De Europa
Vol. 6, No. 2 (2023), 41-59
ISSN 2611-853X
www.deeuropa.unito.it

Youth political participation and inequalities: comparing European countries and different repertoires of engagement

Elisa Lello, Nico Bazzoli

1. Introduction

In recent years, research on Western democracies has shown that political participation has undergone a deep transformation in its very nature (Dalton 1996). Among the various crises that have affected Europe in the recent past – from the financial crisis of 2008/2009 to the most recent Covid-19 and energy crises – that of political participation has acquired structural aspects, and it is redesigning the relationship between citizens and political parties. Europeans vote less than half a century ago and are more politically disengaged (Norris 2011; Papadopoulos 2013; Allen and Birch 2015). Disengagement looks particularly evident for the youngest cohorts of the population: among them, we can observe the lowest values of electoral participation compared to any other age groups (Kitanova 2020).

Young people are perceived as increasingly disengaged and disconnected from traditional political processes in Europe, especially regarding voting (European Commission 2001; 2007). New cohorts' political commitment has become increasingly scarce, intermittent, and superficial in the last decades (Gozzo 2010). This trend is so visible that it has determined the attribution to new generations of labels such as "invisible generations" (Diamanti 1999) or "sons of disenchantment" (Bontempi and Pocaterra 2007). According to some authors, these are characterized by an eclipse of interest in politics and a progressive retirement into the private sphere (Ricolfi 2002). Furthermore, young people are not only labelled as disengaged but even as apathetic or alienated from traditional forms of politics (Stoker 2006; Hay 2007), while other scholars have pointed out how the difficult socio-economic situation of young people, and even more so their worried and pragmatic vision of the future – especially in Italy and other Mediterranean countries – has rather led to a shift towards a technical, almost depoliticised conception of politics (Lello 2015; 2020).

Several scholars have opposed the thesis of apathy or retirement into the private sphere of younger cohorts, pointing out how they prefer to engage in unconventional forms of activism and protest, such as associations and volunteering or issue-based political initiatives (Spannring, Ogris, and Gaiser 2008; Sloam 2016).

Political participation has indeed become something broader and more complex than mere traditional political activities such as voting in elections (Ekman and Amnå

Elisa Lello, University of Urbino Carlo Bo, elisa.lello@uniurb.it
Nico Bazzoli, University of Urbino Carlo Bo, nico.bazzoli@uniurb.it

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.13135/2611-853X/7368

2012; Pitti 2018). It can include a wide range of activities such as participating in cultural organizations or associations, signing petitions, or boycotting specific products (Bourne 2010). The overall emergence of these forms of political participation in society is often associated with the role played by younger generations.

A substantial body of literature states that young people engage more in politics through those types of political activity (Norris 2003; Spannring *et al.* 2008; Kestilä-Kekkonen 2009) which are generally labelled as "unconventional", in opposition to "conventional" ones (such as voting, contacting public officials, taking part in a party campaign). However, while younger cohorts were generally more engaged than adult ones in these forms of activism during the 1970s-80s, research has also showed a decrease in non-institutional youth participation during the latest decades. These activism practices are indeed no longer over-represented among younger cohorts compared to adult ones (Goerres 2009; Grasso 2014; Fox 2015). Consistently, Grasso (2014) points out that today's youth are the least politically engaged generation ever, in terms of both conventional and unconventional political participation. These processes have to be placed in a wider social context marked by the impact of neo-liberalism and the consequent individualisation of risk, where everyday problems and shortages are increasingly interpreted as the result of personal failures rather than the consequences of structural factors to be addressed collectively, thus contributing to discouraging collective mobilisations (Chiapello and Boltanski 1999; Beck and Beck-Gerhsheim 2001).

Studies on political participation have often focused on common tendencies in voting and alternative forms of engagement in single countries (Dalton 2009; Van Deth *et al.* 2007; Whiteley 2012) or across some democracies (LeDuc *et al.* 2014; Norris 2011). Less attention has been paid to comparing youth participation practices across a wider range of countries and the relative popularity of different modes of participation among younger citizens (Sloam 2016; Kitanova 2020).

