news for disadvantaged young people and their concerns and aspirations, which we have analysed in this chapter and which are often strongly socioeconomic. KO and the Left favour maintaining existing social benefits and, in some cases, expanding them. Public services such as education, healthcare and transport are also critical to their vision for a new government. All these points could, potentially, be used to address some of the most mentioned problems, such as the rural-urban divide and the gap in civic education discussed by experts.

However, as the future government is such a diverse mix, the first problems are already looming. Szymon Hołownia, newly appointed marshal of the *Sejm* and one of the two leaders of the Third Way (one of the coalition partners), commented shortly after the election results were announced that "ill-considered handouts have come to an end," which could mean that the government is on its way to cutting social benefits. This is a sign of the challenges and compromises that lie ahead for the (most likely) incoming coalition government. At the same time, it faces the major challenge of reversing years of attacks on the institutional system and the justice sector, which, as our research suggests, is also an important concern for many disadvantaged young people.

4. SPAIN

3. SPAIN

Introduction

The economic consequences of the 2008 recession, the pandemic and the inflation that followed the Russian invasion of Ukraine have led to tremendous economic adversity in Spain. The party-political landscape has completely altered from one in which the traditionally dominating social democratic PSOE (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*)[129] and the conservative People's Party (*Partido Popular*, PP)[130] parties have had a hard time forming stable governments due to a fragmented parliament while the 15M and *Indignados* movements eventually translated into the formation of new parties. Young people are confronted with a highly polarised political environment. It is not surprising that Spain is below the European average in satisfaction with democracy.[131] It is important to assess how young people's socioeconomic disadvantages may impact their attitudes towards Spanish democratic institutions. Does it transform them into anti-democratic sentiments or lead them to a complete withdrawal from politics? The potential link between economic vulnerability and eroding belief in democratic values is investigated in this chapter.

The literature on the relationship between democracy and young people with experience of disadvantage in Spain is scarce. Most research is quantitative and those who are in extreme poverty tend to be underrepresented. However, surveys of young people do show that a lower socioeconomic status is correlated with a lack of political interest, participation and overall satisfaction with democracy.[132] Generations of young people who reached adulthood in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis have experienced a process of precarisation to the extent that being young is increasingly correlated with being economically disadvantaged. Therefore, the research encompasses not only those young people who have experienced disadvantage growing up but also those who have begun to experience it in young adulthood, albeit in varying degrees. This trend is not only due to the Great Recession, but also to the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis caused by a rise in (energy) prices as a result of the Russian invasion and the subsequent war in Ukraine. In short, economic conditions have worsened, and not fully recovered, since the 2008 economic crisis.[133] Although this report is about the democratic engagement of young people with experience of socioeconomic disadvantage, downward mobility is also a feature in the Spanish case study, as working-class and impoverished middle-class young people experience the same forms of disadvantage, but in varying degrees, partly due to high levels of overqualification.

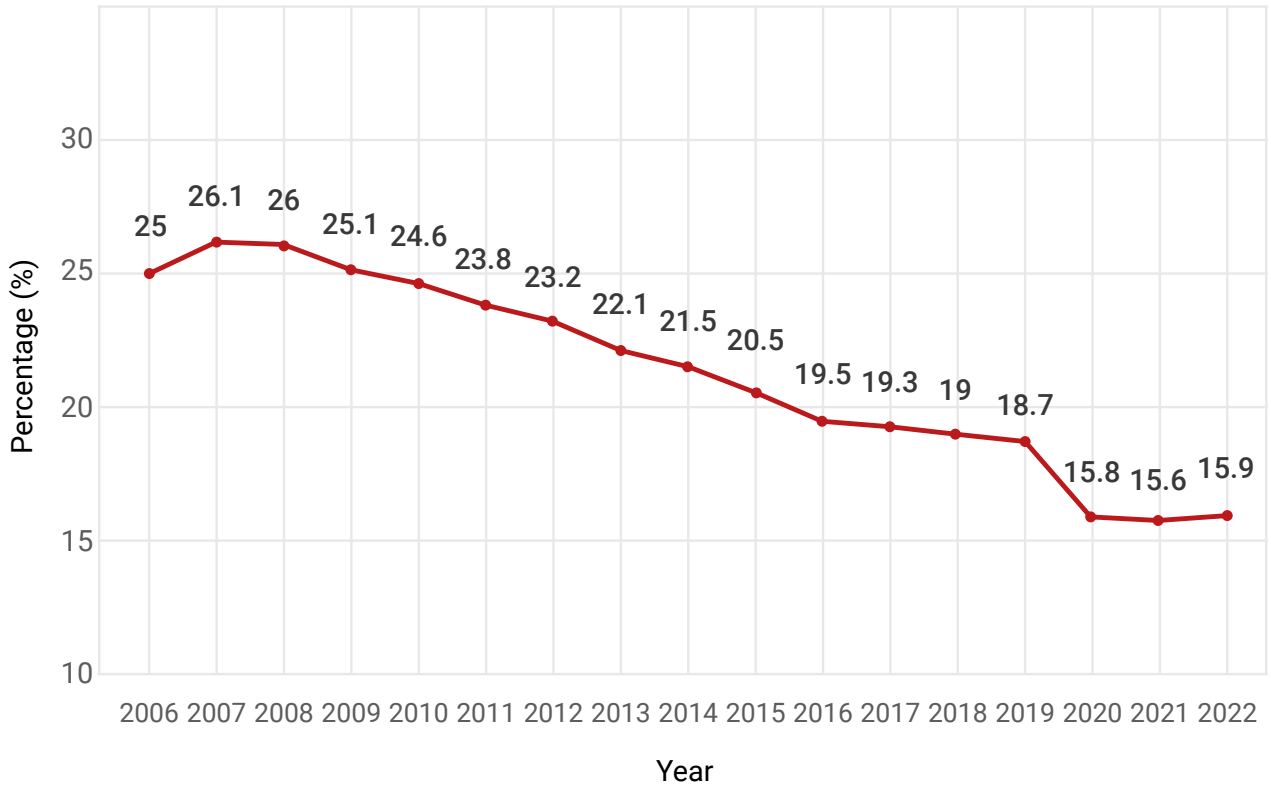
Four focus groups were conducted in Spain, in areas and neighbourhoods with high levels of disadvantage. Each group had a combination of participants with experience of socioeconomic disadvantage, secondary education, long-term unemployment or overqualification.

They were carried out in Málaga, where an NGO working locally recruited participants from the neighbourhoods of Cruz Verde and Los Asperones, in the village of Villanueva de Algaidas in Andalucía, with young people recruited via a local youth association; in a Madrid foundation working with young people at risk of social exclusion, and in the municipality of Adra with participants recruited by local authority outreach, from across the province of Almería, including Adra and El Ejido. Expert interviews were conducted between May and September 2023, which coincided with the local and national elections in Spain.

Socioeconomic context

Precarity among young Spanish people is widespread, with 33.5% of them at risk of social exclusion.[134] Only 16% of young people live independently of their parents in Spain, compared to 32% in the EU and this number has been falling steadily since the beginning of the economic crisis.[135] The high percentage still living in their parental home indicates the extent to which younger generations lack opportunities to build a life for themselves (Figure 1). On average, young people leave their parental homes at 30.3 years of age. In other words, Spanish people leave their parents' home when they are not officially considered young anymore.[136]

Figure 1. Percentage of young people (between 16 and 29 years old) economically independent of their parents in Spain.



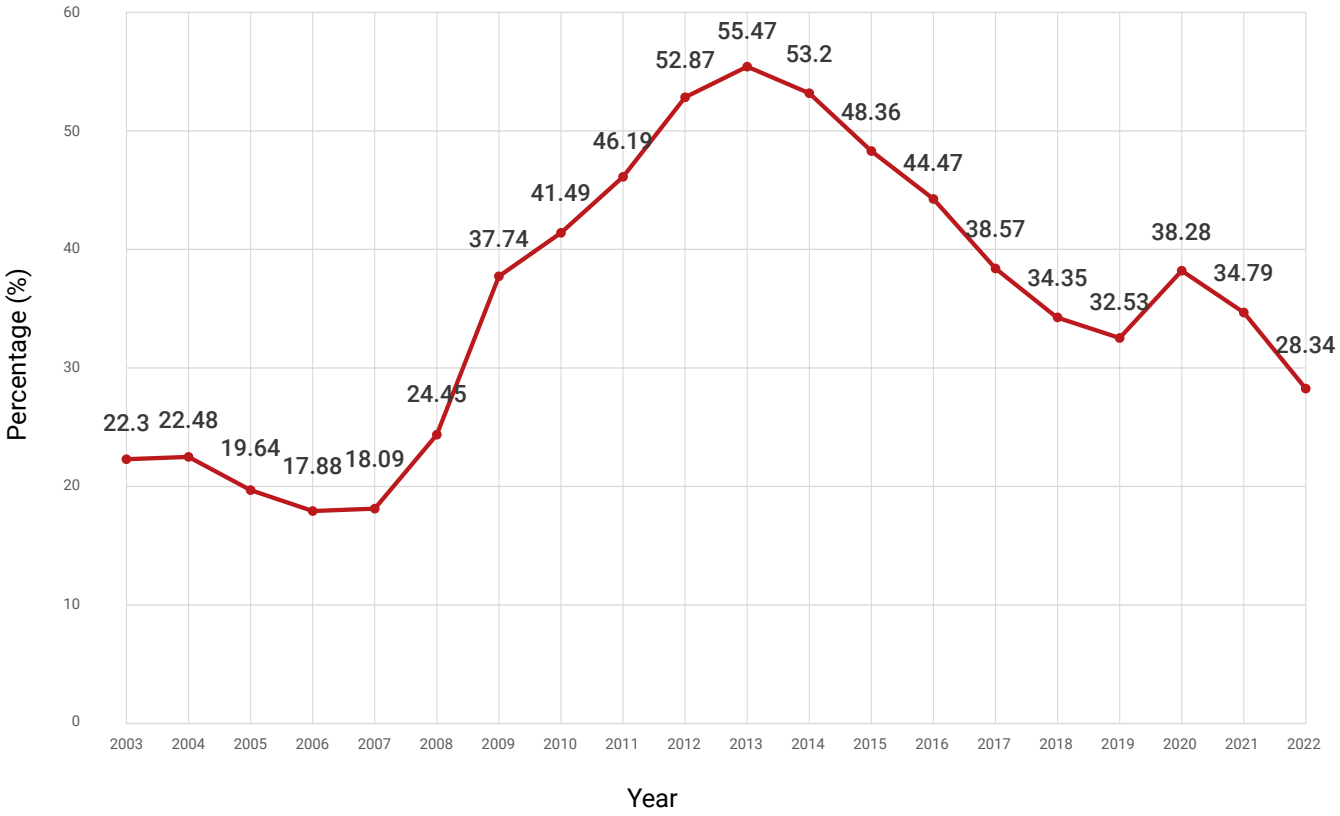
Source: Own elaboration based on data from CJE.[137]

The primary factors hindering a move to independent housing are the housing crisis and Spain's labour market. Young people spend an average 85% of their salary on rent.[138] The inability to save combined with rising house prices in Spain means 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 salary for young people is only 12.640€.[139] In addition to expenditure on their day to day living costs (rent, food, transport and so on), young people need to save nearly four years of a full salary to be able to pay the deposit of a mortgage.[140]

The labour market in Spain is highly segmented between employees on indefinite contracts or in civil servant positions with strong labour rights protections and those in short-term, precarious or part-time jobs with few labour rights. While young people have always been overrepresented within the latter group, this representation became far more pronounced after the Great Recession.[141]

In 2022, the unemployment level for young people between the ages of 15 and 24 years old in Spain was twice that of the European Union average, or 28% compared to 15%.[142] The worst period for youth unemployment, which is characterised by high levels of precarity, insecurity and low pay, came between 2012 and 2014, when more than half of all people aged between 15 and 24 years old seeking a job could not find one (Figure 2). This coincides with the 2011 takeover of the government by PP, led by Mariano Rajoy who then began implementing a €65 billion programme of austerity cuts and tax increases, until he was removed in June 2018 and Pedro Sánchez, the PSOE leader, was sworn in as prime minister.[143]

Figure 2. Unemployment rate for young people aged 15-24 years old in Spain from 2003 to 2022.



Source: Own elaboration based on data from the World Bank (2023).

Just as Spain has been characterised by high unemployment rates among young people, it also possesses one of the highest levels of overqualification in the EU. The number of university students is relatively high, yet a significant share of them—especially those who do not enjoy a strong network and socioeconomic privilege—do not transition into employment.[144] While the European average is 23.6%,[145] more than 42% of young people in Spain work in occupations for which they are overqualified.[146] This speaks directly to the feelings of frustration and unmet expectations, as many young people, having studied for many years, encounter only downward mobility in the labour market. According to the Youth Council of Spain (*Consejo de la Juventud de España*, CJE), 33.5% of young people are at risk of social exclusion and 23.4% of young people in poverty are in employment. Despite being active in the labour market, being employed does not place them above the poverty line.[147] This is key as it speaks to the inability of the Spanish labour market to lift people, especially younger generations, out of poverty.

Political context

Young people in Spain are challenged by both a severe economic crisis and a highly polarised and fragmented political environment in which the two traditionally dominant parties—the socialist PSOE and the conservative PP—are increasingly unable to form stable governments. This is partly due to the entry of smaller political parties both to their right and left partly because of social movements such as the Indignados of the 15M movement,[148] eventually forming into new parties.

The radical right-wing party *Vox*[149] has gained importance during this ongoing political crisis and become the preferred coalition partner of the Spanish conservatives. Following the regional and municipal elections held on May 28, 2023, the conservative PP shifted its stance towards forming coalition governments with *Vox* and entered into various agreements with it to assume control in several Spanish regions, including Valencia, Extremadura, and Aragón, as well as securing leadership in numerous municipalities across the country. In recent general elections, the PP and *Vox* signalled that they would replicate regional deals at the national level with the intention of ending the left-wing coalition that sustains the Sánchez government.

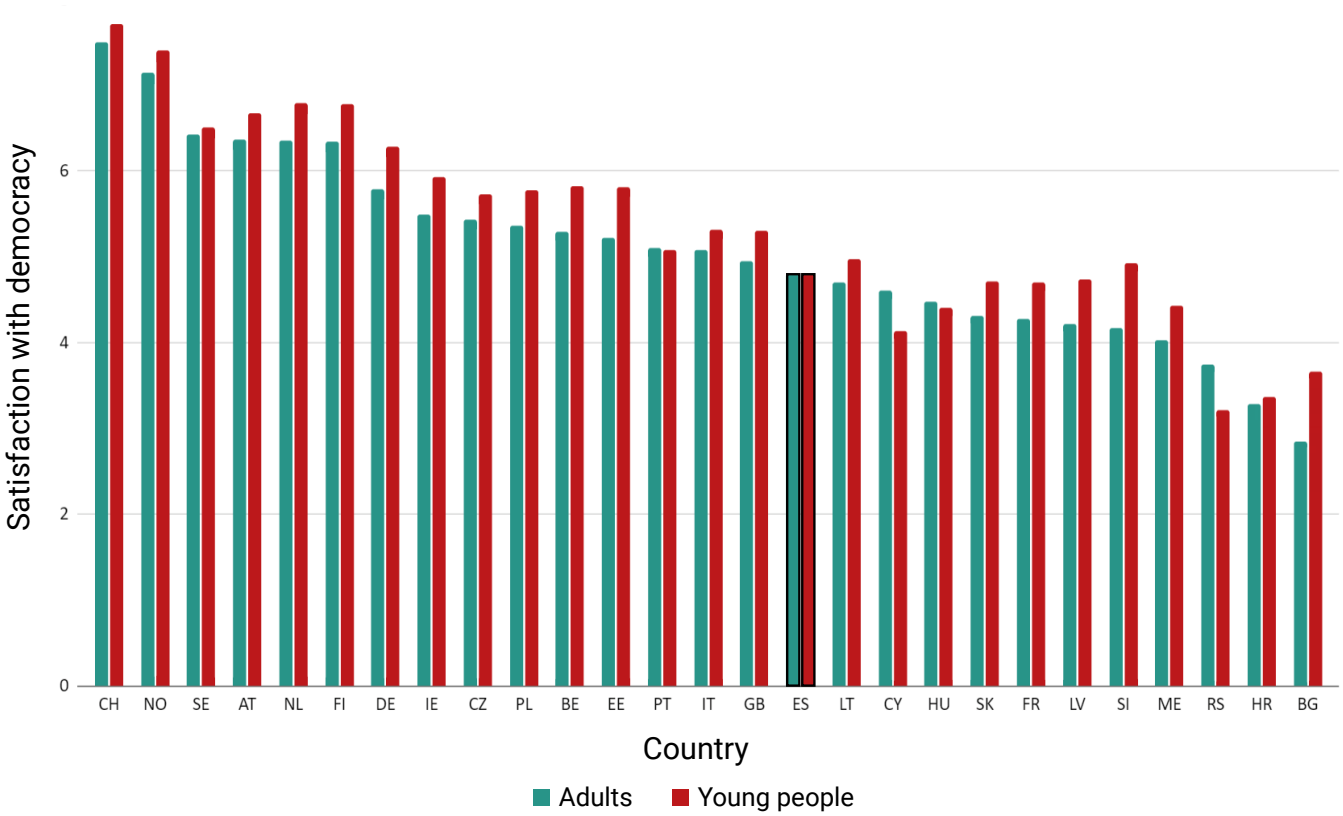
However, Spain resisted the option of a conservative coalition with the extreme right, as the PP and *Vox* did not win sufficient seats to form an absolute majority in parliament, mainly because of a decline in the seats held by *Vox* in comparison to the 2019 general election. Spain is confronted, as a result, with two political scenarios. The first is the continuation of the Sánchez government through a slim majority that needs the support of pro-independence Catalan and Basque parties. The second is another election in a few months if no majority is formed. The possibility of the social democrats abstaining and facilitating a minority conservative government (without the extreme right) is considered remote and inviable.[150]

Satisfaction with democracy

Given the very harsh economic and political crisis that Spain has suffered,[151] it is not surprising that it is below the European average in satisfaction with democracy (Figure 3).[152] 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 on these views by age. Simón et al.,[153] based on European Social Survey (ESS) data, found that there was little difference between young people and adults when reporting satisfaction levels with democracy (Figure 3). However, Cordero and Roch found that satisfaction with democracy increased with age.[154] Their results also suggest that young people aged 18-35 were most prone to think that democracy was not always the preferable system (Figure 4). Similarly, when comparing internationally, Foa et al. find the Spanish millennial generation has been the age group that has most experienced a decrease in satisfaction with democracy compared to the previous generation (Generation X).[155]

What conclusions can be drawn from these heterogeneous results? Foa and Mounk[156] defended the existence of a "deconsolidation process," by which people's support for democracy waned, particularly among young people, and challenged the continuity of the democratic regime. While the existence of a political crisis is widely acknowledged, the idea that it constitutes a threat to democracy as a regime or that young people are disengaged has been extensively criticised,[157] and evidence seems to point to a deconsolidation only in a very limited number of contexts.[158] Other measures, such as political trust, also show signs of recovery but not among those experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage.[159] Thus, the jury is still out on how threatened democracy is and how young people view it.

