

10 questions about the political participation of young people¹

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(1) Has the political activity of the young become polarized?

“Finnish youth seems to be clearly divided in this respect: those who vote in parliamentary elections, those who do not. The first group shows a certain degree of interest in politics, the other does not. The former discusses the elections with others, the latter does not. The first group participates in the activities of NGOs or at least has relations with them. The other group has no such connections.”²

- How clear is this polarization? Is it a question of a polarization process leading to two qualitatively opposed youth groups: those who want to or are capable of looking after their own interests and those who lack the will or capability? Is it possible any longer to talk about the realization of representational democracy?
- On what basis do young people fall into one of these two groups? What factors divide people into active and passive citizens? Is there any way to influence the passive ones?

(2) Why are young people showing a growing interest in politics but not in voting?

In 1979 the voting percentage among the young was 75, but only 53 in 1999 and 54 in 2003. In the last municipal elections, the voting percentage among young people in Helsinki was 36. This is a general tendency in Europe. On the other hand, surveys indicate that the youth is increasingly interested in politics. In 1991, 40% said they were quite or very interested in politics. By 2003, the figure had risen to 54%. This is also a pan-European tendency.

- What do these tendencies tell us?
- How could the increased interest in political matters be used to mobilise voters?

(3) Why are young people at the age of 13 interested in politics, while 18-year-olds are passive voters?

Anne Halsall³ has studied attitudes to politics among the English youth. According to her, 13- and 15-year-olds are still interested in politics although they are beginning to feel distrust of politicians. In Halsall's view, this distrust strengthens between the ages of 15 and 18, leading to the loss of interest in voting by the age of 18. Why does interest wane among 15- to 18-year-olds? What could be done to maintain or strengthen it?

- Does Anne Halsall's analysis hold a grain of truth when she proposes that (1) people should be allowed to the ballot box at a younger age, (2) there should be more candidates of the same age whom young people could identify with and trust, and (3) the opportunities to participate should be greatly increased: what looks like apathy among the young may simply be a reaction to not being able to influence matters?

(4) What to do about principled non-voters?

Studies show that for a significant share of non-voters the decision to not vote is a deliberate and conscious form of protest. The reason for their abstaining from voting is not the difficulty to identify with political parties or find a candidate who represents their opinions, but rather the feeling that representational democracy does not serve the interests of citizens.

- How should this phenomenon be tackled? By organizing an aggressive persuasion campaign of the type 'only fools don't vote', or simply giving up any attempts to turn the heads of non-voters?
- Are principled non-voters a necessary evil of the system or a serious indication that the representational system no longer serves citizens sufficiently? If the latter case is true, should any essential steps be taken to increase the opportunities for direct influence – especially in the case of young people (public legitimacy, enabling of opportunities, increase in the public support for direct influence, etc.)?

(5) Are parties interested in their youth organizations?

The Belgian researcher Marc Hooghe⁴ claims that parties no longer show much interest in their youth organizations for a variety of reasons: (1) young people often vote 'too' radically (left or right (e.g., Tony Halme in Finland)) and do not support the big parties, (2) demographic changes have made young people a dwindling natural resource no longer worth investing in, (3) parties are making increasing use of the media as a channel for influence, effectively reducing the significance of and investments in members – and, consequently, youth organizations, and (4) political youth organizations are needed only to raise the party elite so there is no need for mass recruitment. The point is not so much that young people are not interested in political youth organizations but rather that political parties are not interested in supporting their youth organizations.

- How close to truth does this analysis come? If it is true, how could the value and authority of political youth organizations be restored? Furthermore, what could be done to improve their street credibility as a noteworthy channel for influence (instead of a mere manager training programme for parties)?

(6) Do new or alternative forms of participation erode the legitimacy of and opportunities for action within a representational democracy?

The young are becoming increasingly active in different forms of participation, such as lifestyle politics, activism and single-issue movements (antiwar activities, criticism of capitalism, alternative globalization, environmental activities, animal rights, gender issues, etc.), networked action and action through cultural expression. But how do these alternative methods and representational democracy relate to one another? Three interpretations have been proposed in this respect: (1) new forms of participation replace action through representational democracy (the 'erosion' view), (2) new forms complement representational systems with new themes and players (the 'complementation' view), and (3) different forms of participation live side by side independent of one another (the 'independence' view).

- The erosion view is supported by the decrease in voting activity coinciding with young people beginning to express themselves through new channels and methods. Perhaps activists and those involved in lifestyle politics do not feel the need to vote?
- The independence view, in turn, is supported by a study conducted in Spain⁵. In November 2001 students mobilised themselves in mass demonstrations against the government's university legislation, which was felt to weaken the position of students.

In November 2002 the oil tanker Prestige sank off the coast of Galicia, leaving much of the damage repair to citizen movements and individual citizens because the government did not take sufficient measures. In February 2003 the whole country saw widespread protests against the war in Iraq, involving the young in particular. However, studies show that these events had no impact on the voting activity in subsequent national and local elections, nor on the support for governmental parties.