Our work addresses this relative gap in the existing literature by investigating the recent dynamics of youth political participation through data from the 9th edition (2018) of the European Social Survey (ESS). The first aim is to explore differences in young people's political involvement levels within the European Union. On the other hand, the transformations regarding the very nature of political participation also affect the relationship between socio-economic inequalities and political engagement, implying the emergence of both new possibilities and barriers to access, which are related to different dimensions of exclusion (Bruselius-Jensen, Pitti and Tisdall 2021; Bruselius-Jensen and Nielsen 2021; Tisdall 2021). The second objective, therefore, is to assess the impact of socio-economic inequalities on political engagement based on a quantitative and comparative approach, comparing younger cohorts with older ones.

To explore these issues, the rest of the article is organized as follows. The next section provides a conceptual framework contextualizing our analysis within the existing literature on young Europeans' political participation and formulates the main hypotheses guiding the empirical analysis. The third section deals with methods and

provides adequate clarifications on data and empirical choices. The fourth one aims to expose the results of the analysis and unravel the differences between some groups of countries, based on the relative popularity of conventional and unconventional participation among youth. In the fifth section, the analysis is focused on the relationships between political engagement and socio-economic inequalities according to an individual-based analysis, which compares young and old people. Finally, the last section provides some conclusive remarks with the aim of discussing the interpretations of the empirical results and their possible implications.

2. Class, inequalities, and youth political participation in Europe

The life of young Europeans has changed considerably in the recent past under the pressure of economic, cultural, and institutional factors. The transition from youth to adulthood for those born in the late 1980s is delayed and staggered compared to that of their parents. This phenomenon is evident to such an extent that it has influenced the way of defining young citizens (Arnett 2004; Flanagan 2009). We hear more and more often about "young adults", meaning the subjects who have only partially experienced the different stages of life marking the transition to adulthood (Cavalli and De Lillo 1993). In some countries, especially Italy and other Southern European countries, the presence of structural factors that hinder young people's economic and housing independence – more than in other national contexts – has led to the extension of the age range within which one person is considered young (Cuzzocrea, Bello and Kazepov 2020).

These changes are related to the increase in the years of study, the delayed entry into the labour market, the challenges posed by growing job insecurity, as well as the postponement of choices such as marriage and having children (European Commission 2009). Structural changes in the labour market have caused younger cohorts to face more significant social risks than previous generations, resulting in both a loss of certainties such as job security and an increase of precariousness (Furlong and Cartmel 2007). The risk of downward social mobility particularly affects young people, and for more educated youth a central element becomes status incongruence (Raffini 2013). Moreover, the delayed acquisition of social and economic stability can affect the constitution of individuals' identity and the very definition of subjective interests, determining a deferral or disengagement in the assumption of social, civil, and political responsibilities by new generations (Gozzo 2010).

In recent decades, the ways of understanding politics have also changed. The individualization of values has led to the emergence of so-called "lifestyle politics" (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005, Giddens 1994). Young people have been described as the protagonists of a reinvention of politics, which leads to a politicization of everyday life (Pirni and Raffini 2022). Old class divisions much less define the political activities of young Europeans than their own experiences and perceptions of democracy in their social and work environments (Marsh *et al.* 2007). Young citizens' political commitment increasingly concerns participation in personally significant issues

driven by their lifestyle, values, and social networks (Bennett 2007), in accordance with a shift from political to cultural conflict (Touraine 1980) and from a traditional "dutiful" citizen model to a newer "self-actualising" one (Bennett and Wells 2009; Pleyers and Capitaine 2017).