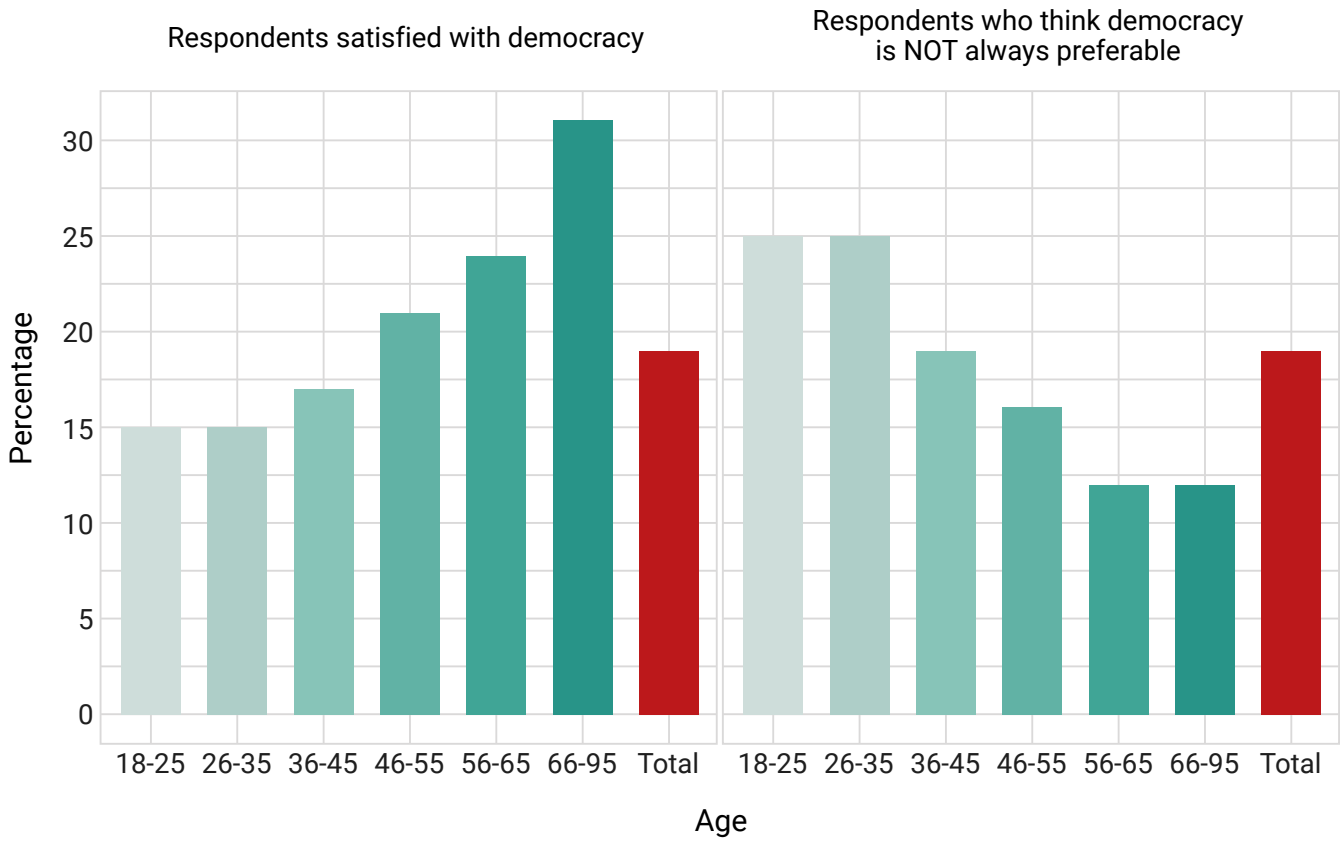
Figure 3. Satisfaction with democracy among adults and young people in Europe in 2018.



Source: Own elaboration based on European Social Survey data and Simón, P., S. Clavería, G. García-Albacete et al. (2020) "Informe Juventud En España 2020". Report. Injuve Instituto de la Juventud, p. 190.

The two trends of relatively low satisfaction rates with democracy in Spain compared to other European countries and relatively higher dissatisfaction among younger generations compared to older ones, imply the need for more qualitative and detailed research into the relationship between youth and politics in Spain. Given that satisfaction with democracy is highly dependent on an overall assessment of the state of the politics and economics of the country[160] and that Spain was particularly harshly hit by the 2008 economic crisis followed by a major political crisis,[161] a more informative approach may be to analyse the consequences of these crises on young people to understand their perceptions of democracy as a political system (see the discussion below).

Figure 4. Percentage of respondents in Spain who are satisfied with democracy and percentage who think that democracy is NOT always preferable.

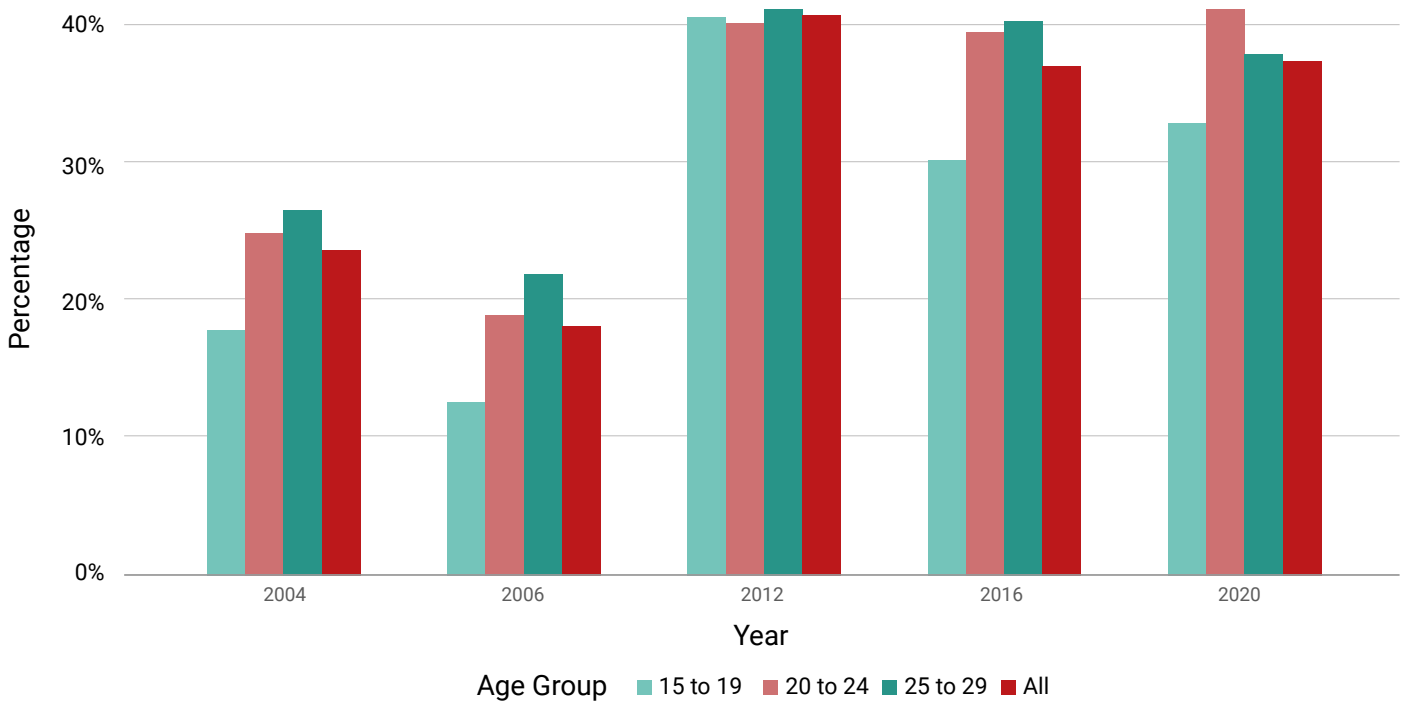


Source: Own elaboration based on Cordero, G. and J. Roch (2023) "Democracia se escribe con zeta. Jóvenes, precariedad laboral y actitudes políticas". Documento de trabajo 223/2023. Fundación Alternativas, p. 64.

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. Repeated elections, the Covid-19 pandemic and the continuation of political and economic crises has meant that levels of dissatisfaction have continued to be high.[162] At the same time, the emergence of *Podemos*[163] to the left in 2014, *Ciudadanos*[164] in the centre in 2015 and the pro-independence movement in Catalonia, contributed to a general sentiment of change in Spanish politics. Consequently, the generation maturing into adulthood just before or after the 2008 Great Recession (roughly speaking, millennials) has become deeply interested in politics. As Figure 5 shows, millennials show significantly more interest in politics than previous generations, an interest that seems provoked by the economic crisis. Younger generations display similar levels of interest in politics as the rest of the population (Figure 6).

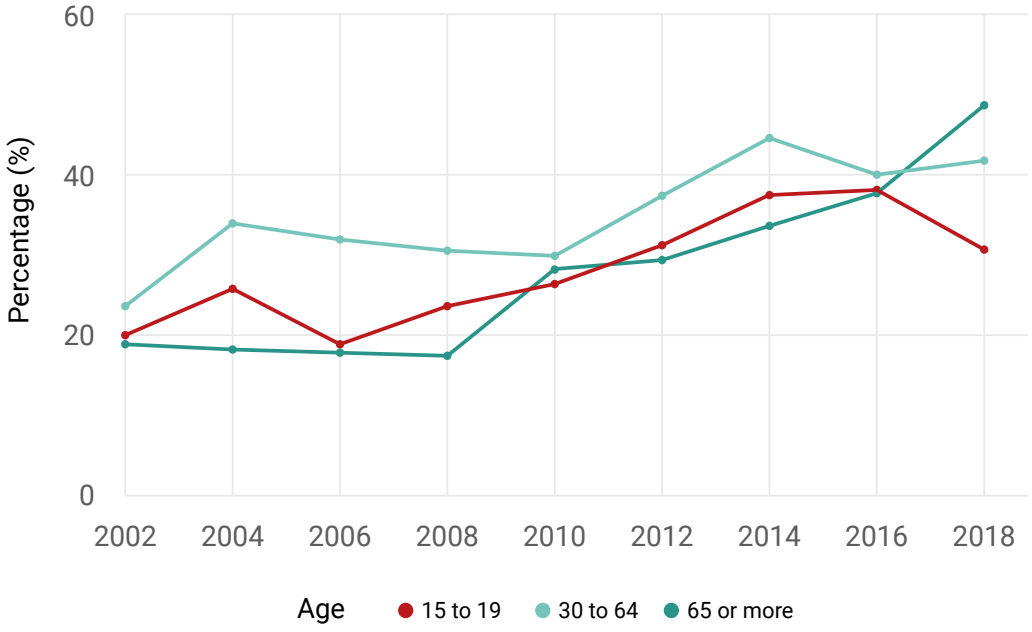
Figure 5. Evolution of interest in politics in Spain across different young age cohorts.



Source: Own elaboration based on data from Simón, P., S. Clavería, G. García-Albacete et al. (2020) "Informe Juventud En España 2020". Report. Injuve Instituto de la Juventud, p. 184.

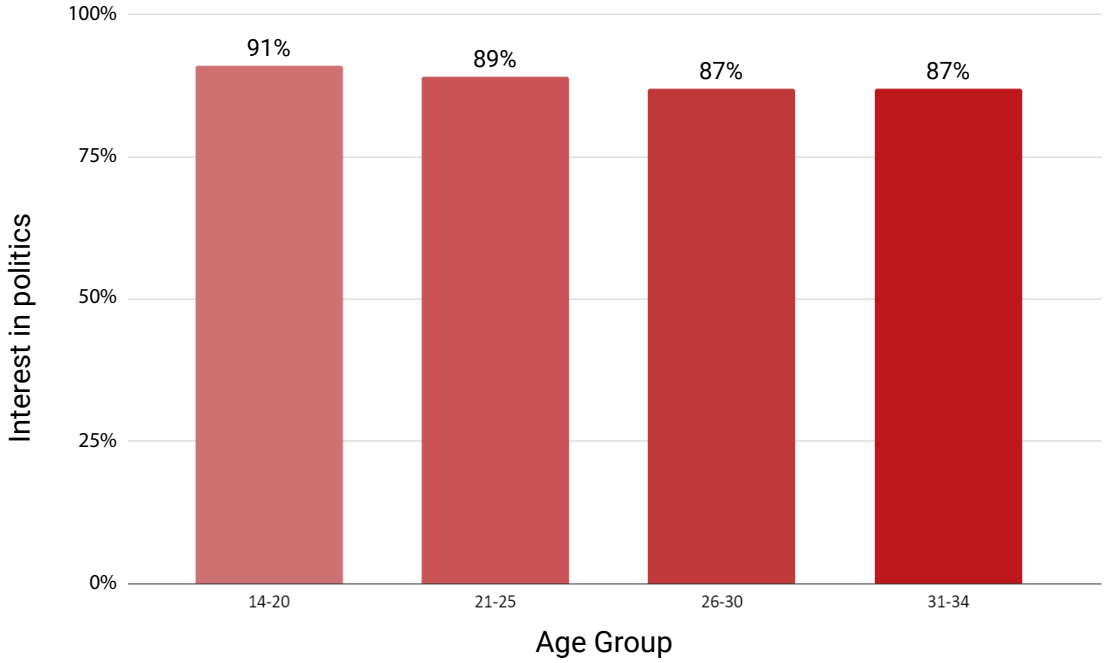
However, the evidence is contradictory on the extent to which newer generations (roughly Generation Z) are more or less interested in politics than previous young generations (millennials). The European Social Survey (ESS) data presented in Figure 6 shows that in 2018, 30.5% of young people (between 15-29 years old) in Spain were interested in politics. However, Figure 7 presents 2023 data from the Youth Council of Spain[165] elevating that number to 89%.[166] A stark contrast. It is also evident from that data that the very youngest among the young people (14-20 years) show the greatest interest. These differences cannot simply be explained by the different times of data collection.[167]

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



Source: Own elaboration based on data from Simón et al.[168]

Figure 7. Interest in politics in Spain across different young age cohorts.



Source: Own elaboration based on data from CJE, 2023.[169]

Again, the lack of clarity presented in quantitative data reinforces the need to explore the complexity of political engagement and interest amongst young people through more in-depth, qualitative research.

Democracy: Valued in principle but not working in practice

Given that the relationship between economic conditions and satisfaction with democracy is well-established,[170] it is not surprising that young people experiencing high levels of precarity in Spain show significant levels of political dissatisfaction. However, that dissatisfaction had no influence on the high levels of support for democracy evident in the focus groups. None of the more than 30 participants questioned whether democracy was the best system. Instead, participants' concerns concentrated on how to improve their situation within the framework of a democratic order:

> *If we compare democracy 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.*

Therefore, while the narrative was strongly negative about the current situation of young people with disadvantaged backgrounds in Spain, this never led to questioning the validity of democracy as a system. Instead, respondents called for greater forms of democracy and better forms of democratic participation as the means of improving their situation and their relationship towards the political system more generally. When asked about the current functioning of Spanish politics, respondents described how they felt about it:

> *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 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 [...] at the end you just decide to ignore it.*

Focus group participants agreed that voting is the key characteristic of democracy, as it holds politicians to account. Some were familiar with national democratic institutions and recognised the names of high-profile politicians. Others commented that they "had no idea who the MPs are who represent their province in the national parliament." Knowledge was limited about how power is shared between the legislative, the executive and the judicial branches of government as was an understanding of the key functions of government. For example, the government is responsible for managing 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.

Several respondents noted a lack of political education in schools, similar to that discussed in Ireland and Poland. One mentioned that they "had gone through this in high school but not in much detail" and another that:

> *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.*

Most of the focus group participants understood democracy related to political participation, representation of their interests, and political parties. There was also a strong association between democratic participation and the recent advancements in women's rights. Some members of the urban focus group felt that a key element of democracy was participation and activism through local associations. This, however, may reflect a self-selection bias as willingness to participate in this study indicated some interest in politics and

activism. In the rural areas, the idea that local activism was essential to the functioning of democracy was not expressed at all and politics was seen as being "distant."

What's not working

Democracy is not democratic enough

Focus groups members and expert respondents felt 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 needed improving because they were not providing a well-functioning and stable democratic order.

When participants were asked why they felt "democracy is not always the best", they replied that democracy is not solving economic problems, that politicians are being "selfish", "non-inclusive", acting "like mercenaries", or that there is a "lack of justice." Additional elements identified were the crisis of political parties, the lack of responsiveness of institutions, the distance of representatives from their public, and the inability to establish the neutrality of news agencies. All these things were perceived as evidence of the erosion of essential elements of democracy and detrimental to their trust and confidence in the political system. In sum, they specifically asked for *more efficient, responsible, and inclusive democracy* rather than calling for other systems.

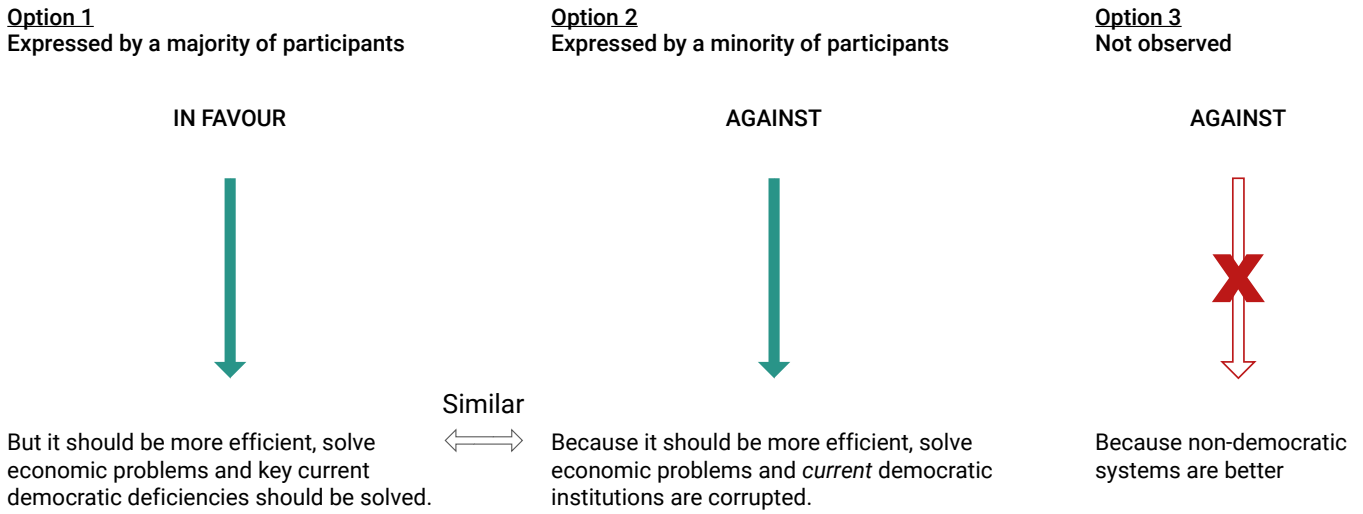
Whereas this represented the majority view, in the most extreme case, this critique led to the view that "real democracy" was not present in Spain and other countries:

> *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 of the countries, democracy does not exist. They sell you democracy as the ability to influence 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 over most things that are being done. What people think doesn't really matter.*

The debate between young people in the focus groups on whether the present political system qualifies as a democracy or not aligns with the experience of some experts interviewed, particularly those of the far-right *Vox*, who also mention that these discussions also take place among its young members. It follows that, if they do not live in a democracy, they may be willing to explore radical changes to the political system, which may provide them with a better one. 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, young people who believe they do not live in a democracy were a minority in our focus groups. The argument of the majority remained that the current democratic system needs to become more democratic rather than replaced by a non-democratic system (Figure 8). It does, however, point to the fact that, despite a vastly critical stance towards the political system by some, there is scope to re-engage people in a democratic system in whose values they still believe and that policies should aim to enhance their participation.

Figure 8. Attitudes towards democracy observed in the focus groups



All Spanish political parties were extensively criticised in the focus groups and also held responsible for the fact that the democratic system is not democratic enough. Critically, most focus group participants felt that once in power, politicians became corrupt and that they were partially responsible for the lack of participation and activism in the democratic system:

> *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.*

> *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.*

Several focus group participants spoke of the waste of resources and time as a consequence of public sector employees having to adapt their work to election cycles. Teachers, for example, were constantly having to adjust to the continual changes in policies made because of irrational power play between political parties. One participant in a rural group commented:

> *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.*

Experts interviewed for the study highlighted some reasons for this problem. Political parties in Spain no longer provide the same level of socialisation for young people as before, due to society's growing individualism and the rise of social media as alternative socialisation spaces. This change has diminished the role of political parties as a primary venue for young people to build social connections and social lives. Víctor Camino, secretary-general of the Socialist Youth of Spain (*Juventudes Socialistas de España*),[171] notes a generational divide: older members attend party meetings for socialising, while younger members join out of political interest, but it's the social aspects and networking opportunities that retain their involvement in party organisations.

Barriers to engaging

Some focus group participants made clear that the reason they were not more active in politics or civil society was a lack of time and energy due to economic pressures. Their financial stress influenced their view on what was not working properly in the current democratic model. Their inability to actively engage in their communities and participate in public and civil action hindered their capacity to become informed about politics, to join a political party, or cross-check newspapers to develop a more balanced view on political affairs in Spain. In sum, the lack of time and energy reflected economic vulnerability, which in turn affected their ability to participate. Participants commented that it was only the most privileged who could devote several hours a day to following news:

> *It is very hard to participate. People who participate have certain basic needs covered. If you live in poverty, 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 a complete disconnection.*

Participants felt that the elitism of national institutions and bureaucratic bodies also created barriers. Several complained that official language represented a major obstacle for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. In Spain, new laws, for example, are published in the Official Bulletin of the State (*Boletín Oficial del Estado*),[172] whose language and formatting was felt to be inaccessible to those needing to check their eligibility for social protection:

> *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 people with disabilities and the vocabulary was very old [...] legal language should be more accessible and understandable.*

And respondents pointed out that the barriers were most felt by those who were most vulnerable and most in need of support:

> *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 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 understanding laws at national level or European level.*

Excessive bureaucracy also created barriers. For example, it could lead to vast delays in processes with those applying to the state for support, often having to go through several rounds of revising their application,

providing further documents. Respondents called for the language to be more transparent, accessible and less discriminatory, particularly for people who are most in need of support. Young people experiencing disadvantage did not always have family members who knew how to navigate the system and therefore were unable to help them, leaving them having to pay for external support, such as hiring lawyers.