- The complementation view is supported by the findings of Finnish political researchers. According to Villiina Hellsten, radicalism does not reduce interest in voting, but instead broadens the political repertoire into new political arenas, introducing alternative interpretations of the world and meaning, as well as new forms of interaction⁶. In Pia Lundbom's view, conventional and unconventional methods for political action can coexist side by side in an individual's range of measures and have brought issues into political discussion that traditionally have not formed part of it.⁷
- Are there paths leading from citizen movements to political parties?

(7) Do the young mock politics through their new attitude?

According to Kari Paakkunainen, the attitude of young people to politics has changed from one characterised by a simple dislike of 'political farts' to one that pays attention to politics and is typified by elasticity, game and irony. The uncertainty of the postmodern age is reflected in young people's attitudes to politics. The young now try and test different viewpoints on politics, vote on the basis of situation and emotion, play the role of good citizens when needed, fool political researchers in survey responses and adopt a lightly ironic attitude to political questions. Meanwhile, the activities of young activists have come to include new features, such as short-term enthusiasm, fun and entertainment, humour, collaboration and creativity. Adult and long-time politicians find it difficult to understand the notions of 'reclaim the streets party' and 'to resist is to create'. They were also confused to see that young people participating in the London anti-Bush demonstrations in autumn 2003 protested by dancing, having fun and waving cheerful banners.

- Is it not a sign of mockery to treat politics lightly and ironically instead of taking a serious and long-range attitude to it?
- Do we need to restore the discipline and esteem formerly seen in politics or embrace the new forms: understand, give room, tolerate, support, accept and cooperate?
- Geoffrey Pleyers⁸ has studied young people involved in the activities of Attac. He calls them 'free electrons', nonconformists who do not want to become parts of the system but act as operational units, skipping from place to place in an impulsive and uncontrolled manner. Can a democratic system be constructed on such a method of action?

(8) Why aren't politics discussed at home?

Edward Horowitz, researcher of political socialisation in families, says that a family environment characterised by democratic decision-making, discussion and a communicative attitude increases the political activism of young people.

- Why aren't matters such as politics discussed at home? Why, in the first place, don't families talk?

(9) Why aren't political topics discussed at school, youth clubs and other educational arenas?

In Marjatta Bardy's opinion, today's young people do not have enough opportunities to consider questions such as 'Who am I?' 'What do I want from life?' 'What will I become?' Critical school researchers (e.g., the Civic study) claim that the treatment of political and moral issues has been neglected in Finnish institutions. The factual description of representational democracy that citizenship education provides at school is essential for active citizenship to become reality. However, it also calls for personal pondering and debate on basic political and moral issues, the creation of motivation for social action, rehearsal of participation skills and positive experiences showing that participation is worthwhile.

- In their role as public educators, municipal youth activities have their obligation to fulfil in this respect. But what could youth organizations, especially political ones, do alone or jointly with municipal youth activities, possibly even with other municipal players (e.g., schools), to enhance discussion about moral, social and political matters among young people?

(10) Why haven't politics made their way into the everyday activities of the young?

Juha Suoranta⁹ encourages educators to go where 'meanings of reality are truly determined'. By this he refers to the cultural environment surrounding today's youth: the media and leisure activities. Cultures created by the media teach young people the notions of right and wrong, what is desirable and what is not, what is a good way to act and what is not. These concepts are influenced by open and, to a large extent, hidden messages. In any event, as Suoranta explains, the culture has become media-oriented, and upbringing has moved from educational institutions to the fields of media culture. Leisure activities often aim solely at achieving personal pleasure, breaking records or playing for points. What political meanings can be produced in these arenas?

- How important is 'media literacy' (the critical inspection of messages produced by media culture)? Why couldn't leisure activities include a political dimension? How can political youth organizations bring their message into the everyday lives of young people? How could municipal youth activities promote media literacy?

¹ The questions are partly based on the research seminar 'What about political youth participation?' arranged by the EU and Council of Europe in Strasbourg 24–29 November 2003. A version of this article was also published in the Nuorisotyö (Youth Work) magazine 3/2004

² Sakari Nurmela and Juhani Pehkonen: 'Nuoret ja vuoden 2003 eduskuntavaalit'

³ Anna Halsall: The political attitudes of 13 and 15 year olds in Wales and England, Strasbourg 2003

⁴ Marc Hooghe: Youth organisations within political parties. Strasbourg 2003

⁵ Daniel Blanch: Political participation and disaffection among youth in Spain, Strasbourg 2003

⁶ Villiina Hellsten: 'Uusi politiikka ja poliittisen osallistumisen moninaistuminen: haaste edustukselliselle demokratialle?', published in Kyllä politiikalle, mutta..., ed. Kari Paakkunainen, 2003

⁷ Pia Lundbom: 'Hei kaveri – millä välineillä äänestät? Mitä demokratia, vaalit ja poliittisen osallistumisen keinot merkitsevät nuorille?', published in Kyllä politiikalle, mutta..., ed. K Paakkunainen.

⁸ Geoffrey Pleyers: From political disillusionment to a new culture of participation: young alterglobalisation activists' involvement and commitment, Strasbourg 2003

⁹ Juha Suoranta: Kasvatus mediakulttuurissa, Vastapaino 2003