Notwithstanding the declining importance of the class dimension in structuring processes of collective identification, it may be argued that social class in itself keeps playing a crucial role in determining different degrees of access to political participation. The interaction between socio-economic exclusion and political exclusion has been explored since the origins of empirical research on civic engagement by the Social Centrality Model (Socio-Economic Status Model, hereinafter SES Model), according to which political engagement increases as we move towards those social components that can benefit from larger stocks of economic, cultural, social, and psychological resources linked to personal and family social position (Milbrath and Goel 1977; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995)[1]. That model was discussed in the classic contribution by Alessandro Pizzorno (1966), who shifted attention away from social-economic inequalities to collective identification processes and the role of mass organizations like parties and trade unions. Looking at the history of Western democracies, such organizations did play a decisive role in counterbalancing the effects of the SES Model, contributing to steering wide components of blue-collar workers and subaltern classes towards political participation. It was also noted that within these organizations differences in the intensity and quality of participation often recurred, especially relating to the control of resources linked to the socio-economic condition (Pizzorno 1966). Nonetheless, political organizations have helped to politically "form" and "integrate" vast social segments that would otherwise have largely remained on the margins of the political system.

This point is momentous since, in the absence of this counterbalancing role historically assumed by mass political organizations, the effects of social centrality can cause political participation to become an arena of reproduction, and perhaps even widening, of social inequalities. In fact, the issues that become the object of mobilization processes tend to receive more attention, resources, and answers from institutions than those which do not (Schlozman, Verba e Brady 1999), even if the latter are of interest to a wider audience, and precisely for this reason find it harder to organize themselves (Olson 1971). In other words, it is likely that issues raised by those social components who engage most – largely overlapping with the wealthiest social sectors – receive more attention from governments. In this way, census, while no longer being a discriminating factor at a legislative level, continues to determine unequal access to participation, as well as differentiated chances of receiving answers in terms of policies, from the point of view of concrete, everyday social dynamics (Gaxie 1978).

[1] We are aware that social class and the SES model are not synonymous, since social class refers to a common belonging that concerns economic situation, but also prestige and profession, cultural capital, aesthetic criteria and lifestyles (Bourdieu 1979), while the SES model is basically an operationalisation of the concept of social centrality. However, since the SES model includes aspects related to economic situation, educational level, belonging to linguistic and religious majorities/minorities, etc., we can reasonably relate the two concepts.

In this paper, we highlight that a number of factors occurring in recent times bring the relationship between class and access to political participation again to the fore, concerning the whole of society and especially youth. Such factors partly have to do with the impoverishment of middle classes and the increasing inequalities taking place throughout Western democracies, as well as with the abovementioned processes that identify younger cohorts as the most exposed to social risks and marginalization. Thus, distances between central and peripheral social positions are getting wider and deeper, even though – and at the same time as – class as an object of political conflict and identification has lost relevance when compared to other dimensions (such as gender, race, and sexual orientations).

Secondly, in recent decades a real change in the nature of political participation has begun to occur, whereby the contraction of conventional engagement has been accompanied by a widening of the repertoire of participation itself, which has included an increasing variety of unconventional forms. This may lead to an exacerbation of the influence of variables attributable to "social centrality". On the one hand, there is no longer a widespread presence of organizations that mobilize people in the territories, in society, and at workplaces. The transformation of participation and the withdrawal of political organizations from society towards institutions (Katz and Mair 1995) make political participation more of an individual rather than an associative issue, as it was, after all, before the emergence of mass political parties (Manin 1995). Parties decrease their efforts towards socialization and mobilization (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000) and the ability of trade unions to mobilize workers that are fragmented in terms of their contractual position and physical workplace becomes decidedly more uncertain.

On the other hand, heterodox activism seems to require more resources (skills, interest, information, as well as time and familiarity with new technologies), compared to mobilization within large organizations. It is the very characteristics of unconventional participation that lead us to suppose that the probability of its activation is influenced by the control of cognitive, socio-economic, and relational resources, to an even more pronounced extent than activism in conventional forms (Verba, Nie and Kim 1978; Dalton 1996). On average, these are methods of involvement that indeed require a more active role on the part of the individual in various ways: from the very selection and framing of the issues to the need to obtain information and develop one's own counter-expertise and to think up original forms of mobilization capable of penetrating the media without having to bring huge crowds of people to the streets. In all these aspects, the role of those who decide to mobilize is clearly much more active, and therefore requires more resources, compared to a time when the protagonists were mass organizations which made decisions and organized demonstrations limiting themselves to asking militants to take to the streets.