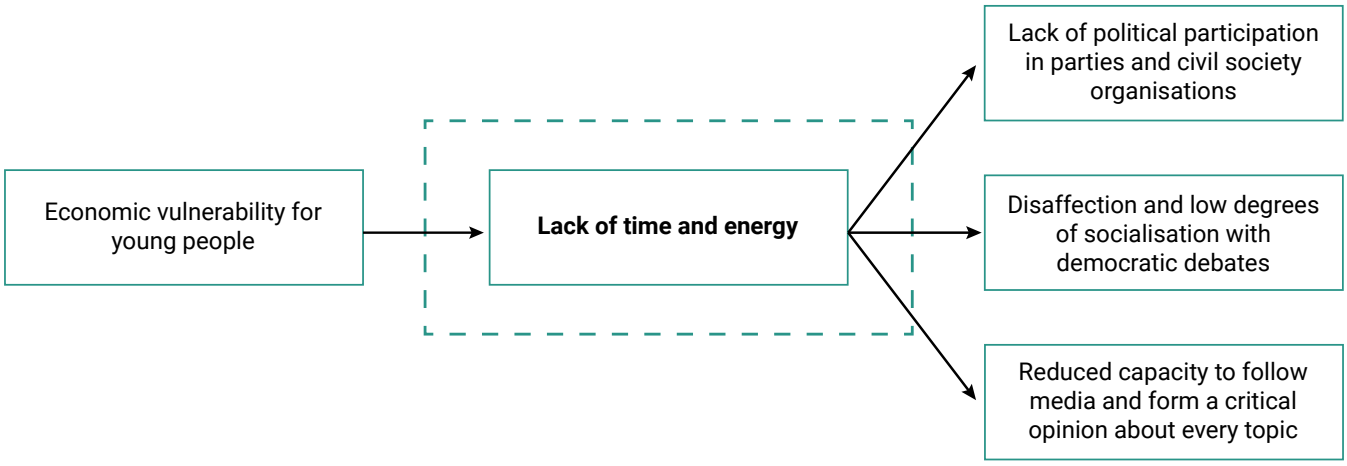
Several felt that the government was not making enough effort to communicate its legislation and policies to the wider public. One focus group respondent spoke about the process of applying for a scholarship:

> *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.*

Another participant from a disadvantaged urban area felt that the media had a role in disseminating information about legislation and in the process of applying for government support:

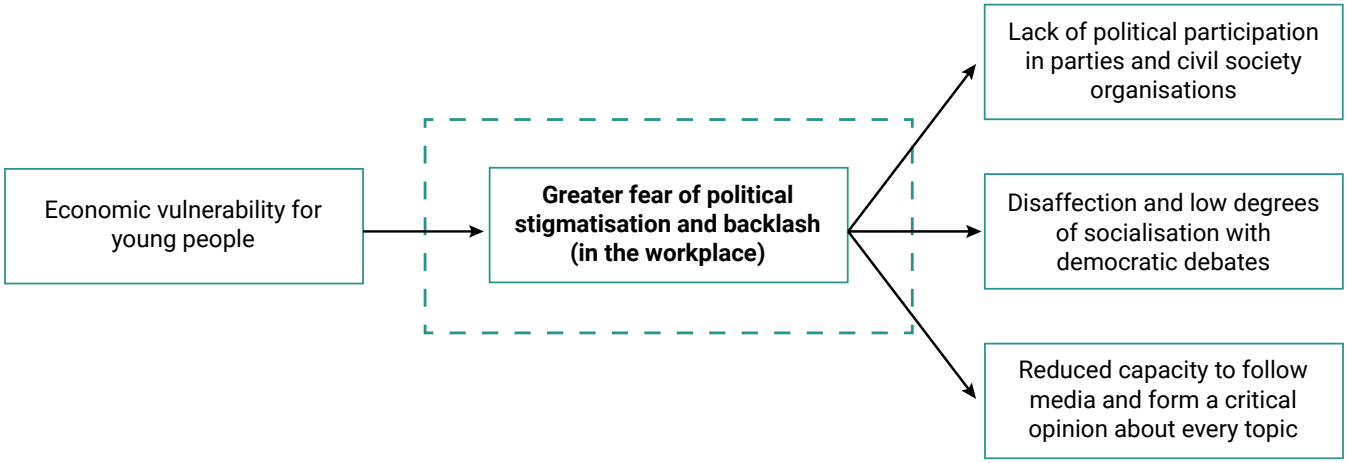
> *There should be people who are dedicated to informing us about issues that really affect us. You watch the news and most of the news shows are nonsense [...] why don't they use the time to explain the new laws that have been approved, take time to explain the regulation and the process. We have a right to quality information.*

Figure 9. Key reasons why young people are disaffected and excluded from democratic debates.



Young people also feared jeopardising their employment by being associated with a particular political party and this prevented them from participating in politics. This affirmed the belief that only people in a position of privilege and economic security can risk becoming politically engaged. In contrast, those already struggling to keep themselves afloat will be more fearful of being discriminated against, for example, by an employer that may have strong opinions about political parties that call for progressive taxes.

Figure 10. Barriers to democratic participation and membership of political organisations.



The fear of employer backlash occurred particularly when an individual's job depended upon public funds and the election of a new local government with different political attitudes could jeopardise their job. Respondents also voiced concern at the prospect of people staying in precarious employment over time, where their circumstances are not improving. This situation may prevent ongoing democratic engagement:

> *Increasingly, there is a fear about participating and people in your environment tell you to 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.*

This fear was confirmed by experts interviewed in both urban and rural areas, such as Marc Hidalgo, a member of Socialist Youth of Spain (*Juventudes Socialistas de España*),[173] and town councillor in Catalonia:

> *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 [...] and to be careful not to make my political leanings too explicit.*

Similarly, Diego Loras, a representative from the rural party *Teruel Existe*[174] told us:

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

Even if economic circumstances do improve as someone gets older, as was suggested in the Polish case study, a person would have potentially missed the chance to become involved politically at a younger age, during their most formative years, in which long-term attitudes are shaped. It then becomes harder for that person to develop strong ties, solid attitudes of democratic activism or a social network of friendships and personal connections that may help to guarantee an enduring involvement in democracy. Disaffection, then, will be more likely amongst individuals who do not participate early on, which may also be connected to lower incentives and, over time, the capacity to stay informed about key democratic developments.

Dislike of media reporting on politics

Most focus group participants were concerned about the quality of news media in Spain, talking about its bias, the role of hidden interests and content designed to provoke political reactions rather than to inform the audience. As such, they felt it had a detrimental impact on the health of its democratic institutions and found it difficult to trust newspapers and television news. As one participant put it "the information that reaches us comes already influenced." This was reason enough for several participants not to read newspapers at all. Respondents spoke about the negativity of the media, such as this participant from an urban area:

> *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 politics, then, of course, that has a negative impact [...] and the negativity starts spreading as people speak and talk to each other.*

Some female participants felt that even though much progress had been made in women's rights, the media did not sufficiently focus on that as a success story, which could help to consolidate women's achievements but had instead retained a negative viewpoint, negating successes in legislation:

> *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.*

Respondents in all the focus groups felt that the concept of democracy was connected to a free and open media (both traditional and social). Both urban and rural groups followed the news on national television regularly, yet they did so passively—in that the TV was on at home and national news (the *Telediario*) would come on. They also gathered political knowledge through personal discussions with family and friends, or news that they had randomly picked up from Facebook feeds.

In urban focus groups, participants tended to have Twitter (now known as X), Instagram and Facebook accounts and to follow national politicians but not necessarily actively engage with politics online. As in Poland and Ireland, in general, the urban groups were much more politicised, as they expressed greater interest in political topics. Twitter usage was widespread in the urban area though not as much in the rural area, and TikTok usage was widespread in both the rural and the urban focus groups. Reading newspapers was the exception rather than the norm. Those participants who did tend to read national newspapers, such as *El País* or *El Mundo* said that they had read a newspaper to follow news on a particular issue that affected their employment.

Polarising attitudes to equality and immigration legislation

While focus group discussions on democracy were fairly cohesive, those on key policies such as equality and immigration laws became very heated, with participants articulating strongly opposing views. Young people

living in urban areas favoured strong equality laws and open immigration policies. Criticism to equality laws and to positive discrimination and affirmative action came most vocally from participants in rural areas:

> *I am in favour of equality, but not equality that favours one side.*
>
> *Extensive resources are being wasted in equality laws.*
>
> *The current judicial system is supporting women and going against men.*
>
> *What needs to be avoided is that a woman's opinion counts more than a man's.*

They felt that "democracy should have other priorities." One respondent elaborated on this viewpoint:

> *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.*

Radically opposed views were also held on immigration. Attitudes against immigration were highest in the focus groups carried out in the Almería province, a region that receives a large share of migrants working in the agricultural sector. Comments included:

> *We should be in favour because most immigrants come since they are fleeing due to economic and political reasons.*
>
> *There should be higher controls, because sometimes they arrive and find no work.*
>
> *Official processes should be implemented to avoid that they come in illegal ships.*
>
> *They should only come if they already have a labour contract.*
>
> *They are taking away jobs from Spanish people because they agree to work without a contract and are ready to earn less.*

Rural and urban

The difference between rural and urban participants already emerged in the sections above, when discussing equality, and in part, migration. A key difference between the urban and rural focus groups was that participants in the former were mostly concerned about national politics and disregarded smaller city-level debates, while rural respondents were much more centred around specific projects in their locality or neighbouring ones and cited one such forum organised for young people regionally. Rural participants were critical about how regional governments distributed budgets that directly impacted them. They felt that money was often spent 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 quickly. For example, an event had been recently organised for young people in the region to meet YouTubers. But the organisation had to be done 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.

Urban focus group participants discussed "formal politics" such as judicial reforms, and new laws in the field of equality, health, and housing. While they demonstrated a higher command of political terminology and clear ideas on what a democratic system means, they had little working knowledge or experience of policies on the ground. Most of what they discussed was based exclusively on what they had heard from others.

By contrast, the rural focus groups showed a lack of understanding of how local, regional, national and EU institutions function and how they are intertwined in daily legislative activities. They had little knowledge of who represented them in national parliament. This sense of the disconnection of young people living in rural areas from national politics was also commented on by the experts interviewed. Diego Loras, quoted above told us:

In addition 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.

However, participants in the rural groups also engaged in comparatively more discussion of "soft politics" – for example, one participant had become interested in local politics after having been involved in planning some festivals. It seemed to be a common practice for regional politicians to ask for youth involvement in such events.

Rural and urban participants' responses on the areas of policy that needed to be improved were consistent with the priorities just discussed. Focus group participants in urban areas stressed better policymaking in fields such as gender equality. Several respondents made explicit reference to the fact that, without democracy, advancements in women's rights would not have been possible in Spain. While those in rural areas wanted politicians to focus on health and education, which they saw as higher priorities.

Old and young

Focus group participants held that the democratic system did not listen to young people. They felt that older generations disregarded their opinions simply based on their age. One participant recounted that when they started talking about politics with relatives, 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 was met with widespread approval from other members of the focus group who had also experienced this same attitude. Participants conveyed the frustration of being prevented from making themselves heard speaking truth to power:

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.

OIder generations were also described as blocking access for young people to assume positions of public responsibility. Some commented that access was particularly restricted by those in the baby boomer generation who competed with them for political positions.

Generational divides were also discussed in relation to party political culture. Political parties do not appeal socially for young people as much as they have in the past. Online social activity also restricts the amount of time that young people have to interact through more traditional communication. As a result, political parties have lost their importance as a preferred space in which to construct significant social connections. Víctor Camino, secretary general of the Socialist Youth of Spain, felt that improving and finding new ways of building political culture within parties would be a very important element to incentivise young people to become more 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 makes people remain in party organisations. There are a lot of people that got interested in the party through open events and then decided to join.*

Andrea Henry, President of the Spanish Youth Council, spoke about the lack of representatives, in both the Spanish and EU Parliaments, who are under 35 years old:

> *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*[175] *[...] so there are around the same number of people called Martin as there are people who are young. Several experts interviewed stressed the need for young people to be better represented by the democratic system. If the number of young parliamentarians and national politicians increased, this would facilitate legislation being put forward in a variety of fields from a youth perspective.*

Carlos Corrochano, spokesperson of SUMAR,[176] also spoke about the need for young people to hold 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 of this. There are many young people at SUMAR holding positions of responsibility and young people elaborating the political programme.*

What young people are asking of their democratic governments

The participants in the focus groups wanted 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 and not being provided with the opportunities to develop skills for the digital transition. They expressed this above all by demanding better socioeconomic conditions for themselves and better administrative, political and civic opportunities for participation that would facilitate these conditions.

Material economic progress: policies that improve young people's lives

While some experts held that previous generations have also experienced the challenges now being faced by young Spanish people, the main difference today is the scale of young people suffering from economic hardship,[177] as Pau Mari-Klose, Member of Parliament for the PSOE party, inequality researcher, and interviewed for this study, 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.*

Mari-Klose also commented that:

> *There have always been young people who show disaffection with the democratic system due to their economic vulnerability. What may be different nowadays is that, while the attitudes 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.*

When asked if the *political situation* was improving or worsening in Spain, many participants would directly respond that it is clearly worsening and then use the *economic situation* to make their point:

> ***Facilitator:*** *Do you think the political situation in Spain is improving or worsening?*
>
> ***Focus group participant 1:*** *There are very few young people with stable and sufficient incomes. They must either look for the cheapest possible rent or live with their parents. Economic dependency is very high.*
>
> ***Focus group participant 2:*** *Housing prices are very high [...] it's very hard not to drown financially while you constantly work.*

Nacho Catalá, MP for PP in Madrid's regional parliament, concluded that the real source of young people's discontent is economic:

> *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 the 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.*

Accessible administration, participative government, active civil society

Although economic conditions were at the centre of the debate, it was clear that there was a link between them and the opportunities for disadvantaged young people to participate in society to create a virtuous circle for better living conditions.

On the administrative side, access to information needs to be easier for those who come from a disadvantaged background, and, in that regard, other bureaucratic models should be promoted that create a space where citizens can easily manage any communication between themselves and bureaucratic bodies that execute the laws of democratic institutions.

On the political side, Víctor Camino, Secretary General of the Socialist Youth of Spain,[178] suggested that the government needs to explore the development of other forms of democratic involvement, beyond the traditional election vote once every four years. He felt that the democratic institutional framework in Spain (and elsewhere) has not adapted to a new reality of digital participation:

> *Democracy continues using 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.*

At the same time, Andrea Henry, President of the Spanish Youth Council, noted that youth organisations are only involved in specific areas of policy, usually at late stages of the legislative process, and mainly at the more symbolic and ceremonial level:

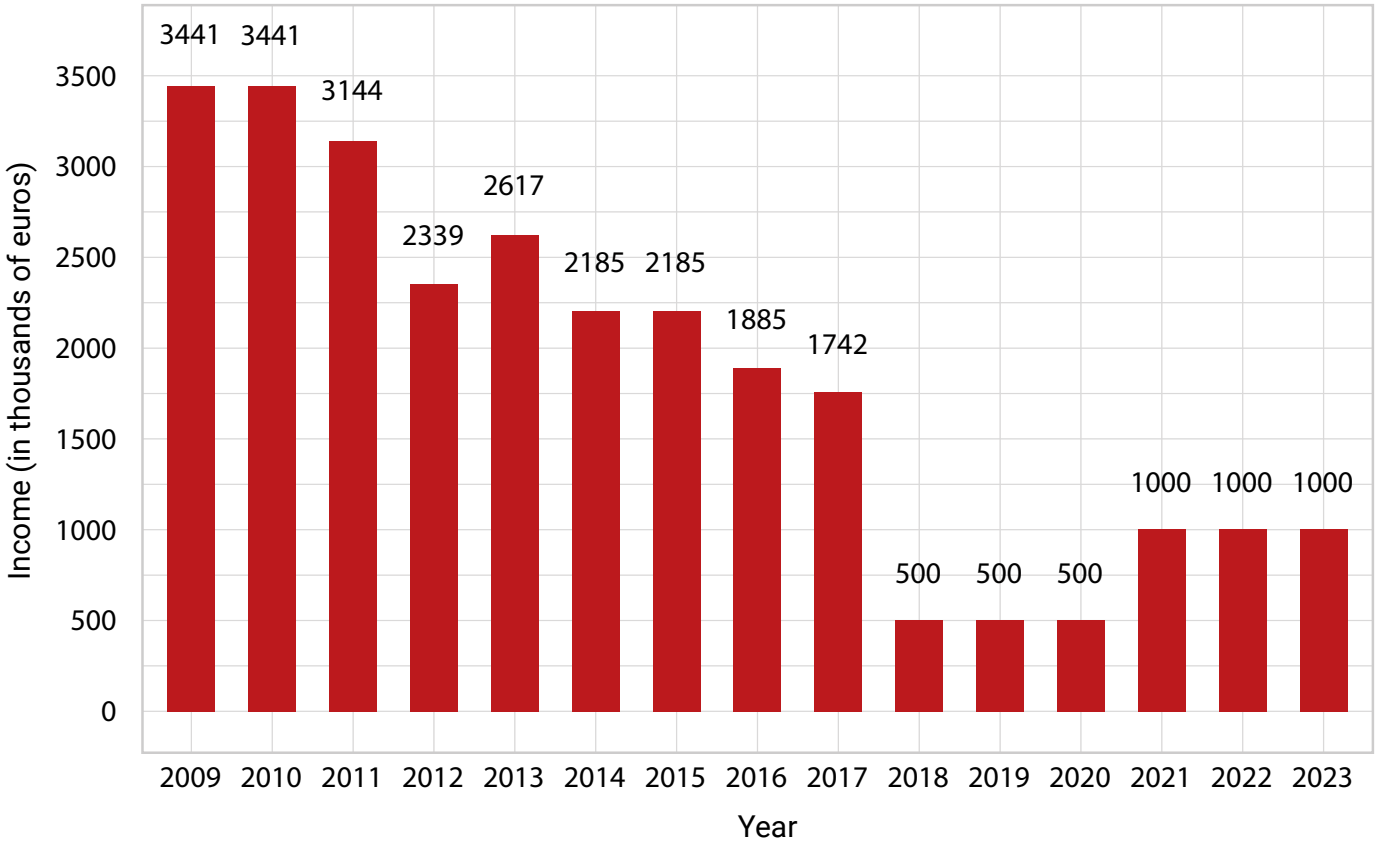
> *We are usually involved at advanced stages of the legislative process where it is already difficult to propose any changes, even changing a comma [...] they do involve us and we are present, but there is a tendency to invite us in a decorative way because it looks good for the photo.*

In addition to the administration and political institutions, civil society was ascribed a major role in improving participation as well as economic conditions. The research showed that civil society organisations play a fundamental role in protecting and fostering democratic values amongst disadvantaged communities. In areas with a greater presence of civil society organisations, Javier Poleo, President of INCIDE,[179] observed that there are also greater levels of electoral participation compared to other places of similar economic vulnerability where such NGO activities are more limited:

> *Since the start of our 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.*

Therefore, building networks of civil society organisations working in vulnerable areas may be critical to whether young people experiencing economic disadvantage foster more positive attitudes towards the democratic political system and actively participate in it. However, they have been harshly hit both by the 2008 economic crisis and by legal and political decisions and have lost members, resources and a presence in society. As an example, the budget allocated to the Spanish Youth Council,[180] the main body representing youth in Spain, has seen its income reduced by more than two-thirds in the last decade (Figure 11). Reinforcing the resources of these organisations is a priority to regain the trust and participation of young people.

Figure 11. Budget of the Spanish Youth Council provided by the Spanish Government.



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

While funding is not the only way to support youth organisations, without it, these associations cannot fulfil their function, as Andrea Henry, President of the Spanish Youth Council, described when interviewed:

> *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.*

Youth mainstreaming

Youth mainstreaming is a comprehensive approach that has the potential to combine the participation of young people with the consideration of their most important concerns. Instead of treating youth policy in a silo, one way to protect a democratic culture amongst this age group is to mainstream their perspective so that it is present in all areas of policy planning, including macroeconomic policies, housing laws, green and climate policies, and both domestic and foreign policy more broadly. Representatives from the youth organisations of the main political parties in Spain, such as Bea Fanjul, president of the youth branch of

the PP, believed 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 PP's electoral programme, there should not be a specific section on youth but, rather, youth should be a cross-cutting, transversal issue. It should be part of all policy proposals.*

Conclusion

The majority of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in Spain are very critical of the current functioning of democratic institutions, which seems unable to solve what they consider their key problems (mostly economic ones). However, their negative view of the politics of the country does not translate into a questioning of democracy as a system, for which they showed a strong preference. These pro-democratic attitudes were shared by almost all participants and had a strong consensus across genders and specific ages, as well as between participants from rural and urban focus groups. Only a small minority questioned democracy, and when further engaged, were also committed to the democratic ideal, expressing very similar concerns and arguments to the rest of young people. Instead of systemic change, our interviewees demanded reform to make democracy *more efficient, responsible and inclusive.*

The chapter also revealed that youth disaffection is not a new phenomenon. What has changed is not so much the attitudes of young people but the number considered to be disadvantaged, which has grown significantly since the Great Recession of 2008. Currently, 33.5% of Spanish youth are at risk of social exclusion, indicating an increase in economic vulnerability.[181] This study has explored the relationship between economic vulnerability and democratic engagement, noting that disadvantaged youth exhibit lower levels of participation and greater disaffection, primarily due to economic struggles. Furthermore, political activism can lead to stigmatisation, particularly for those without stable economic situations.