Based on such premises, our work is aimed at analysing ESS data moving from some major hypotheses:

1) We expect higher levels of youth political engagement to be associated with wealthier social conditions, in accordance with the SES model, through both an

individual-based analysis and a comparison of different national cases. In the latter case, we expect to find higher political engagement in European countries where younger generations experience better socio-economic conditions. In addition, we focus on differences between countries also concerning the repertoire of political engagement (conventional or unconventional). However, we are conscious that a comparison between different national cases is influenced, beyond youth socio-economic conditions, by contextual characteristics, since the social and cultural peculiarities of national contexts can have a direct and diversified impact on political participation (Kitanova 2020). National civic-political cultures can indeed play a leading role in determining young and older citizens' political participation (Sloam 2016).

2) As for the individual-based analysis, we expect to find a deeper impact of social centrality on unconventional rather than conventional participation, since the first form relies to a larger extent on individual resources which are, in their turn, related to individual social positions; at the same time, it is less dependent on the intervention of political organizations able to counterbalance the effects of social centrality.

3. Data and methods

This article addresses young Europeans' political participation from a comparative perspective between some EU countries. The work draws on data from wave 9 of the ESS (2018)[2] to examine political participation in six different political activities. The six indicators selected concern electoral participation (voting in most recent national parliament elections) or forms of unconventional participation (wearing or displaying a badge or sticker, signing a petition, participating in a boycott, participating in a demonstration, posting or sharing something online about politics).

In order to analyse the relationship between socio-economic conditions and forms of political participation by young Europeans, we mainly relied on the respondents' educational level. Even though this can be considered a good proxy for the socio-economic status, since it is related to other dimensions (such as income, parents' education level, professional position, social recognition, self-esteem and so on), we verified if we were to obtain consistent results even through another indicator, that is the respondents' feelings about their current household income.

All these data derive from specific ESS questions as presented in Table 1. For the purpose of cross-country comparison, we have aggregated the data at the national scale, calculating the rates for young people and the rest of the population for each indicator.

[2] We preferred to use these data rather than the recently published ESS wave 10 data (2020) to avoid possible biases related to the emergence of the Covid-19 crisis in 2020. The reliance of our paper on only one edition of the survey may be considered as a limitation of the study.

Tab. 1 – Selected indicators (ESS 9 2018).

	Indicators
Participation in election	Voted last national election
Unconventional forms of participation	- Worn or displayed campaign badge/sticker last 12 months. - Signed petition last 12 months. - Taken part in lawful public demonstration last 12 months. - Boycotted certain products last 12 months. - Posted or shared anything about politics online last 12 months.
Socio-economic	- Educational level (tertiary: BA and MA; vocational and upper secondary; until lower secondary. - Feeling about current household income (difficult + very difficult on present income; coping + living comfortably on present income).

Although it would have been preferable to investigate a broader range of participatory acts, the selected ESS items provide a good overview of youth participation in each country. For reasons related to the availability of ESS data at the national level, it was necessary to focus only on 22 of the 27 EU Member States. Great Britain was included in the analysis because during the surveying window of wave 9 ESS (2018) it was still a member of the EU, and the effects of Brexit were not yet implemented. Then, the comparative analysis covered 23 European countries, involving both founding member states of the EU and more recent member states.

In this article, respondents to wave 9 ESS (2018) aged 15 to 34 are defined as "young Europeans". The reason therefore is twofold. On the one hand, it is linked to the extension of the youth age range mentioned in the previous section. On the other hand, considering the 15-34 age group as young has practical reasons due to the size of the sample in single countries. Overall, the analysis was carried out on data from 40563 respondents distributed in 23 countries; 8938 respondents between 15 and 34 years of age and 31625 respondents older than 34.

However, when dealing with electoral participation, we restricted the youth category to the 18-34 age range and set aside those who declared not being eligible to vote at the time of the most recent national election.

Analyses were conducted after weighting data by using *anweight* (analysis weight), since, as reported in the ESS Data web portal, this weight is "suitable for all types of analyses, including when you are studying just one country, when you compare across countries, or when you are studying groups of countries"[3].

4. Youth political engagement across European countries

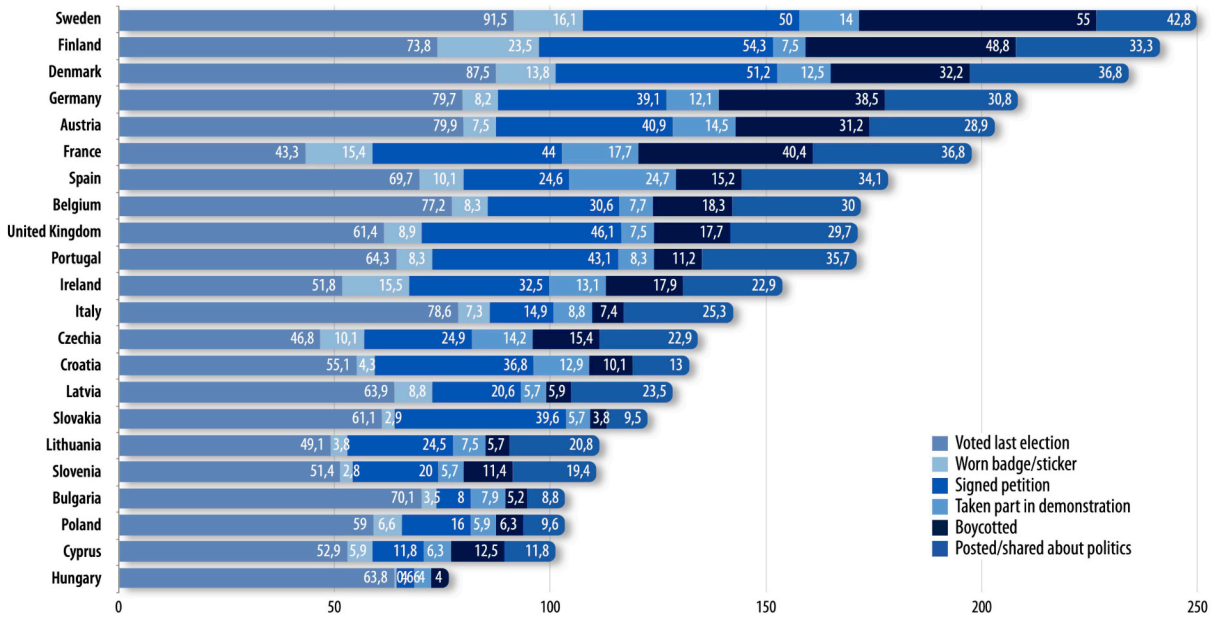
As shown in Fig. 1, youngsters' rates of political engagement vary considerably across Europe. A group of Northern European countries stands as the one characterized by the highest level of youth involvement in politics, while at the bottom we find Eastern and Baltic countries, together with Italy (and, to a lesser extent, the Nether-

[3] https://stessrelpubprodwe.blob.core.windows.net/data/round9/survey/ESS_weighting_data_1_1.pdf

lands). It is interesting to note that, while differences in electoral participation are sometimes relevant, yet generally modest, differences between countries where youngsters are most or least engaged particularly concern unconventional participation. Thus, those countries where young people are less engaged show relevantly lower rates of youth engagement in boycotting, sharing posts online, and signing petitions.

These differences between countries may also be interpreted as a partial confirmation of the perduring relevance of the SES Model. Younger cohorts generally do seem to be more engaged in those countries where their social and economic situation are better – although we are aware that the economic situation is only one aspect of social centrality, albeit a crucial one. Conversely, countries where youngsters engage less partially overlap with those where their preceding conditions of vulnerability have been further worsened by the effects of the economic crisis started in 2007-2008, so that their present situation is particularly critical compared to other age groups, including some Southern and Eastern European countries (European Commission 2017; Morlino and Raniolo 2017; Pitti 2018).