Key discussions in focus groups and expert interviews centred on potential solutions to enhance the democratic involvement of disadvantaged young people. The case study advocates shifting from isolated youth policy to a broader youth perspective in all policy areas. This involves including young people in discussions on policies affecting them, such as climate, economic planning, housing, and education. Enhanced representation of young people in national democratic institutions is crucial for incorporating their perspectives into legislative processes. This representation can also strengthen their connection with democratic institutions.

The study underscores the role of local civil society organisations in fostering democratic culture among disadvantaged youth and increasing their electoral participation. A primary recommendation is to augment funding for the national network of civil society organisations.

In summary, the chapter suggests that while the disengagement of disadvantaged youth from democracy in Spain has deep-rooted causes, there is significant potential for policy interventions to reinvigorate their democratic participation.

5. FRANCE AND HUNGARY

4. FRANCE AND HUNGARY

Introduction

Young people in Ireland, Poland and Spain had very similar attitudes to politics. Facing similar socioeconomic challenges, including in the labour market and in housing, they failed to see the relevance of a political system that did not make any concrete changes in their lives and felt disconnected from it. They did not think that policymakers listened to them. Despite this, young people involved in the research supported democracy in principle. Following the three main case studies, the study was extended, with smaller scale fieldwork in Hungary and France, to examine whether the findings held in countries with divergent national political trends and strength of democratic institutions and processes. This chapter briefly outlines the socioeconomic and political background for these further additional case studies followed by a presentation of their findings.

The French case study was researched against a politically volatile backdrop of Macron's minority government, between winter 2022 and spring 2023, which is characterised by some clear differences in political participation between the generations. A pattern that seems even more evident in France than in the other case studies. Demographics were described by observers as 'decisive'. 27.5% of over-65s are on the electoral roll compared to 25.6% of 18–24-year-olds, but with substantially higher abstention rates among young voters compared to over 65s—who have the highest participation rates of any demographic group.[182] [183] However, translating abstention from voting as lack of interest in politics is too simplistic. Young French people are taking a much more direct part in political life, what Sarah Pickard terms 'Do it Yourself (DOI) politics.'[184] This activity centres on campaigning and protesting, particularly about the environment and labour market precarity, but also about racism, feminism and social inequalities. In many of these campaigns, young people are calling for democratic renewal through deliberative and direct democracy mechanisms.

The three French focus groups were conducted with the help of *Sainte-Maure* agricultural college, located in the rural department of Aube, where the unemployment rate is well above the national average.[185] Two focus groups were composed of young people with little political experience and low-level interest in politics. One was made up of young people who were much more politically aware and interested in political issues. The groups were equally composed of men and women, but unfortunately, were not representative in terms of ethnic diversity, due to recruitment challenges. Between November 2022 and May 2023, interviews were also conducted with researchers, political representatives and community activists for their perspectives on the politicisation of young people.

Hungary is the only country in this study with a global freedom score categorised as 'partly free', in contrast to Ireland, which ranks the highest among our case studies at 97, only surpassed in Europe by Sweden, at 100.[186] [187] An 'obstructed' democracy, it embraces culturally conservative politics, targeting immigrants and LGBTQI+ communities while promoting traditional gender roles. It ranks below other Eastern and Central European countries such as Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and the Czech Republic, all defined as 'consolidated democracies.'[188]

The prime minister, Viktor Orbán, and his Fidesz party, will rule with another supermajority until at least early 2026. His government is in conflict with the EU over the rule of law and relations between Hungary and the EU remain contentious.[189] The hybrid regime currently observable in Hungary raises serious concerns among

those who believe in and support democratic principles and institutions. The practice and preservation of democracy is crucial for safeguarding individual freedoms and rights. In this context, increasing the demographic participation of young people with experience of socioeconomic disadvantage is particularly important.

What also characterises Hungary compared to the other countries examined in this study is the fact that inflation in Hungary is three times higher than the EU average and almost twice as high as the next highest countries (Poland, Czechia and Slovakia) and a fairly volatile economic context.[190] Economic slowdown has had repercussions on job creation, contributing to slower wage growth and higher unemployment.[191] Hungary has double the population of Ireland, but GDP five times less per capita.[192] Between 2019 and 2022, mean and median income for young people in Hungary rose from €5768 to €6689 whereas the equivalent figures in Ireland were €25,153 and €28,989.[193]

Three focus groups were conducted in Hungary. One in Budapest, facilitated by *Tudatos Ifjúságért Alapítvány* (Foundation for Youth Awareness);[194] a second in an urban region outside the capital: Veresegyház, working with *Támaszpont MOPKA,*[195] a well-established organisation working with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and in Mályi—a small settlement in the Eastern part of the country, carried out in collaboration with *MINI Ifjúsági Szolgálat*a, a locally embedded organisation.[196] Expert interviews were conducted with politicians who are actively involved in youth affairs, one from the governing party, another with a representative of a left-leaning, social democratic party and also with academics, civil society representatives and local charities working with young people with experience of socioeconomic disadvantage, and women's and migrant rights associations.

France

Socioeconomic context

The key statistics on the socioeconomic situation in France, together with some structural legal obstacles, describe a difficult, often precarious situation for an important minority of the young population. The age groups who are most at risk of poverty and exclusion are the youngest: 21.8% of under 16s and 27% of 16-24-year-olds, both higher rates than in the remaining age groups.[197] France is one of only a few European countries where the qualifying age for the minimum income is higher than the age at which someone legally becomes an adult, which is a clear structural barrier to an adequate, self-sustaining income for young people.[198] Out of the 18% of those who received food aid during the pandemic, 31% of them were under 30 years old.[199] Since then, the economic situation has remained difficult, with the population having to contend with very high inflation, especially in energy and food.[200]

In 2019, 19% of young people aged between 18 and 29 years old were in poverty,[201] with poverty affecting mainly younger generations.[202] Even though the employment rate has risen sharply for young people,[203] the unemployment rate in France is 7.3% for the population but 17.3% for the under-25s.[204] The status of employment has also deteriorated. Among 15–24-year-olds in work, only 41% have a permanent job, compared with 72% of the population as a whole.[205] On the other hand, in 2021, 12.8% of young people aged 15-29 were NEET, slightly less than the EU average, and this is most often correlated with unemployment, or inactivity due to constraints such as childcare or poor health.[206]

Poor housing conditions are also an issue. In 2019, 23.5% of 15-29-year-olds lived in overcrowded housing versus 15.6% of the overall population.[207] The numbers of young people living with their parents has been increasing since 1970 with the rise of unemployment and the difficulty in finding stable employment at a young age.[208] In 2013, 43% of 18-29-year-olds lived with their parents (five percentage points more than in 1973), the majority of students lived with their parents and 76% of 25-29-year-olds came back to live with their parents after their studies.[209]

As in the other case studies in this report, young people are experiencing delayed transition to adulthood due to the cost of living and challenges related to education, employment and housing. In 2016, the mean age for a woman's first marriage was 32 years old compared to 34 years old for men, among the older ages in the OECD.[210]

The pandemic also revealed the health challenges of young people in France, "separated from their peers, prevented from participating in social life, confined to their homes for prolonged periods, [they] suffered from loneliness and isolation."[211] 20.8% of 18-24-year-olds experienced a depressive episode during 2021, against 11.7% in 2017.[212] In France, 20% of 15-year-olds smoke - it is the most common addiction.[213] This is followed by addiction to alcohol, consumption rates of which (across all age groups) are the highest in the OECD. [214]

Political context

France is a semi-presidential republic with a head of government - the prime minister - appointed by the president who is the directly elected head of state. The parliamentary system consists of the National Assembly (NA) and the Senate. The political environment is characterised by fragmentation, with the rise of the far right, decline of the centrist conservative right and the inability of the left to unite with fragile coalitions (*Ensemble*[215] and *Nouvelle union populaire* écologique *et sociale* (*NUPES*))[216] in the NA. Since 2022, there has been the rise of a new far-right political party *Reconquête!*[217] led by Eric Zemmour. Dominant in the media before the presidential election, it "only" achieved 7% in the first round in April 2022.[218] Despite not representing a very high percentage of the overall vote, that allowed for the party to be reimbursed for campaign expenses by the state,[219] awarding Zemmour some legitimacy.

In the second round of the 2022 presidential elections, Macron's centrist *La Republique En Marche* (LREM)[220] won 58.55% of the vote, against 41.45% for Le Pen's radical right's *Rassemblement National* (RN)[221] representing a decline from 66.10% in 2017 (versus 33.90% for Le Pen).[222] While Macron relied on votes from different electorates for the second round to block Marine Le Pen's win he still won less votes than five years before.[223] Overall, Macron lost seven percentage points of 18-34-year-old's votes between 2017 and 2022.[224] Amongst the same age group, 59% voted, compared to 88% voters aged 60-69. This shows a large gap between the generations and a disproportionate representation of the political preferences of the older population groups.[225] Likewise, during the first round of legislative elections in June 2022, a record number, 75% of young people under the age of 25, and 65% of those aged 25 to 34, did not turn out to vote, raising questions about their interest in traditional politics altogether. This matters, as the parliamentary elections in France are crucial in determining whether the government will have the (absolute) majority (and support) in the NA. As result of the last elections, *Renaissance* (formerly LREM) did not win an absolute majority. One important consequence is that if it believes that a draft bill will not pass the NA, the president has to find votes among the opposition to get his presidential programme adopted[226] or frequently resort to circumventing parliament through Article 49.3.[227] The latter has increasingly undermined the legitimacy of the political institution, not least through the controversial use of the article to push through pension reforms, which led to massive protests.

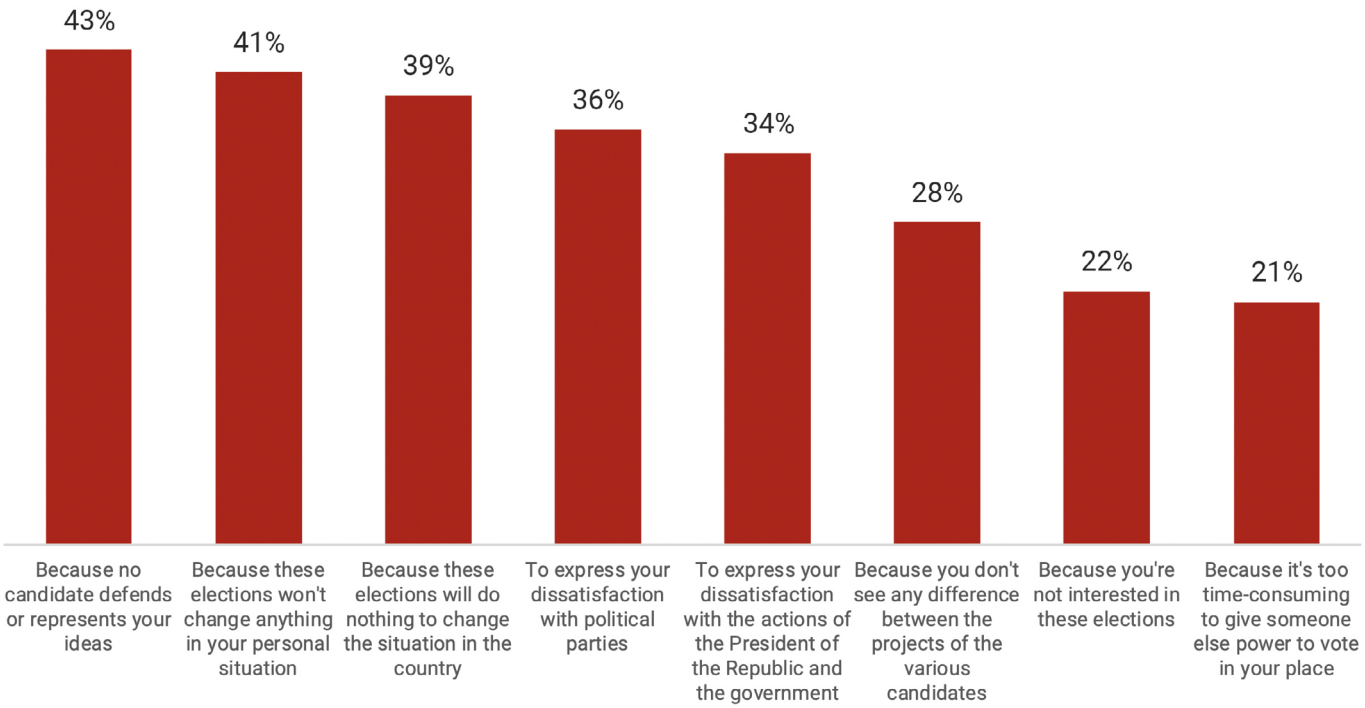
Macron will leave office in 2027, providing a potential opening for Marine Le Pen, who has growing support, as well as left and right parties, who claim fewer supporters than the RN. The current coalition of parties on the left (including *La France Insoumise),*[228] the Greens (*Les* Écologistes)[229] and *NUPES* have struggled to find consensus on the issues their supporters want them to pursue, or more generally to challenge the political system.[230]

It should be said that voting rates are admittedly difficult to use as evidence of diminishing engagement with democracy, as younger generations conventionally have lower turnout than their older counterparts,[231] with perhaps the exception of referendums, such as the 2018 Irish referendum on abortion rights.[232] Young people participating less in elections than older generations is not a new phenomenon, however the trend has nevertheless worryingly increased in recent years in France.

Distrust in politics

The voting levels and fragmentation of political parties parallels distrust in politics. A substantial proportion of young people in France feel that public policies are not capable of improving people's lives, that ultimately it doesn't matter who is elected as it will not have a profound effect on individual lives. In 2022, only 18% of French people said they had confidence in political parties.[233] This is reflected in the reasons given for abstaining from voting in the first round of the 2022 French presidential elections.

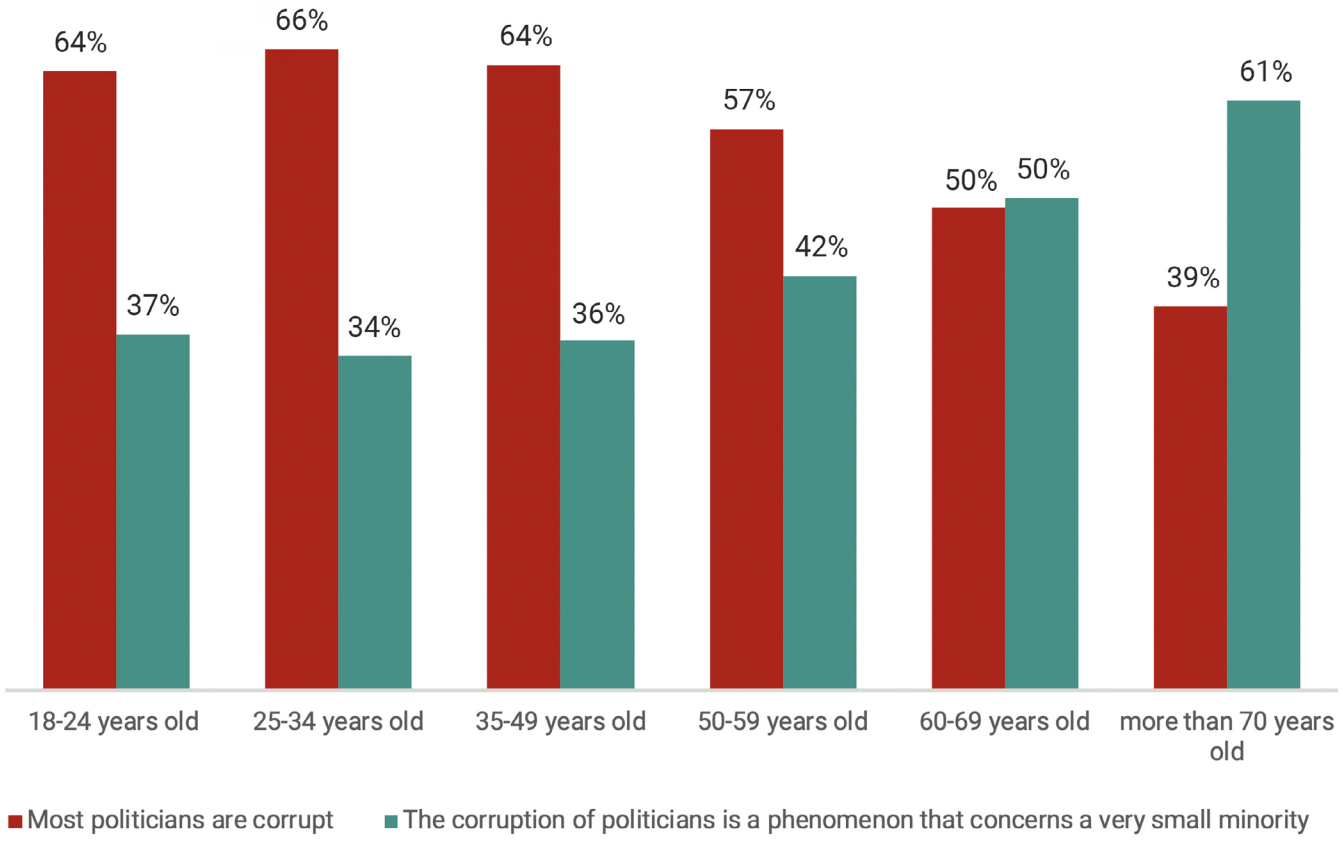
Figure 1. Decisive reasons for abstaining in the first round of the 2022 presidential election.[234]



Source: Dabi, F. and Fourquet, J. (2022) "Législatives 2022 – Sondage jour du vote: Profil des électeurs et clés du scrutin (1er tour)". Ifop-Fiducial, 12 June.

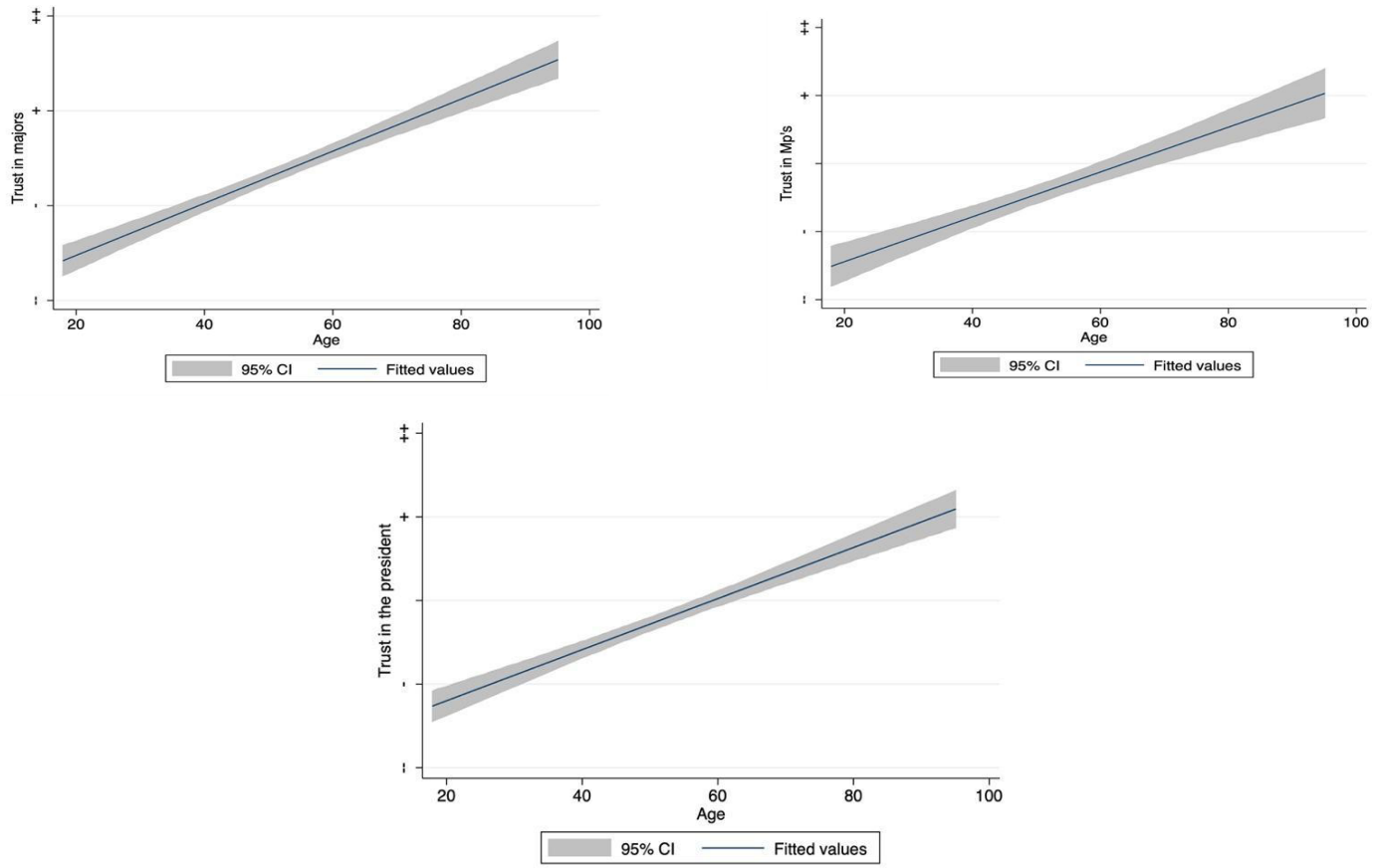
Figure 1 shows that 43% of the French public who abstained from voting did so because no candidate represented their ideas. Another 41% felt that the elections would not alter their personal situation and 39% felt that the elections would not lead to positive change in the country. Other survey data shows quite clearly the extent to which distrust is particularly marked among young people. Nearly two-thirds of 18-24- and 25–34-year-olds in France think that most politicians are corrupt (see Figure 2).[235] A similar percentage (64%) of 35-49-year-olds think the same but the perception of corruption decreases in the older age groups.

Figure 2. Perception of political representatives by age group.[236]



Source: Teinturier, B., M. Gallard, and S. Quetier-Parent (2022) "Fractures françaises". IPSOS and Sopra Steria.

Figure 3. Trust in political actors in France, by age group.



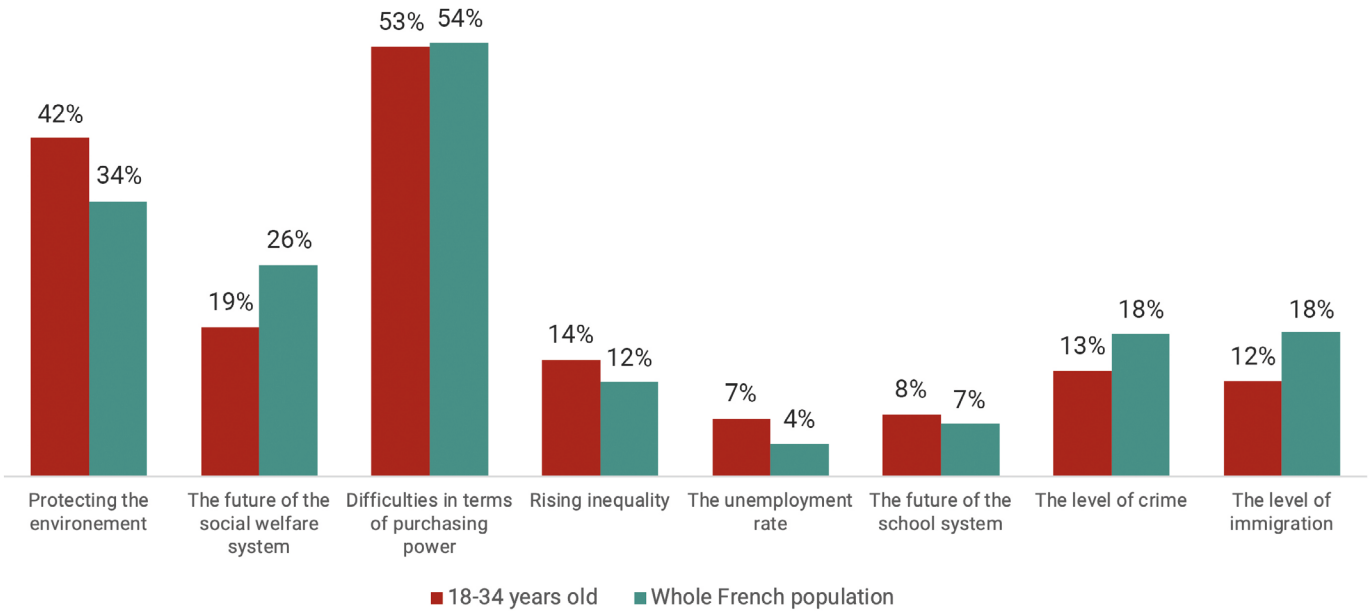
Source: Wave 7 of the French electoral survey, IPSOS for Cevipof, Le Monde and the Jean-Jaurès Foundation, 2022.

Figure 3 and Figure 8[237] further illustrate, not only the level of distrust among young people, but the correlation between increasing age and levels of confidence in representative democracy. Vincent Tiberj, a leading French youth researcher,[238] has warned of the negative implications for representative democracy when younger generations are becoming more and more distrustful of the decisions taken by political leaders. One factor driving this distrust might be the gap between priorities for younger generations and legislation which is passed (or not passed), and the dimension of environmental concerns.

Issues concerning young people

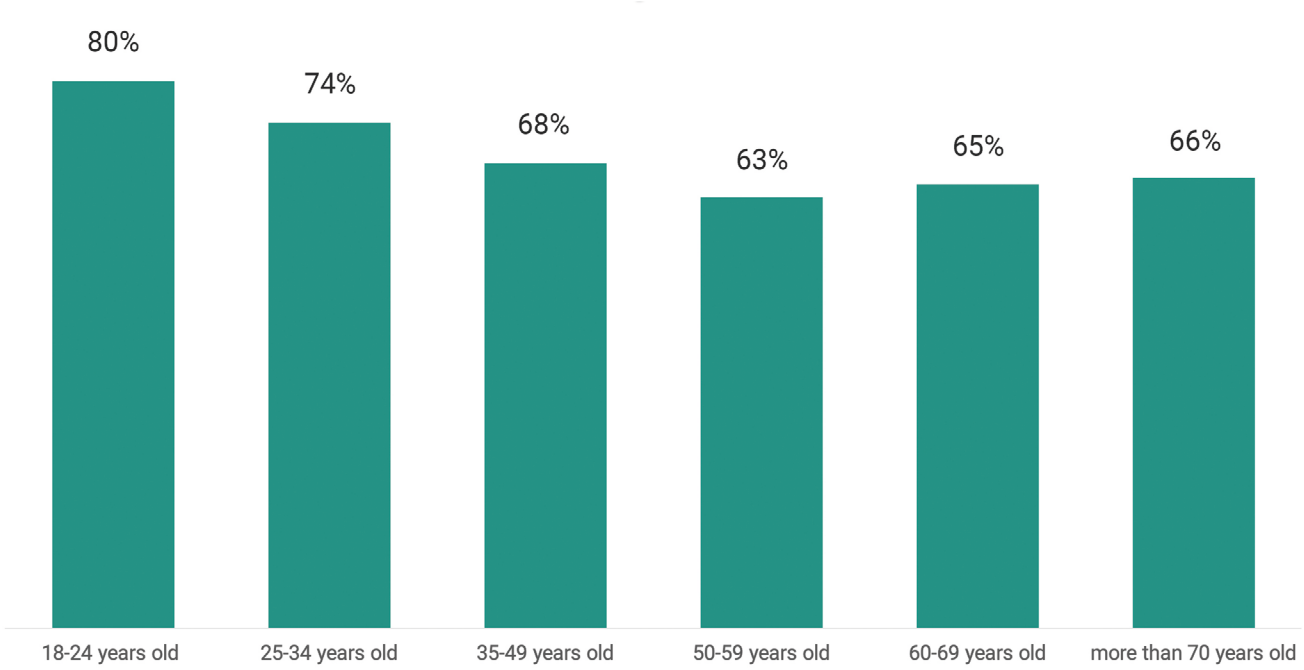
Figure 4 indicates the issues of greatest concern to young people and to the French population. The data show quite clearly that both groups have similar concerns, except for one issue: the environment. Here, there is a disconnect between overall opinion and young people's concerns. While 34% of the French population consider environmental protection to be one of their main concerns, this figure rises to 42% among the under-35s and to 46% among the 18-24s. This concern for environmental issues can be seen even more clearly in demand for more to be done by public authorities to protect the environment (Figure 5). In short, the gap between what young French people want and what is being done for the environment may be a factor in young people not feeling heard. The question is whether this also applies to those we are most interested in in this study, namely those who are economically worse off.

Figure 4. Priority issues for young people and for the French population as a whole.



Source: Teinturier, B., M. Gallard, S. Quetier-Parent (2022) "Fractures françaises". IPSOS and Sopra Steria.

Figure 5. "The government should be doing more to protect the environment, even if it means making fundamental changes to the way we live."



Source: Teinturier, B., M. Gallard, S. Quetier-Parent (2022) "Fractures françaises". IPSOS and Sopra Steria, p. 87.

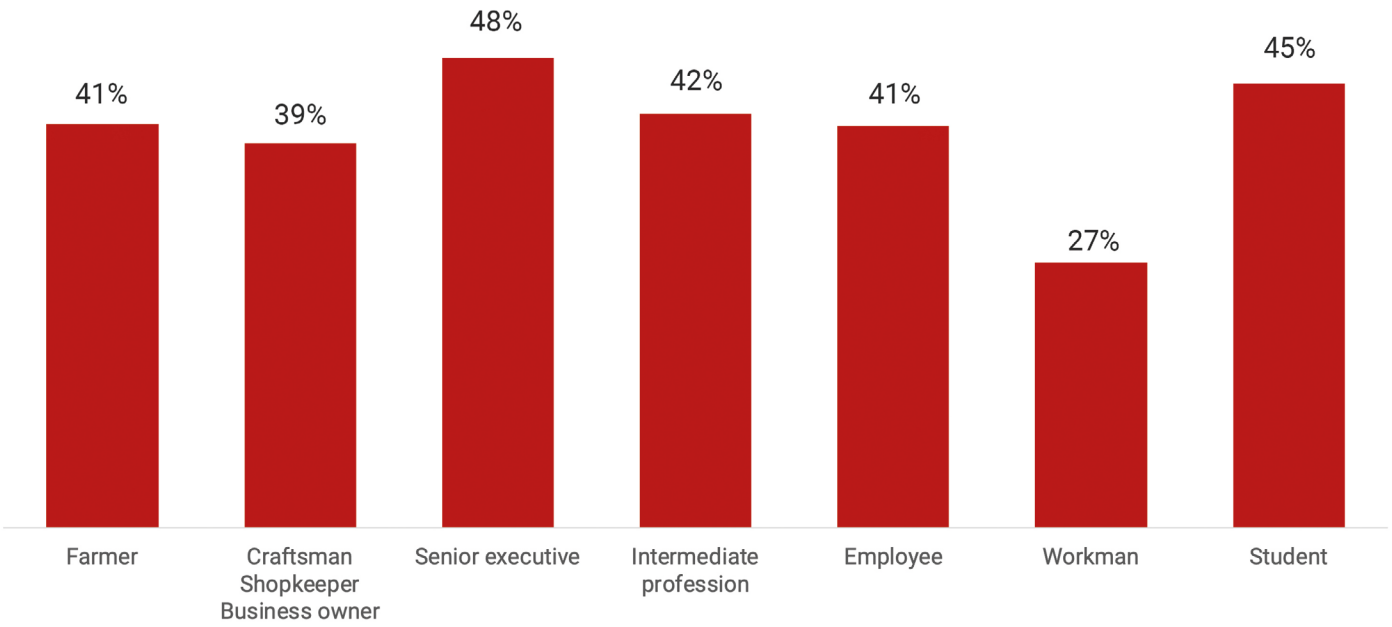
Socioeconomic status and politics

In France, socioeconomic status corresponds with the degree of concern about the environment. Figure 6 shows that 48% of young managers and 45% of young students cite the environment as one of the three issues that most concern them, while this figure falls to 27% among blue-collar workers. Our focus group participants similarly spoke about their priority being whether politicians will affect an improvement in their material circumstances:

> *To be honest, I choose a candidate mainly on the basis of what he or she will be able to change on the economic front. In concrete terms, will he be able to improve my living conditions?*

This means that the generational ecological divide does not tend to apply to young workers, who are more likely to face low wages. It should be noted at this point that this category does not, of course, include all those young people who are experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage but are not in work or education.

Figure 6. Concern for environmental issues among the under-35s in France, by political category.[239] [240]

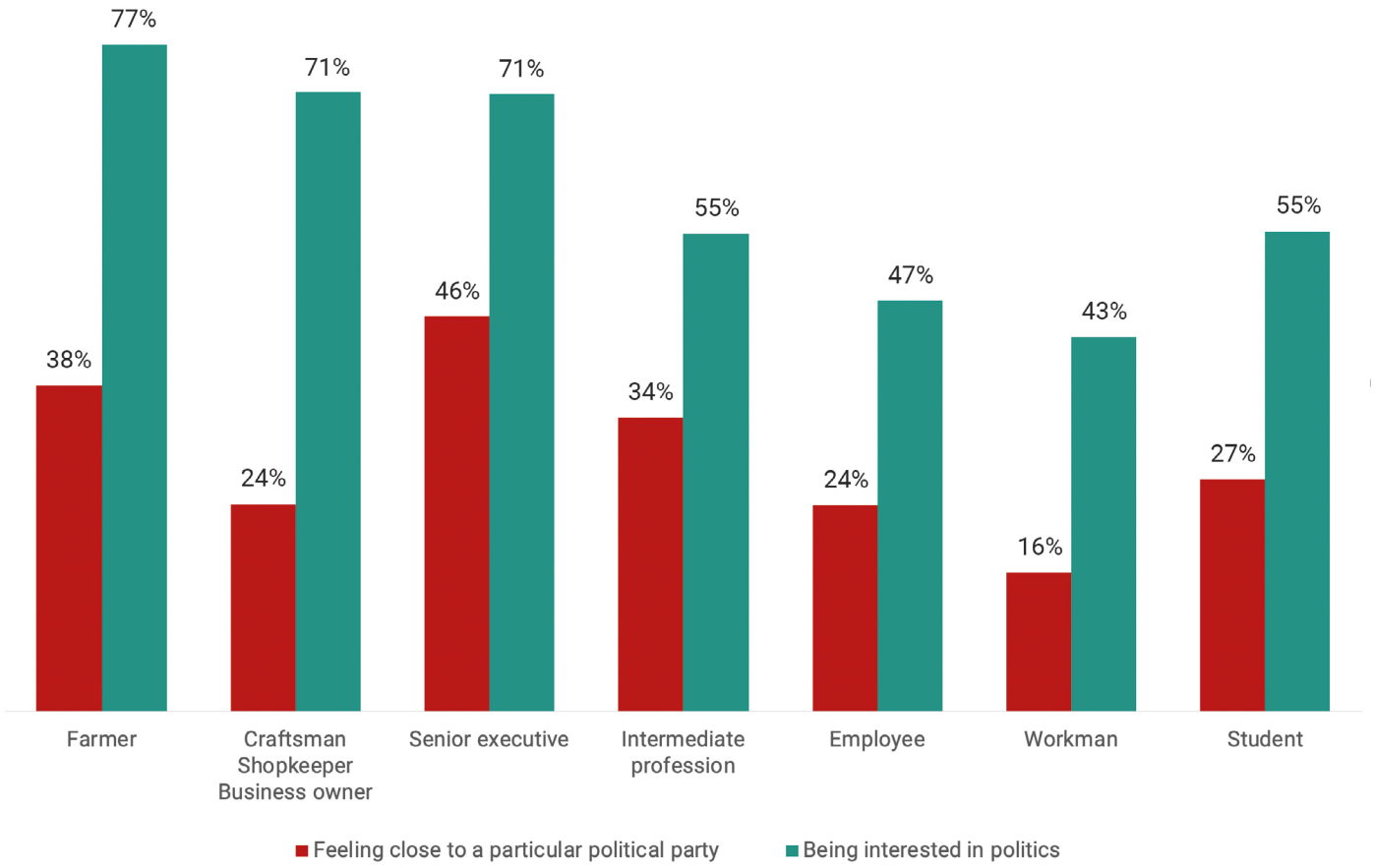


Source: Teinturier, B., M. Gallard, and S. Quetier-Parent (2022) "Fractures françaises". IPSOS and Sopra Steria.

What's more, the data shows that despite the differences in the importance of the environmental issue between occupational groups (and associated lower and higher incomes), there are no differences in whether young people are willing to change their lifestyles. Younger generations want the government to do more to protect the environment, even if it means asking the French to change their lifestyles. 76% of under 35-year-olds would be prepared to change their lifestyles but only 66% of those above 35 years old.[241] Among young people under 35 years old, there is no major difference on this point according to income level. This is interesting because it suggests that younger generations with a working-class background, while attaching less importance to the environment, are still willing to adapt if they have to.

Interest in politics is also impacted by socioeconomic disadvantage. Figure 7 shows that only 43% of young blue-collar workers say they are interested in politics and 16% say they support a particular political party. In contrast, these figures are much higher in almost all other social categories. Another factor reflecting the low level of interest in traditional political involvement is the fact that trade union membership rates in France have fallen dramatically since the mid-1970s.[242] This is also true for young people. As trade unions have traditionally served as a vehicle to connect workers with political parties, this decline may be one important reason for the current, very low levels of political participation and interest of socioeconomically disadvantaged groups in traditional politics.[243]

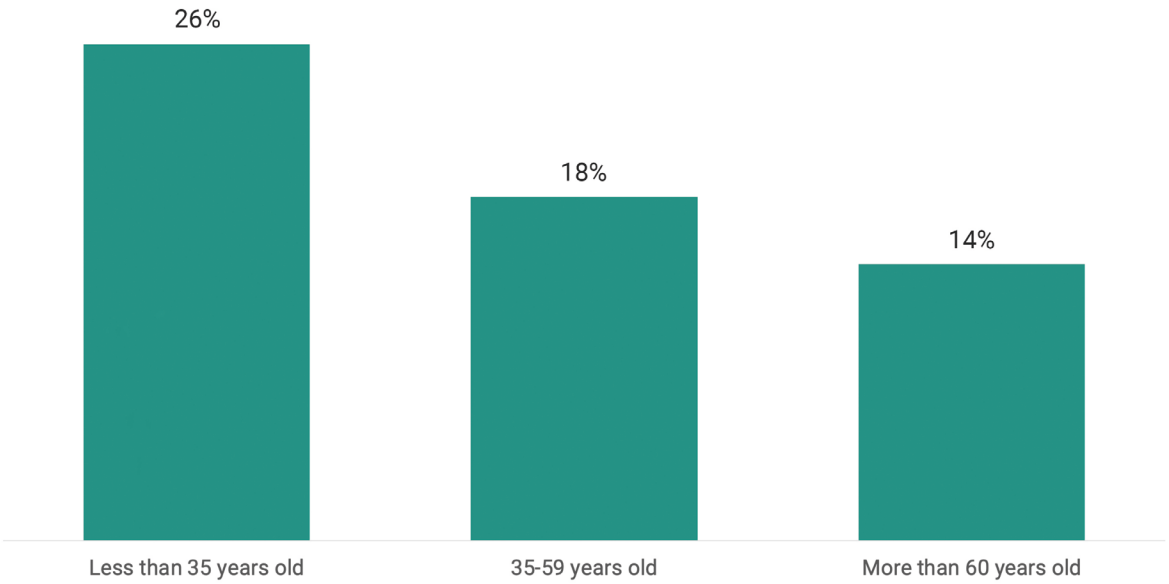
Figure 7. The politicisation of the under-35s, by socio-professional category.[244]



Source: Teinturier, B., M. Gallard, and S. Quetier-Parent (2022) "Fractures françaises". IPSOS and Sopra Steria.

So, while interest in traditional politics is low among young people, and particularly low among those experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, the question remains to what extent this translates into patterns of attitudes and voting behaviour that reveal authoritarian tendencies. Figure 8 shows us a concerning trend in this regard. Even if the majority in surveys do not prefer authoritarianism, under 35-year-olds declare a clearly higher preference for this form of government than other age groups and are, more generally, questioning democracy as a system.[245]

Figure 8. Preferences for authoritarian forms of government, by age group



Source: Teinturier, B., M. Gallard, S. Quetier-Parent (2022) "Fractures françaises". IPSOS and Sopra Steria.

This also seems to be increasingly reflected in younger people voting for the far right. Before we get to the specific voting data, however, it is worth briefly discussing the dramatic change in the party system in France, which, with its increasing fragmentation and polarisation, makes voting for parties on the fringes of the political spectrum more likely.