Fig. 1 – Rates of youth (18-34 year olds) participation in voting and non-electoral forms of engagement

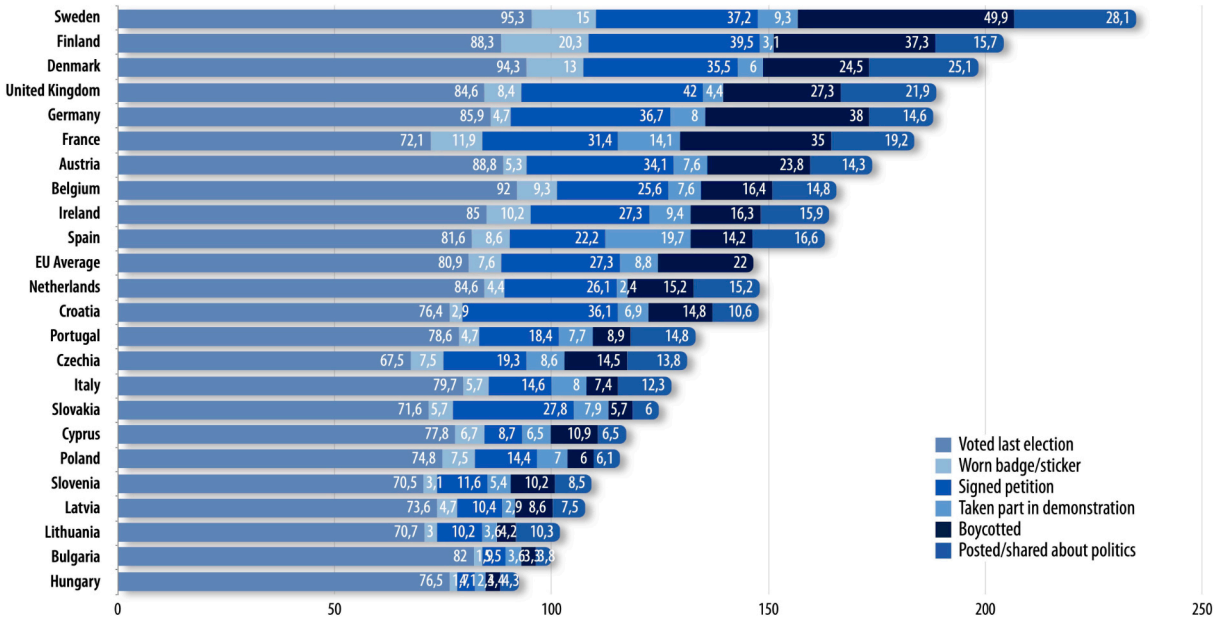


Source: European Social Survey data, Wave 9 (2018).

However, patterns of youth engagement also reflect and reproduce important traits of national political cultures, concerning both general trends and the prevalence of specific (conventional or unconventional) repertoires of engagement.

As for the first point, we can see that the country hierarchy based on youth engagement rates is consistently similar to the one obtained when focusing on adult and older people (Fig. 2). In broad terms, youngsters tend to imitate and reproduce other cohorts' propension to political engagement.

Fig. 2 – Rates of adult (35 year olds and over) participation in voting and non-electoral forms of engagement