Previous research indicates that two patterns tend to emerge in relation to the feeling of not being heard by younger voters. In countries where left-wing politicians have been prepared to break with economic orthodoxy, and implement a transformative agenda addressing youth debt, unemployment, and wages, young voters have supported these politicians and their parties, which could be identified as left-wing populist. However, in those countries where right-wing populists have filled the gap between the political class and citizens, pivoting towards interventionism, youth support has flowed to anti-system challengers on the right.[246]

Both phenomena can be observed in France, as both Marine Le Pen's far-right RN and Mélenchon's left-wing socialist movement have gained large followings among young people. While there are many reasons for their appeal, they also take place in a changing party system in which both the traditional centre-right party, the Republicans, and the centre-left party, the Socialists, have lost massive ground since the rise of Macron's liberal centrist *En March*. Many voters for the previously dominant parties have turned to Macron's movement. Others have turned to the parties mentioned above, which are much further to the right and left. The latest election results show that those parties are particularly popular among the young(est) voters and young voters with lower incomes. Data from the polling institute Harris Interactive shows that, during the first round of the 2022 presidential election, the left-leaning Mélenchon won over the most voters between the ages of 18 and 24 with 34.8% of the vote, followed by Macron and Le Pen with 24.3% and 18% respectively.[247] In the second round of the 2022 French presidential election, 75% of under 35s with a household income of over €3,500 voted for Emmanuel Macron, whereas 25% voted for Marine Le Pen. At the same time more young people with a household income of less than €3500 still voted for Macron, or 55% versus 45% for Le Pen, but their support was weaker.

Although it is not possible to make a strong judgement due to limited data, the results seem to point in a similar direction to the conclusion from the previous case studies. Namely, that the results of the first round were at least partly driven by a clear criticism of the status quo of the functioning of democracy, while this trend weakened in the second round to prevent a radical right-wing candidate and defend liberal democracy. This desire for prevention was, as the data shows, significantly less pronounced among less affluent young people than among higher earners.

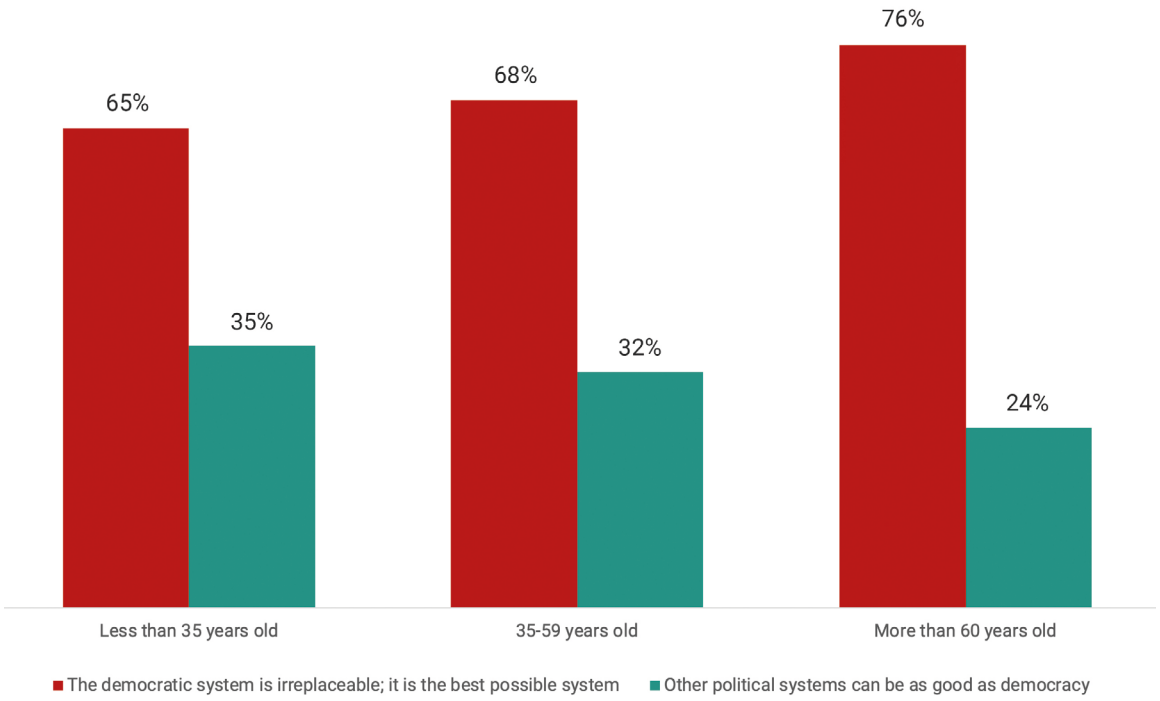
Although populists on both the left and the right sometimes share common characteristics, it is important to note that in the European context, it is the far right that poses the greatest threat to democracy. This is due to both their greater electoral success and their often clearly anti-liberal democratic agenda, as best exemplified by Orbán's *Fidesz* (which we discuss later) and the PiS in Poland. On the left such sentiments are often far less present, as recent examples, such as *Podemos* in Spain and Syriza[248] in Greece, have shown. Beyond their anti-liberal stance, far-right agendas include negating the seriousness and even existence of climate change, calling for border closure to migrants, promoting the traditional family structure, championing conservative religious values and engaging in historical revisionism.

Young people and new forms of political commitment

However, the increasing distance between young people and traditional politics, which is reflected in their declining trust and voting for anti-system parties, does not mean that young people are not political. New forms of political engagement that go beyond voting and involve much more direct participation are increasingly valued by young people in France (and elsewhere). This participation is manifested in climate marches, where young people have been principal organisers and at the forefront of expressing demands for climate action. Researchers have shown that these climate walks are carried out by a high proportion of young people in France, and even very young people. Traditionally, social movements generally have a higher average age.[249]

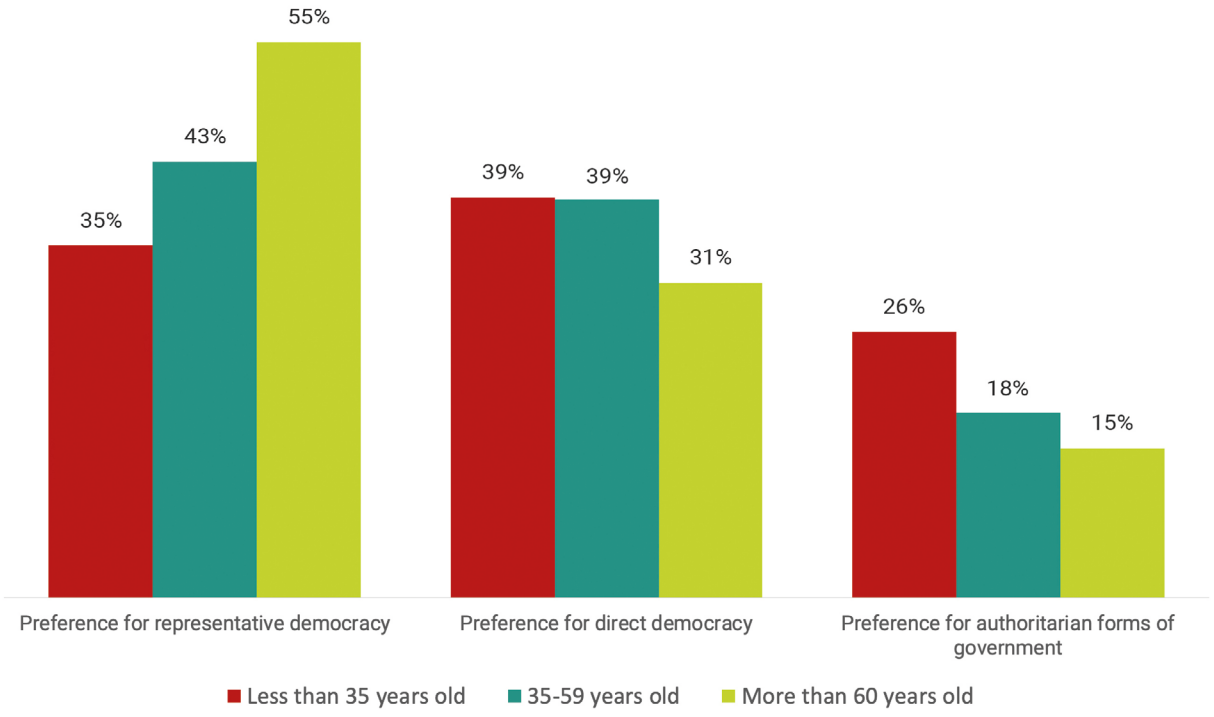
Furthermore, Figures 9 and 10 show that older generations have a higher preference for representative democracy and maintaining its current functioning, and conversely, that younger generations are more open to more direct forms of democracy.

Figure 9. The relationship with democracy, by age group, in France.



Source: Author's own elaboration

Figure 10. Preference for different forms of government, by age group.[250]



Source: Author's own elaboration

This preference for more direct or deliberative forms of democracy is reflected in increasing examples of it in France. While deliberative mechanisms exist at the local level, national citizens' conventions are intended to encourage deliberative democracy on a different scale, bringing together 150 citizens chosen by lot to debate major public policy issues. To date, two citizens' conventions have been set up, one on climate and one on the end of life. Thierry Beaudet, the president of the Economic, Social and Environmental Council (*Conseil* économique *social et environnemental*, EESC), a consultative body governed by the French constitution, interviewed for the study, describes the objective of the conventions:

> *The aim must be to create spaces for public debate during the weak periods of institutionalised politics. At the EESC, we believe strongly in deliberation, in a process in which we must be able to compare our opinions. At the national assembly, there is no deliberation, only fixed positions.*

Amongst the French public, different generations have contrasted in their response to deliberative mechanisms. When asked about their opinion of the citizens' climate convention, 66% of under-35s thought that this way of debating important issues should not just be left to political representatives to decide, while this figure fell to 47% among the over-60s.[251] Not all of the 150 proposals put forward by the climate convention have been taken up by the government, and this has led to debate about the extent to which it should adopt them. [252]

Hungary[253]

Socioeconomic context

Hungary has double the population of Ireland, but GDP five times less per capita.[254] Between 2019 and 2022, mean and median income for young people in Hungary rose from €5768 to €6689, whereas the equivalent figures in Ireland were €25,153 and €28,989.[255] Although the proportion of young people living in financial deprivation decreased between 2016 and 2020, the gap between their actual monthly median income and what they consider sufficient is growing.[256] In 2020, four in ten young people thought that the country's economic situation and international standing had deteriorated, 47% thought living standards had deteriorated, more than half (52%) thought the mood of the population had deteriorated, and almost a third (29%) thought their own family's financial situation had deteriorated. The data also show that those from higher income groups possessed a more positive outlook than those from lower income groups. While these attitudes were more negative than in 2016, overall satisfaction had clearly improved in the long term, between 2008 and 2020.[257]

On a positive note, the NEETS rate significantly declined in Hungary from 18% in 2012 to 11% in 2020. This was due in particular to an increase in the proportion of young people in employment (38% to 51% over the same period), while the proportion of those in training or education fell only slightly (42% to 38%).[258] However, those from disadvantaged backgrounds are finding it increasingly difficult to progress through secondary and tertiary education, severely hampering social mobility and sustaining inequalities.[259] In addition, although the employment rate of the 15–29 age group has improved, the actual number of young people in the labour market has declined due to population decline and challenges of overqualification.[260]

Less young people live at home in Hungary (39.3% compared to Ireland's 58%, for example), yet the proportion of the population living in overcrowded conditions is higher in Hungary (28%) versus 4.5% in Ireland.[261] Nagy et al (forthcoming) report that young people's transitions are being delayed and that "the majority of young people do not link adulthood to getting married, having children or moving into their home." Instead, they

list completing studies, dating and or building relationships and earning their first income as conditions for adulthood.[262] The correlation between a person's financial situation and their decision not to have children, or to have fewer children, has persisted in surveys since 2000.[263]

Political context

Hungary was a republic aligned closely with Soviet Russia until 1990 when its first freely elected parliament became a functioning institution with a multi-party system. Many of the civil/political actors that lobbied for democratic change back then are still influential in Hungarian parliament today, including the SZDSZ Democratic Alliance (*Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége – a Magyar Liberális Párt*), the Hungarian Civic Alliance (*Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség*) and the Hungarian Democratic Forum (*Magyar Demokrata Fórum,* MDF). In May 1989, Hungary's border with Austria was opened, and Hungary was officially declared a Republic.[264] Despite these positive moves towards democracy, Socialist leader Ferenc Gyurcsány was elected Prime Minister in the 2006 general elections and riots erupted across the country after Gyurcsány confessed that his administration had repeatedly lied about the state of Hungary's economy.[265]

In 2010, Fidesz led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, gained two-thirds of Hungarian parliamentary seats, which enabled it to enact an entirely new constitution, through which important checks on the ruling majority have been taken away.[266] In April 2022, a coalition, led by Fidesz, secured a fourth consecutive term and a two-thirds parliamentary majority. Through legislation, this government has narrowed freedom of expression and assembly, penalising and restricting the work of opposition groups, journalists, universities, and NGOs. Hungary is now categorised as an 'obstructed' democracy, an 'electoral autocracy'[267] and a 'transitional or hybrid regime' and is the only country in this study ranked by Freedom House and others as 'partly free.'[268] It embraces culturally conservative politics, targeting immigrants and LGBTQI+ communities while promoting traditional gender roles. It ranks below other Eastern and Central European countries such as Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and the Czech Republic, all defined as 'consolidated democracies.'[269] In terms of Global Freedom Scores, Hungary, with a score of 66, is the only country in the research categorised as 'Partly Free'. In contrast, Ireland ranks the highest at 97, only surpassed in Europe by Sweden, at 100.[270]

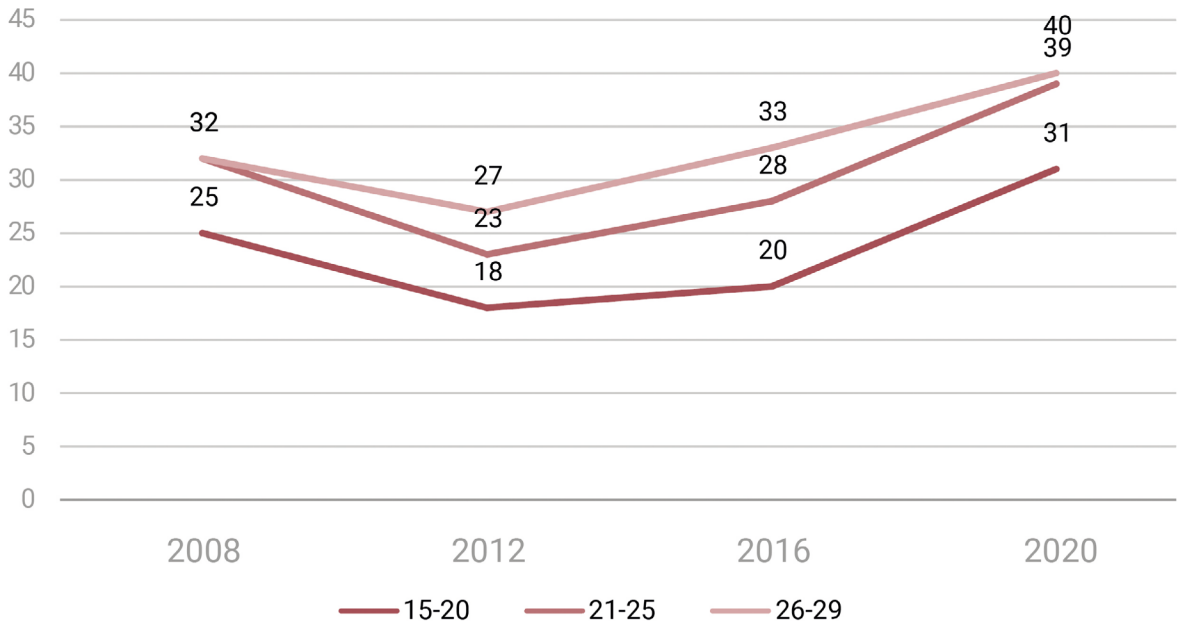
Despite a difficult economic situation in Hungary, support for democracy has increased significantly since 2008. In 2020, 57% of young people surveyed claimed to prefer democracy to all other political systems, an increase of 14% from 2008.[271] The share of people believing that, in some cases, a dictatorial system is better than a democracy has declined from 14% in 2008 to 10% in 2020.[272] Freedom of speech and expression is considered an essential principle in democratic society, despite recent attacks on it within Hungary.[273] At the same time, young people's responses to this statement in a government survey "a good livelihood is more important than freedom of expression" have led researchers to argue that prioritising livelihood over freedom of speech is a prevalent trend in Hungarian society. Among young Hungarians, those who consider a good livelihood to be more important than freedom of speech and opinion (42%) is much higher than the proportion of those who disagree (19%) (39% no answer, or answering 'don't know').[274] When it comes to the actual functioning of democracy, young people surveyed in 2020 (18-29-year-olds) were split on whether they are satisfied (48%) or not (46%). Interestingly, the youngest age group seems to be the most satisfied: 49% are satisfied, while 39% are dissatisfied.[275]

Surveys have also indicated widespread patriotism, even amongst younger generations. According to 2020 government survey data, 94% of those aged 15–29 years old "feel Hungarian," with only a 3% decrease compared to 2016. This contrasts with the average across the EU-27, whereby 67% of those aged 15–24 years old and 68% of those aged 25–39 years old feel a strong sense of national identity.[276] This is not

surprising to Nagy et al. (forthcoming), who note that a sense of national pride has been ingrained in government propaganda since 2010.[277] The authors also conclude that an important minority of close to 30% of young people's social environments are characterised by religious-national-political-social homogeneity, with limited openness to an inclusive society and a strongly negative attitude towards minority populations. More accepting attitudes are found among young people in Budapest, those with higher education, and those with higher socioeconomic status.[278]

This negative, exclusionary side of nationalism is exemplified in data showing an increase in strong distrust towards other, non-Hungarian people. Identification with Hungarians over others is most noticeable among young people in rural towns (81%) and villages (79%) and less pronounced in Budapest (67%) and regional centres (65%).[279] However, despite these aspects of identity and conservative and illiberal government policies, there has been a marked spread of liberal and left-wing political identity among young Hungarians since 2008.[280] What is more, despite government anti-EU propaganda, younger generations in Hungary are strongly pro-EU, with 49% saying that EU membership is beneficial or strongly beneficial for Hungary and only 13% saying that membership is either completely or somewhat detrimental.[281]

Figure 11. "How interested are you in politics?" By age group, averages on a scale of 100.

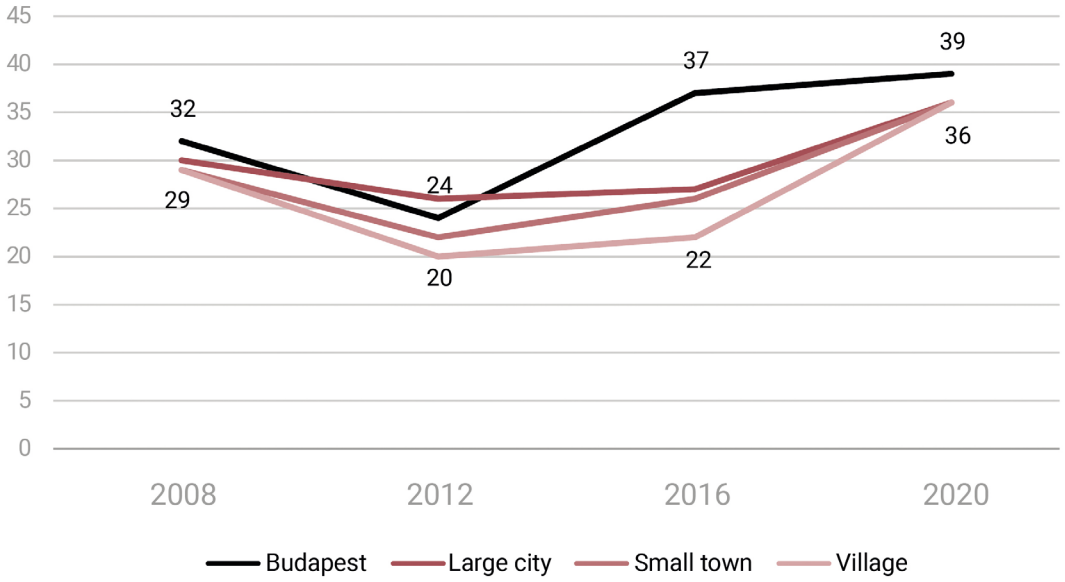


Source: Marián, B. (2022) "A 15-29 évesek politikai, közéleti véleményei", in Nagy, Á. (ed.) *A lábjegyzeten is túl - magyar ifjúságkutatás 2020* (Budapest: Excenter Kutatóközpont), pp. 219-258.

Interest in politics was low in all surveys of young people in Hungary between 2008 and 2020. In 2012, only 7% of young people showed high or fair interest in politics. By 2020, a marked increase in interest (albeit from a very low starting level), meant that it had doubled to 19%. The proportion of completely apolitical young people in the 15-29 age group also declined from 49% to 33% over the same period.[282]

Marián also reports greater interest among young people living in urban or larger settlements compared to those in rural areas, among men compared to women and between younger and older people in the 15-29 age range, with interest increasing with age.[283] However, by 2020, these differences level out.