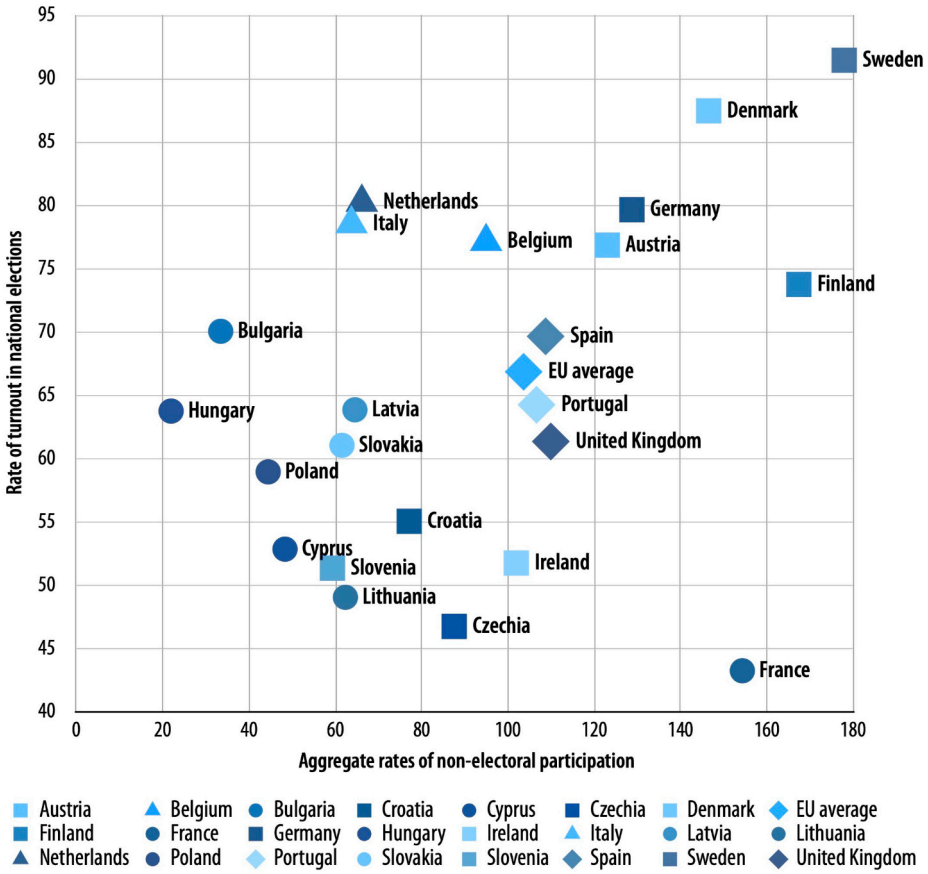
Source: European Social Survey data, Wave 9 (2018).

As for the second one, youngsters' attitudes about the specific repertoires of political engagement show aspects of consistency and continuity with elements of the traditional political culture of each state. In Figure 3, it is possible to look at the collocation of each country according to two axes: the horizontal one reporting the aggregate rates of youth unconventional participation, while the vertical one indicates the rates of youth turnout in most recent general elections. In this way, it is possible to identify a group of Northern-Western countries (Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Germany) where youngsters are highly engaged in both electoral and non-electoral forms of political involvement, reproducing high levels of commitment which are usually reported for adult and older cohorts as well (Garcia-Albacete 2014). While most other Western European countries (Belgium, Austria, Spain, Portugal, United Kingdom) vary from moderate to high levels of youth engagement in both repertoires of political engagement, and score quite close to the average European value, other countries stand apart. This is the case of most Eastern and Baltic countries (Czechia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), where past Communist regimes and the historical circumstances of their transitions towards liberal democracy have fostered widespread feelings of detachment and scepticism towards politics, thus nurturing low levels of engagement, concerning both electoral and unconventional forms (Howard 2002; Bordignon 2007; Vukelic and Stanojevic 2012); while Latvia, Hungary and Bulgaria, though scoring low in unconventional participation, show levels of electoral participation close to Portugal and UK.

However, this is also the case of Italy. In Italian political culture, engagement is traditionally meant more as a political struggle between opposing ideologies and militant fronts than as grassroots activism. This has traditionally fostered high levels of

turnout (and party membership) alongside significantly lower rates of non-electoral (and non-partisan) participation (Biorcio 2003). Italian youngsters thus seem to reproduce their fellow nationals' political behaviour. Something similar – albeit in the opposite direction – happens in France. Here, the traditional weakness in the social and territorial organization of political parties is intertwined with a political culture that is more oriented towards direct actions and contentious politics (Sawicki 1997; Ysmal 2005). Once again, young people's trends seem to follow coherently, so that they stand among the most engaged in non-electoral forms and as the least involved in voting.

Fig. 3 – Rates of youth participation across EU



Source: European Social Survey data, Wave 9 (2018).

5. The Social Centrality Model, between conventional and unconventional repertoires of engagement

While differences between national cases are mostly related to contextual factors such as political cultures and styles of civic engagement, the impact of social centrality is instead more clearly identifiable in the individual-based analysis. When using educational level as a proxy for the individual socio-economic status, we can observe a relevant difference between the most and the least educated, both among young people and older ones, for what concerns electoral participation as well as unconventional forms of civic engagement. The same results are obtained when we use the indicator concerning respondents' feelings about their own household income, although differences are even wider when measured through the education level.