Figure 12. "How interested are you in politics?" By type of settlement, averages on a scale of 100.



Source: Marián, B. (2022) "A 15-29 évesek politikai, közéleti vélemények", in Nagy, Á. (eds) ***A lábjegyzeten is túl - magyar ifjúságkutatás 2020*** (Budapest: Excenter Kutatóközpont), pp. 219-258.

In addition to political disinterest, young people express relatively little knowledge of civil society, and organisations working with young people. For example, according to the 2020 government survey, only 38% of young people were aware that youth advocacy groups exist. Only 2% of young people felt that they had opportunities to have a say in local public affairs, while 22% thought they had no opportunities at all.

The remaining discussion takes the themes identified in the analysis of the other case studies in this report and applies them to the French and Hungarian focus group and interview data.

Democracy: Valued in principle, but not working in practice

Young people in the French focus groups, similar to the participants in other countries in this study, were highly critical of political institutions because they failed to represent them and implement concrete, positive political change. The problems they identify are linked to the functioning of democratic institutions and crystallise around wanting to become more involved in decision-making and combining direct with representative democracy. Democracy is "not democratic enough" was the sentiment expressed by many focus group participants:

> *I said that I was in favour of democracy, but the problem is that we have the impression that we don't really live in a democracy today, that our opinions are not respected.*
>
> *The problem today is that politicians think only of themselves, that they don't respect the opinion of the population. I don't know if we can still talk about democracy.*
>
> *I have the feeling that democracy isn't working very well in France today.*

However, they nonetheless showed a strong attachment to democratic government:

> *We're lucky to live in a democracy, but unfortunately not everyone does. Democracy really isn't the problem today.*
>
> *It's important for everyone to have their say in a country, so yes, if that's how you define democracy, there's no doubt that democracy is irreplaceable.*

Benoît Coquard, a sociologist interviewed for this study, explained that young people are not seeking to challenge the very principles of representative democracy:

> *When people don't feel legitimate to speak out, they want someone else to.*

Focus group interviewees also expressed this view. While they felt a need to put the people back at the centre of the political decision-making process, it was not a question of replacing the representative system but improving the democratic processes within it. As one focus group participant put it:

> *Of course there's always a need for elections in France, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't decide for ourselves from time to time.*

Vincent Tiberj, a political science professor, confirmed the distinction between dissatisfaction with the system and support for democracy:

> *A good proportion of the "I've got a problem with democracy" responses are not about democracy as a principle, but about democracy as a system that enables the right decisions to be taken, particularly in terms of the general interest, and all the more so in a system where the power of citizens is quite limited, given that we rely on elected representatives. Young people are not happy with the way the current system works, but that in no way means that democracy is being called into question.*

However, they did not all support liberal democratic values. For example, this participant clearly intended to vote for political candidates who stand for a far-right populist vision of democracy:

> *But isn't anyone questioning democracy today? I don't quite understand the question, to be honest. I voted for Le Pen, I have no problem saying so, I even hesitated to vote for Zemmour, but I'm in favour of democracy. When you vote for Le Pen, you vote, that means you're in favour of democracy.*

The participants in the Hungarian case study viewed its political system as less developed and less stable than in other western European countries. The political culture was described as not sufficiently pluralistic and the democratic institutions less effective. A common observation both in focus groups and expert interviews was that while democratic institutions still exist in Hungary (such as the judiciary, prosecution service, and constitutional court), they are not independent. Views varied on how useful it was to compare with other countries. Some participants said that the focus should be on how to improve the political system and not compare internationally, while others contended that comparisons push political leaders to become more accountable.

This study finds that the current hybrid regime observable in Hungary raises serious concerns among those who believe in and support democratic principles and institutions. The practice and preservation of democracy is crucial for safeguarding individual freedoms and rights. In this context, policy proposals that focus on the democratic inclusion of young people, especially those in underprivileged situations, increasing their participation and emphasising democratic values are particularly important.

What's not working

Dislike of political culture

Nearly two-thirds of young people in France believe that political representatives are corrupt and act only in their own interests.[284] This criticism goes well beyond the issue of corruption, and, in many cases, becomes a criticism of the actions of political representatives who are out of touch with citizens' real concerns. This study took place in the spring of 2023, at a time when the political situation in France was tense because of opposition to pension reform. Demonstrations were taking place at regular intervals, and debates in the NA were extremely heated. The following focus group participant response was not untypical:

> *I don't usually follow politics that much, but I saw extracts of the debates on the news channels and social networks. It's crazy, it's like a zoo, they disgust me. They're not politicians, they're actors, they spend all their time shouting at each other.*

The word "zoo" was used repeatedly in focus groups to describe the actions of political representatives in the NA. This disconnect between politicians' actions and the public is largely confirmed by public opinion surveys. 37% of French people used the word "distrust" and 19% the word 'disgust' when asked what they think about politics.[285]

Again, consistent with the findings in the other case studies, many participants had little confidence that the political system can produce public services and concrete positive effects in their everyday lives. This is partly because they see it as economically constrained:

> *You've got the left in power, then the right, then the centre, and in practice it doesn't change much for us. At election time, you get the impression that the candidates are going to be able to change the world if they're elected, but once they're elected, the truth is that nothing changes, and they're not in charge anyway - it's the economy, the lobbies and big business that are in charge.*
>
> *When you see that the PS,[286] which is supposed to be left-wing, is implementing a right-wing economic policy, because they are unable to change things. Frankly, it's disgusting.*

Some participants felt the decisions were really made at the EU level and did not involve citizens:

> *In any case, it's Europe that governs, not France. Politicians can say whatever they like, but they don't decide anything. It's all just big speeches that serve no purpose and have no effect.*

Similarly, while democracy remains the most popular political system among young people in Hungary (see section above), most focus group participants were negative about politics. They voiced concern similar to those heard from participants in the other case studies. National institutions were disconnected from them and they felt that they could not have any influence on legislation that affects them directly or indirectly. They commented that politicians were corrupt, that they put personal gain over public good.

The negative impact on young people's capacity to trust political representatives was especially striking in the focus groups in Hungary, with the backdrop of the credibility of democratic institutions and processes being undermined by political manipulation, lack of accountability and restricted access to information, as discussed further on in relation to media sources.

Not being listened to or engaged with

Consistent with the research findings from Ireland, Poland and Spain, young people in France also fairly unanimously felt disconnected from politics:

> *I really can't see myself belonging to a political party, there's no place for me there, and what's more I don't want to [...] Having to deal with old militants who are constantly telling you what you should or shouldn't do would be unbearable.*

> *I have the impression that all young people are disgusted by politics. Sometimes I turn on the TV and I hear politicians saying that young people need to be more interested in politics. But they're completely out of touch with the real lives of people like us. I have the impression that young people don't believe in politics at all anymore, it's just people in suits talking to themselves.*

As Jean-Marc Ayrault, a Former French Prime Minister interviewed for this study, explained:

> *Political parties have often failed to understand the changing relationship between citizens and politics, particularly among young people. They need to adapt to the times, and they haven't always done so.*

Precarious employment and a decline in trade union or political party membership mean that young people do not gain political competence, as described by this participant:

> *I don't have much opportunity to discuss politics with my colleagues, because my colleagues change often, they're never the same. And it would also be risky to take a political stance, the job is really precarious and anyone who causes a stir doesn't stay in the job for long.*

They do not have any connections to politicians and their decisions appear de facto less legitimate. One participant clearly refused to take an interest in political issues: "I have nothing to say on the subject, it clearly doesn't interest me, it's a disgusting environment."

Others felt uncomfortable discussing politics, feeling it was reserved for experts:

> *For me, it's complicated to talk about politics, I don't really understand everything that's going on, all the debates there can be. Politics is a serious subject, so you need a minimum of knowledge to express yourself.*

Benoît Coquard, a sociologist specialising in young people with experience of socioeconomic disadvantage living in rural areas, explains just how far they are from institutionalised politics:

> *I'm not saying that working-class young people are depoliticised, because there is a real politicisation of everyday life. What is certain is that there is a real gap with the concerns of the political field. The political arena has drifted away from the working classes [...] I saw it in the legislative elections, it's really incredible, nobody talks about it, they don't seek information at all.*

Young participants across the Hungarian focus groups spoke of the same disconnection from government institutions. Government is intangible to them and they feel that they cannot have any influence on legislation that affects them directly or indirectly. This is how one focus group participant described government's relationship with young people:

> *There is no genuine and institutionalised dialogue between young people and decision-makers at the national level, and I can think of several good examples at the local level.*

This is also expressed in the structure of the legislative as reflected in this comment from a youth policy expert:

> *Since 2010, youth affairs and youth policy advocacy in Hungary have deteriorated significantly. There is no longer a permanent parliamentary committee dedicated to addressing the concerns of young people. While there is a representation at the government administration level (deputy secretary of state), its influence on decision-making has become increasingly insignificant over the years.*

Rural and urban

Similar to the other case studies, differences were noted in France between young people with experience of socioeconomic disadvantage in urban versus rural areas. Chloé Alexandre, who has worked on the sociology of the climate movement, and was interviewed for this study, commented that young people involved in climate campaigning were "often educated and urbanised." Young people in rural areas, by contrast, were described as not having that same connection with politics. However, those employed in precarious jobs are likely to have commonalities whether they live in urban or rural areas. Benoît Coquard, quoted earlier, explains:

> *The politicisation of working-class and rural youth takes place in a context of conflict with the social world. In a deteriorating economic environment and faced with the destructuring of work collectives, there are no longer any real spaces for political socialisation. On top of that, people have less and less personal time available, particularly because of shift work. So, it's obviously more and more complicated to*

get involved in politics, especially when you're already thinking about saving yourself. All this is a consequence of economic change and rising inequality.

In Hungary, as discussed earlier, researchers have concluded that young people from urban areas have a greater interest in politics. Experts interviewed also commented that the smaller a settlement, the stronger the predominance of right-wing, conservative politics. Conversely, the larger the settlement, the more progressive, open-minded politics are present. The restrictive character of the media was felt to account for this difference. While the polarising impact of the media was a concern across the case studies, it was in Hungary that the influence of government-controlled media and market-based media controlled by pro-government lobbyists, was most concerning in terms of its fundamental influence on young people's political activism and participation. As one policy expert explained, in rural areas, young people have limited accessibility to media and typically follow sources that are predominantly affiliated with the current ruling party:

Many of the regional and local printed newspapers in rural areas have ties to the government, and national radio stations rely on materials from the Hungarian News Agency, a state news agency, for their news.

This is reflected in the electoral results of recent years, with the governing parties winning overwhelming support in rural, smaller towns and villages, while the opposition is mainly successful in large cities and the capital. Focus group participants in rural areas felt that Hungary's political system is democratic as multiple political parties operate and electoral options are available. However, others expressed concerns about the state of democracy, believing that political power is concentrated in the hands of a single party, limiting the emergence of alternatives and diverse opinions. Young people in rural areas prioritised the interests of their local communities and wanted politicians to talk with them about how they were going to improve their quality of life through economic development; job creation, improving infrastructure and reducing the digital lag in rural regions. They had more conservative attitudes on the rights of sexual minorities and were more inclined to agree with homophobic political statements introduced by the government.

Young people in urban areas were described by expert interviewees as more likely to be politically active, attending demonstrations for example, and to access more media coverage of those events. Their priorities included demanding more equality, inclusivity and sustainability, highlighting the importance of representing social minorities such as LGBTQI+ communities.

What young people are asking of their democratic governments

Public policies that improve their lives

Tom Chevalier, a CNRS research fellow at Sciences Po Rennes who works on public policies targeting young people in France[287] reminds us of how critical government policy can be at this formative time in young people's lives:

[They] structure the entry into adulthood and therefore structure the economic difficulties that young people may encounter, which may be linked to two issues. Firstly, entry into the labour market, and therefore unemployment, non-employment and job insecurity. Secondly, there is the economic issue, in terms of resources, of

continuing their studies, which is linked to the issue of student insecurity. And to deal with these issues, there is a whole range of public policies, and the way in which they are perceived will have a major effect on young people's relationship with institutions.

Focus group participants alluded to these policies too. They also wanted more attention paid to the functioning and quality of services delivered by institutions that impact their daily lives, including taxation, healthcare, education and the justice system. They called for more transparency in decision-making on these policies. However, consistent with findings in the other case studies, French participants do not see politicians focusing on policies that will noticeably improve their lives, as clearly expressed by one focus group member:

For me, it's quite simple: I won't have confidence in the state unless I have the impression that the state is doing something for me. But I don't get the impression that politicians are very interested in the fate of young people like me.

Young people, while feeling that not enough is being done by the government to ameliorate their socioeconomic difficulties, also feel that the political system is not responding to other issues they consider equally urgent. As discussed earlier, survey data suggests this relates to the climate emergency in particular. Chloé Alexandre, a researcher, who has worked on the sociology of the climate movement notes that:

[W]hat was very clear within the climate movement was the extent to which some young people in France are extremely concerned about the environmental issue and feel that the public authorities are not doing enough about this specific issue. The young people in the climate movement have a sense of "urgency" about the climate issue, and they also feel that they are up against a governmental and institutional wall that does not take their concerns on board. Obviously, this is likely to create resentment.

And this was reflected by focus group participants themselves:

I'm a bit fed up with politicians telling us that it's up to us to protect the environment, for example that we should lower our heating or that sort of thing. It makes you wonder what the point of politicians is if it's just to tell us things like that. They make the laws, so it's up to them to put in place effective laws to protect the environment.

They [the politicians] need to take action; it's their responsibility to put in place measures to protect the environment, but unfortunately, they're not doing much.

Focus group participants in Hungary were equally clear that politicians needed to reflect and represent their values and to address the concerns and priorities of the younger generation. Non-graduates wanted to see greater attention to social welfare and reducing economic inequalities. Those with higher educational levels were more prone to discussing progressive and innovative policy, modernisation, technological advancement, accessible and good quality health services, ensuring equal access for everyone in the educational system; an independent and impartial justice system, providing equal protection for all citizens, and placing emphasis on social justice. Concern with the government's inaction on climate was also present within the groups. One participant commented that it is essential for the future that politicians take climate change into account and that they should shape their policies accordingly.

Young people in the Budapest focus groups had a particularly critical stance towards the government, feeling that it does not do enough to ensure equality. Female respondents emphasised the creation of a non-violent society, gender equality and increasing female representation in politics and in leadership positions more widely; the introduction of family-friendly policies and transparent wage systems.

Focus group participants belonging to the Roma minority felt that the government's measures are insufficient to ensure Roma equality. They highlighted the presence of discrimination and prejudice in everyday life as well as obstacles encountered in education and job opportunities and wanted the government to promote social integration and equal opportunities for Roma youth, including representation at a local and national level. One suggestion made was that Roma youth councils could be set up along the lines of the municipal youth councils. Participants in urban areas also wanted politicians to reflect and represent the values and needs of the LGBTQI+ community in Hungary.

Wanting a more direct democracy

As discussed above, younger generations in France prefer direct democracy to representative democracy (39% vs 35% of 18–35-year-olds). Vincent Tiberj, quoted earlier, explains this phenomenon:

> *We are witnessing a contestation of the vote. The simple fact of voting to elect political representatives is no longer enough. Young people of today's generation are rejecting the delegation function of the vote and prefer other types of action. They are going to be more active on social networks, in associations, in grassroots activism.*

Julie Henches, a French climate activist also interviewed for this research, explains that young people's involvement in environmental issues is largely driven by perceived government inaction:

> *The problem today is that there are many young people who are not satisfied with what the political institutions are doing, but who also feel powerless. Our role as activists is precisely to give an outlet to this dissatisfaction.*

A focus group participant felt that voting has no influence on politics and that there should instead be more direct mechanisms for participation:

> *Voting in elections isn't politics, it's just electing guys who are going to decide for us [...] But besides, the yellow waistcoat movement they were asking for the population to be able to decide directly by referendum, that was really interesting, that's what politics is all about.*

Tristan Guerra, a political science researcher who has interviewed many of those involved in the yellow vest movement observes that:

> *[A]t first it may appear to be a sectoral social movement, linked to economic and purchasing power concerns but very quickly what we see is that the democratic aspect becomes central, it's the demand for direct democracy via the citizens' initiative referendum that becomes the unifying element of the movement.*

Even if the Yellow Vests was not specifically a youth movement, it nevertheless reflects a change in the relationship between citizens and politics. The demand for more direct participation can materialise either in a demand to be involved in decision-making processes, through deliberative mechanisms or a demand for direct production of the law through direct democracy mechanisms and through the citizens' initiative referendum.

However, there are several obstacles to the extent that deliberative democratic mechanisms can ameliorate the crisis of political representation. For one thing, only a few of the focus group participants had heard of citizens' conventions, even the much-publicised citizens' climate convention. Those who had heard of them viewed them with mistrust and thought their objectives were vague:

> *I'm not sure what to make of that (i.e. the citizens' conventions), I get the impression that they already know what they want to achieve before they've even started.*

The conventions have also been criticised for the fact that key proposals were felt to have been altered by the government[288] and as such, some voters do not believe that the proposals should become policy, because they no longer represent the views of those who participated.[289] This resentment was felt among some of the more politicised focus group members:

> *The citizens' conventions are total smoke and mirrors. It just shows everyone that the government doesn't give a damn about what the French think, it's just a big communication stunt.*

Thierry Beaudet, the person in charge of organising the conventions, acknowledged that lessons needed to be learned, particularly in terms of setting expectations about the extent to which the conventions will affect change:

> *It is necessary to clearly define what a citizens' convention is, both among the participants and the general public, and within the executive. On the other hand, we've had lengthy discussions with the executive to tell them that they have a moral commitment to take into account what citizens have said in the context of these conventions. On the other hand, we have to tell the participants that they are not members of parliament, that they are not going to write the law. These deliberative forums should help to repoliticise society between elections and bring people back to the polling booth.*

Young people in Hungary, as in France, wished for more transparent, accountable and inclusive decision-making. This was seen as crucial for restoring and reinforcing trust between young people and politicians and ensuring the stability and progress of democratic principles and institutions. Young people in Hungary felt that the Hungarian system was a long way from reaching that point:

> *I find that politicians - especially those in government - are not open to real dialogue, they are closed, and often if someone criticises a young person, there can be consequences for them.*

Conclusion

In France and Hungary, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds increasingly distrust traditional political institutions and representatives.

In France, young people's distrust has, in some cases, turned into disgust, leading to greater abstention from voting on the one hand and more votes for populist parties, including far-right parties with anti-pluralist and anti-democratic tendencies, on the other. The loss of influence of political parties and the decline in socialisation opportunities, especially through work, are cited as factors for abstention. In Hungary, a process of dismantling the rule of law, persistent radical and nativist government propaganda and a clientelist system of government have led to young people supporting the long-term governing party Fidesz, especially in rural areas. Partly because of that, there is a significant minority of young people who hold very conservative, sometimes anti-pluralist and anti-minority views. On the other hand, the undemocratic nature of the political system, corruption and media censorship have contributed to the mistrust of those who disagree with the government. In both countries, however, mistrust or disgust does not mean all is lost. In neither country did the results indicate that when asked directly in surveys, young people favoured authoritarianism over democracy as a system.

Young people in both countries primarily want public policies that meet their needs, including better support for access to employment, housing, health and education. Economic and social justice issues are priorities for young people in both countries. However, there are also differences, one of which concerns the environment. On average, younger generations consider this issue more critical than older generations and want the government to take urgent action. Although the data in France is not all-encompassing, it also shows that this issue is less important for those employees with a lower income. This raises a question about the extent to which the climate issue is not only one that divides generations but whether it can potentially separate the affluent from the less affluent within a generation. The differences between rural and urban youth (which also played a role in France) were the most striking in Hungary. Young people in more rural areas were more likely to cite immediate economic needs, economic development, job creation, improving infrastructure and narrowing the digital divide. Young people in urban areas mentioned some of these priorities but added issues such as inclusion and sustainability, emphasising the importance of representing social minorities such as LGBTQI+ communities.

Finally, the results show, especially in France, that young people are concerned not only about political issues but also about how democracy is implemented. This is reflected in the preference for more direct forms of democracy. These preferences are not necessarily reflected in the forms of deliberative democracy that exist in France, which most of the young people interviewed were either unaware of or sceptical about. This leaves room for reflection on better ways to engage in the future (see also the recommendations section in this study).

In sum, regardless of differences, young people generally expect more from the government regarding equality and social inclusion, the provision of social benefits and the reduction of economic inequalities. A dysfunctional democracy in Hungary and a huge gap between traditional politics and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in France make progress in this regard difficult. Nevertheless, addressing these issues is an important way of regaining the trust of the younger generation.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study analysed the relationship between socioeconomically disadvantaged young people and politics and democracy in five countries: France, Hungary, Ireland, Poland and Spain. We began by describing the socioeconomic conditions of these young people and the political contexts they face, taking a Europe-wide perspective in the introduction before looking at each country individually. With this approach, we contextualised the extensive data collected in focus groups and expert interviews. This framework allowed us to outline three key areas: (1) what young people value about democracy, (2) their concerns about its current state and (3) their hopes for its improvement.

Conclusions

Our description of the economic context confirms previous research that generations of young people who reached adulthood in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis have experienced a process of precarisation to the extent that being young is increasingly correlated with being socioeconomically disadvantaged. Young people experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage across the five countries in this study can't meet the cost of living because they are in low paid and precarious jobs. This is particularly acute in Spain where the harsh economic climate has left many of them overqualified and unemployed. Those living in rural areas, whether in France or Hungary, share the barriers of lack of transport, lack of employment and education opportunities, and lack of youth services. Participants in almost every focus group described shortages of affordable housing and accommodation. These translate into living with parents, overcrowding in some case studies, and delays in family formation. Unmet needs due to pressures on public health and community-based support services, and resultant untreated health issues, including mental health, were also reported across the case studies. The recommendations that follow at a national level may differ because they reflect the specificities of the country, for instance, Ireland's use of citizen assemblies. However, the underlying themes are the same.

Valued in principle, not working in practice: Concerns about the state of democracy

The study supports previous research finding that young people are increasingly dissatisfied with democracy and that this dissatisfaction reflects their overall assessment of the state of their country's politics and economics. Our findings also suggest that this is not due to a strong tendency towards favouring authoritarianism over democracy as a system. While some recent surveys suggest worrying trends in this direction, this was less clear in our focus group discussions and expert interviews. Instead, participants supported democracy in principle, while also clear that the system they are living in is not "real democracy"'and "not democratic enough." While the same slogans can also be used by populist forces to advocate an alternative model of democracy that is in fact a version of autocracy (i.e. Viktor Orbán's oxymoron of illiberal democracy), in most cases this was not the spirit in which they were used in our focus groups.

In hybrid regimes, in the "grey zone" between democracies and autocracies, such as Hungary, most focus participants were keenly aware of the lack of democracy across their governing institutions, including the legal system. However, whether in Hungary or the more liberal democracy of France, they all felt distanced

from traditional democratic processes. In other words, despite the differences between the case study countries in terms of democratic freedoms (e.g. civil society and press restrictions), young people from all the countries spoke of the inaccessibility, the distance and elitism of their political systems. These characteristics manifested themselves in excessive bureaucracy and the use of legalistic and opaque language, the absence of parliamentary, or government bodies dedicated specifically to youth, and the limited visibility or invisibility even of politicians in local areas. The issue of visibility was even more acute in rural areas.

Politicians are seen as preoccupied with preserving their own position and power. At the same time, young people are aware that they are a demographic minority and, consequently, politicians looking for short-term electoral gains don't have to listen to them. They distrust, are sceptical of, and disengage from politicians because they cannot see them making any positive tangible improvements that they can directly attribute to political engagement and policy. Similarly, they see the failure of their politicians to recognise and act on the issues that are urgent to them, among them, climate change. They call for greater institutional transparency and more accountable and inclusive decision-making.

Participants in all the case studies also spoke about the lack of voice that vulnerable and minority groups have in their countries. In Poland, focus group participants described minority ethnic groups as non-existent in public debate, mostly due to the very small share of non-white people living there. Young people throughout the study wanted the rights of minorities acknowledged, whether that be Roma in Hungary or Travellers in Ireland. Yet, they tended to be raised either by respondents who belong to minority groups themselves or who live in urban areas, and far less by those living in rural areas.

In the research, government accountability and action were seen as crucial for restoring and reinforcing trust between young people and politicians and ensuring the stability and progress of democratic principles and institutions. While the young people involved in the research may not have been familiar with formal parliamentary politics, they were engaged with the politics of their local community and the wider regional, national and global issues impacting on it.

Due principally to their economic precarity, young people also described not having the time or energy to engage with politics in the traditional way in which their parents or grandparents might have done, such as becoming political party members. Political parties have lost their importance as a preferred space in which to construct significant social connections. Some young people talked about their fear of being stigmatised at work and their positions jeopardised if they were associated with a political party. They also pointed out that following politics online takes time, namely being able to moderate between polarising, and often negative messages.

Young people were unanimously opposed to the current political culture, which many associated with corruption, empty election promises, unreliable media and in some national contexts, a broken culture of debate, described by several French respondents as "like a zoo." This shows that the aversion of some young French people to traditional politics has taken the form of an intensely felt disgust that indicates a deep dissatisfaction with the way politics is done. Conversely, they desired a free and open media to counter that culture. While this was raised in all countries, it was particularly pertinent in Hungary, where young people and experts spoke about the restrictions on media and attributed political differences, such as less liberal views on minorities, to young people's reliance on state-owned stations and state-dominated private channels. This reliance was greater in rural than urban areas.

In sum, policymakers and politicians would be mistaken in thinking that young people's disengagement with representative political systems in their current form and their disconnection with and lack of knowledge

of formal /parliamentary politics can be equated with lack of interest in politics overall. Young people want their politicians and state institutions to communicate better with them and they want more of a say in the democratic and political decisions which will affect their lives. They have expressed their dissatisfaction with traditional forms of political communication via more protest-based, direct action, such as participation in climate action.

Political parties across the board must now acknowledge that they must find new ways of engaging young people across civil society, government and the political system. Firstly, to uphold the basic democratic principle that all voices are equally important, even if they are young or lack economic power, and secondly, to engage them in their political thinking as they go through the critical phase of forming political opinions that will often shape their beliefs for the rest of their lives. Young people must see themselves as represented and, as called for by participants in this study, possessing better administrative, political and civic opportunities for participation in rural and urban areas. In countries that are, facing or have faced until recently, autocratic leaning regimes, such as Hungary and Poland, NGOs can serve as important conduits for democratic norms.[290]

At the time of publication of this study, the latest election results in Poland are an encouraging sign of political engagement. With a record turnout, the young generation has helped to vote out a government with undemocratic ambitions. As a participant in the Spanish case study said, young people feel that they benefit from democracy and are prepared to defend it in principle, but they want to see it improved. Does the Polish election suggest that there will be progress to make democracy work for disadvantaged young people, too? This is one way in which young voters will judge the incoming Polish government (or any government indeed) in the future: not only whether it is democratic but also whether it can overcome some of the most significant barriers to progress for young people in one of the fastest ageing countries in the EU.

Recommendations

The study has shown that young people know that their transition to adulthood is delayed due to adverse economic circumstances. They want policymakers to listen to them and respond to their economic and social needs. Hence, this section is a combination of two things. It merges the hopes of young people to improve democracy, as expressed in our focus groups, with their practical suggestions and recommendations put forward by the various experts interviewed for this study. The experts were often able to match young people's concerns and ideas for change with specific and tangible proposals. As the study did not specifically focus on the European Union, we conducted additional interviews with experts from EU institutions and conducted desk research to make some of these recommendations relevant to the supranational level.

The European Union

The European Union may not have the legal authority to prescribe measures in some key areas that are important to address some of the main issues discussed. This is especially true for social policy and political education. However, this does not mean that the EU is not capable of doing anything. It can integrate a youth policy perspective into the areas where it has direct authority to prescribe measures, as well as in areas where it can only make recommendations and suggestions. Therefore, to address this, the European Union should:

1) Mainstream young people's perspectives across all policymaking:

    a) Establish a youth test[291] to ensure that all new EU legislation and policy is subject to a youth focused impact assessment, including consultation with youth organisations at the EU level and the development of mitigation measures in case a negative impact is identified;[292]

    b) Expand the role of the EU Youth Coordinator to help her coordinate this work, ideally in cooperation with a commissioner focussing specifically on youth and future generations;

    c) Expand the resources of the EU Youth Coordinator to improve the analytical toolbox used to identify the needs of young people with experience of socioeconomic disadvantage. This will help promote and protect their interests and advance their perspectives across government policy. Additionally, it will help promote equality, combat discrimination, and empower and enable their voices.

2) Improve young people's participation in EU decision making:

    d) Strengthen cooperation between EU umbrella youth organisations and young representatives of the EU political parties;

    e) Remove barriers to young people standing as candidates. For example, by introducing quotas for young people on electoral lists, including placement in prominent positions, to be elected, similar to zipped lists used to ensure gender quotas;

    f) Expand existing participatory and consultative mechanisms connecting EU institutions with young people and, most importantly, ensure outcomes are followed up and considered during EU decision making; and

g) Support member states in collecting and analysing data on the use of services such as the EU's online youth portal—which brings together all information on the EU's work with young people—to determine whether the information it contains reaches young people with experience of socioeconomic disadvantage.

3) Build the capacity of young people with experience of socioeconomic disadvantage to participate in different political platforms:

   a) Continue to monitor the need for financial support, e.g. in times of economic crises, to mitigate their long-term impact on the socioeconomic development of young people (e.g. by including youth-centred measures in short-term employment programmes such as SURE, which was used during Covid-19);[293]

   b) Further improve existing flagship programmes such as the reinforced Youth Guarantee[294] by improving the quality of education and employment opportunities offered under this guarantee, to guide member states in introducing data collection and reporting systems to enable policy evaluation that identifies necessary improvements, and to encourage member states to implement changes to the Youth Guarantee;[295]

   c) Create employment opportunities that enable young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to gain quality work experience within the EU and political institutions;

   d) Expand and support programmes that provide educational opportunities, especially those that focus on civic education and those that help young people experience democracy in action (including the inclusion of approaches to debate deliberation in youth programmes on various topics);

   e) Promote and increase the resources to expand EU youth programmes, particularly those for disadvantaged people (such as ALMA) and develop engagement and build on existing inclusion strategies to ensure broad and intersectional participation, especially of ethnic minorities.

4) Support member states to build participatory and democratic mechanisms and provide inclusive and democratic spaces in cooperation with young people, for example, through existing practices of inclusion and diversity assessments of European Union programming related to youth and focusing funding schemes on people with fewer opportunities.

5) As recommended in the Charter on Youth and Democracy,[296] increase awareness and strengthen protections on social media against:

   a) Civil and youth organisations from being labelled political, especially when they are critical of the government;

   b) Misinformation; and

   c) Polarising and discriminatory behaviour.

6) Support member states in funding research on youth policies, collecting gender and age disaggregated data and ensuring the transparency and accessibility of that data.

Member states

This research paper has demonstrated that socioeconomically disadvantaged people face similar challenges in the member states we examined. Therefore, we provide general recommendations that are applicable to all member states in this section. Additionally, we have identified some differences between the member states we analysed, which we address in specific national recommendations at the end of this chapter.

1) Increase investment in line with the priorities of young people with experience of disadvantage at a national level; with policies that tackle the socioeconomic barriers that young people experience in education, the labour market and housing, among other areas.

2) Invest in and strengthen youth services to enhance citizenship skills and build confidence, skills and experience in democratic engagement in an inclusive and supportive safe space. This must include providing appropriate youth work resources to support participation from immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds.

3) Improve the participation of young people facing disadvantage in national politics by:

    a) Better representation on national youth councils, youth branches of political parties, trade unions and non-governmental organisations;

    b) Ensuring that participation results in tangible and applicable policy outcomes; and

    c) Financially supporting their participation.

4) Implement direct and deliberative democratic mechanisms that better involve young people in decision-making processes at all levels of government and propose youth policy agendas, e.g. youth citizens' assemblies; youth councils; youth-led participatory budgeting.

5) Consider alternative methods of voting; such as various types of e-participation, e.g. ePartool. [297]

6) Co-design more flexible/fluid mechanisms of engagement with young people; by for example: introducing activities that enable young people to develop their political participation skills and participate more meaningfully; providing young people with capacity building opportunities; being transparent about the aims of all youth political participatory mechanisms (so as to manage expectations) and democratic environments; combining research and participation through participatory action research methods and critically evaluating existing opportunities where possible;[298]

7) Invest in citizenship and political education throughout the education system.

8) Protect the civil and political rights of young people, including their right to participate in a trade union.

9) Improve cooperation between representative student organisations and unions.

10) Provide multi annual funding for civil society organisations to work with young people promoting democracy, developing participation and providing political information e.g. information packages for first time voters, including summaries of manifestos/key policies.

11) Develop digital democracy, including:

    a) Addressing digital exclusion, through, for example, developing cross-sectoral and departmental policies to support young people in developing digital literacy in particular related to political participation; creating literacy-friendly online services; taking digital literacy into account when designing websites and apps and raising awareness among political organisations of the digital needs of young people;

    b) Improving digital infrastructure—ensuring, for example, good broadband networks in rural areas;

    c) Developing democratic digital tools, such as local online platforms for encouraging public discussions, which are safe, easily accessible, unrestricted and user-friendly.

12) Persuade political parties that it is in their long-term interest to:

    a) Develop policies that are relevant to young people and that will improve their economic situation;

    b) Interact with young people with experience of disadvantage, meeting them in their own communities e.g. politicians holding surgeries at youth centres and other organisations working with young people and their families.

13) Improve accessibility of information on all youth-related policies, programmes and opportunities for engagement by:

    a) Improving digital resources;

    b) Simplifying language;

    c) Providing multilingual online resources;

    d) Reducing the bureaucracy; and

    e) Adapting communications so as they are accessible to those from disadvantaged groups;

Local and regional-level actors need to:

Our research has shown that young people attach great importance to place-based politics and observable change in local communities. They thought practically rather than politically about what changes were needed on their doorstep to improve their lives and those of their families. In short, improving policies at a local level to support young people from disadvantaged groups is particularly important.

Local and regional-level actors need to:

1) Build participation of young people in the local community, particularly in rural areas and in local politics:

    c) Train and mentor them to represent their community at all levels of government, including mentoring schemes for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to stand for election in local political parties and unions;

    d) Promote and strengthen existing local youth councils and establish new ones where needed, ensuring they are youth-led by intersectional democratic principle;

    e) Make greater use of youth-led mechanisms of participation, ensuring that they are given the resources to contribute, that the outcomes are fed back into local/regional decision-making;

    f) Make greater use of participatory budgeting and other mechanisms which enhance youth ownership; and

    g) Financially support their participation.

2) Improve communication between young people and local politicians by:

    a) Following up on actions and develop trust between elected officials, political parties and young people; and

    b) Focusing on issues that are relevant to young people.

3) Improve citizenship and political education throughout the education system, beginning with schools:

    a) Co-design the curriculum with young people and youth organisations;

    b) Demonstrate the links between the democratic and political system and policies that affect them, e.g. social housing

    c) Strengthen the digital readiness of schools by providing training for teachers and students to improve digital skills; digital literacy and critical thinking; that raise awareness of new technologies based on algorithms; on the role of the media; protection against online discrimination and hate crimes;

    d) Develop young people's practical knowledge about politics e.g. how to register to vote workshops;

    e) Use methods that reflect deliberative democratic mechanisms and develop participatory skills;

    f) Ensure courses are run by facilitators and course leaders trained in methods that effectively convey democratic values and political knowledge to young people with disadvantaged backgrounds; and

g) Actively promote the development of citizenship skills beyond school through funding local community education courses.

4) Ensure schools are democratic organisations that:

a) Actively involve young people in democratic structures at school; and

b) Promote citizenship education within school but also develop those skills outside school, facilitating external networks to enable young people to address issues beyond the school gate, in their local communities.

5) Build capacity of local community organisations that can play a significant role in education and promoting an understanding of democratic values, including:

a) Investing in youth services, to provide inclusive democratic spaces and hubs for young people, including:

i) Organising activities in clubs, organisations and community groups;

ii) Improving access to digital services in municipal spaces e.g., libraries using cultural events and performances, debates to address social and political issues;

iii) Developing online platforms with the remit of encouraging and widening political participation.

The countries in this study need to:

In this section we focus on the three more detailed case studies that delivered more specific recommendations.

Ireland

1. Build upon existing initiatives like the National Youth Assemblies and local councils (Comhairle na nÓg) to add age groups and ensure diversity, including socioeconomic.

2. Link participation to other opportunities to engage in politics and have more public visibility.

3. Expand civic education nationally so that it is delivered in primary and secondary schools.

4. Ensure greater interaction between local, national and EU politicians and young people in their communities.

5. Organise local council meetings in communities where young people can participate.

6. Publicise nationally when young people's suggestions through existing initiatives become policy.

7. Develop community education delivered through community-based organisations as a fundamental tool for engaging young people with politics and, implicitly, democracy as a political system.

8. Utilise a combination of online and in-person mechanisms of engagement that accommodate the necessity to be "more flexible and fluid, not just for retired people with time."

9. Encourage young adults from disadvantaged communities to participate in diverse political forums - offer support and consider establishing advisory committees for local councils that include young people.

10. Consider appointing a commissioner for the future.

Poland

1. Meet young people's basic needs so that they feel safe and have hope of a better future. This is key to engaging them in politics.

2. Encourage politicians to focus on issues that young people are currently concerned with, and not debating political issues from the PRL period,[299] which do not have resonance with younger generations.

3. Implement online voting, signalling to younger people that their participation is required.

4. Conduct more effective online campaigning, debates and social media events.

5. Improve messaging to young people by adopting language that connects with young people: "The far right has already found its language that appeals to young people, while the left is still looking for a way to reach this group."

6. Improve broadband networks to reduce digital exclusion among young people.

7. Promote cultural events that encourage young people to get involved in politics.

8. Implement single-mandate electoral districts to increase interest in politics among the youngest voters.

9. Decentralise aid to strengthen local democracy.

Spain[300]

1. Pass a youth law 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. 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.

3. Co-design and evaluation of policies by young people.

4. Increase funding for the Spanish Youth Council and other youth organisations (political and non-political). A lack of youth organisations, local NGOs, youth branches of political parties contributes to disengagement from politics;

5. Within civil society organisations, develop programmes aimed to develop an active culture of participation by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and the space to develop political activism. Young people who participate not only benefit themselves but become potential ambassadors for political activism and civil engagement in their community. Greater attention should be dedicated to the impact of these multiplier effects;

6. Develop issue-based political engagement. Politicisation among the youngest generations seems to be driven by discrete issues rather than ideological commitments. Political parties should invite young people to participate through the organising of issue-based campaigns.

7. Improve representation of young people in national institutions. This will 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 through parliamentarians who use the same signals and linguistic codes. Numerous focus group participants held 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 Official State Bulletin (BOE).

8. Introduce an automatic voting registry for migrants who have the right to vote.

9. Lower the voting age to 16 years old.

10. Keep government websites properly updated and accessible.

11. Use language across government that is free of jargon and legal terms and which is gender inclusive.

12. Create a citizen's folder where all certificates and information needed to complete administrative processes are kept in one place.

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ENDNOTES

ENDNOTES

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4 Muxel, A. (2020) "Political Radicalism Among the Younger Generations". *Youth and Globalization*, 2(2): 123-136. DOI: 10.1163/25895745-02020001

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In deliberation, citizens exchange arguments and consider different claims that are designed to secure the public good. Through this conversation, citizens can come to an agreement about what procedure, action, or policy will best produce the public good. Deliberation is a necessary precondition for the legitimacy of democratic political decisions. Rather than thinking of political decisions as the aggregate of citizens' preferences, deliberative democracy claims that citizens should arrive at political decisions through reason and the collection of competing arguments and viewpoints. In other words, citizens' preferences should be shaped by deliberation in advance of decision making, rather than by self-interest. With respect to individual and collective citizen decision making, deliberative democracy shifts the emphasis from the outcome of the decision to the quality of the process." Eagan, J. L. (2016) "Deliberative democracy". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 17 May.

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ABOUT THE FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES (FEPS)

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TASC is an independent progressive think-tank whose core focus is addressing inequality and sustaining democracy.

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The Institute for Social Democracy was founded by two parliamentarian parties, the Hungarian Socialist Party (left) and the Dialogue for Hungary (left-green). Its main mission is to help the progressive political forces to break out from everyday political fights and highlights the consequences of the different policy choices. It develops and presents a realistic alternative to all Hungarian citizens who want a just, free and democratic Hungarian republic.

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The Ignacy Daszyński Centre (CID) is a social-democratic think tank established in November 2011 in Warsaw. The CID is a research centre that analyses contemporary public life organises conferences, seminars, and debates and runs publishing activities. CID has branches in Warsaw, Krakow, Gdansk and Opole. Since 2022, CID has been a project operating within the Amicus Europae Foundation.

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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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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.

This study examines the relationship between young people's experiences of socioeconomic disadvantage, and their attitudes to democracy and politics. Drawing on findings from focus groups and interviews with youth representatives and experts in five countries, it finds that young people do still value democracy as a principle but are increasingly disengaged and distrusting of representative politics, specifically its failure to bring positive changes to their lives. Young people want democracy to be more democratic, for policymakers to listen to them and respond to their economic and social needs and they want to participate and be heard. The recommendations present practical suggestions and recommendations to achieve that.

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