Tab. 2 – Electoral and unconventional participation by educational level (%) and by feelings about present household income (%), among young Europeans (18–34-year-olds) and older cohorts (35 years old and over)[4].

	18-34 (excluding the non-eligible to vote)				35 and over			
	Up to lower secondary	vocational and upper secondary	tertiary (BA and MA)	tertiary – lower secondary (percent. points)	Up to lower secondary	vocational and upper secondary	tertiary (BA and MA)	tertiary – lower secondary (percent. points)
Voted last national election	49	66	80	31	73	82	90	16
Engaged in two or more forms of unconventional participation*	18	28	39	21	10	24	39	29
	(very) Difficult on present income	Coping or living comfortably	Coping or living comfortably - (very) Difficult on present income (percent. points)		(very) Difficult on present income	Coping or living comfortably	Coping or living comfortably - (very) Difficult on present income (percent. points)	
Voted last national election	51	71	20		69	84	15	
Engaged in two or more forms of unconventional participation*	25	31	6		16	25	9	

Source: European Social Survey data, Wave 9 (2018), no. 28847 (when using the educational level parameter), no. 28730 (when using the household income feeling parameter).

*Data indicate respondents who declared that they had engaged in at least two among the following: Worn or displayed campaign badge/sticker last 12 months; Signed petition last 12 months; Taken part in lawful public demonstration last 12 months; Boycotted certain products last 12 months; Posted or shared something about politics online last 12 months.

However, different trends can be identified for young people or adults. If we focus on adults, educational level affects unconventional engagement (29 percentage points of difference between the most and the least educated) relevantly more than conventional participation (16 p.p.). Thus, within the total sample of the ESS survey, only 10% of the least educated adults engaged in two or more forms of unconventional participation, vs. 39% among the most educated.

This result is consistent with hypothesis no. 2. On the one hand, quite expected results emerge from the analysis carried out on adult cohorts. On the other hand, we observe something much less expected among youngsters. While the level of education impacts to a relevant extent (although less than among adults) for what concerns unconventional participation (21 p.p.), unlike adults the gap is even wider when we consider electoral participation (31 p.p. vs. "only" 16 p.p. among adults).

If we move on to analysing respondents' feelings about household income, results seem once again to contradict our hypothesis no. 2, since the impact of this variable

[4] For the sake of clarity of presentation, we opted for a cross-tabulation presentation of the data. However, we also checked the coefficients of linear regression: setting the education degree as the independent variable, among adults we found a beta-standardised coefficient of 0,299 for what concerns unconventional participation and 0,15 for electoral participation. Among young people, the beta-standardised coefficient regarding voting is 0,211, while it is 0,16 for unconventional engagement. In all cases, sign. = 0,000.

is greater on electoral participation than on unconventional engagement. Differences, however, are not so relevant among adults, but much wider among youth (6 vs. 20 p.p.), confirming a relevant exclusion of young Europeans in socially peripheral positions concerning electoral participation, even more than unconventional engagement.

We tried to investigate these very relevant and counter-intuitive data in depth, examining the gap caused by educational level in electoral participation within each country, between young people and adults. In particular, we aimed to verify whether the different groups of countries, as emerged in Fig. 3, showed consistent differences in the social centrality gap (as defined through education) concerning youth participation in elections. As already said, the different groups of countries in Fig. 2 are defined based on youth involvement in conventional and unconventional participation, but they also reflect historical differences rooted in national political cultures as well as relevant differences in youth social and economic conditions. Hence, we used this operation to ascertain whether this major gap in youth electoral participation is related to the above differences, or whether it concerns most countries regardless of their different historical patterns of citizen involvement and youth socio-economic conditions.

Tab. 3 – Electoral participation by country and educational level: difference between respondents having tertiary education (BA and MA) and those having up to lower secondary education (percentage points).

Northern Countries: high levels of both electoral and unconventional youth engagement	18-34-year-olds*	35 and over
Germany	44	38
Sweden	14	10
Denmark	24	8
Finland	29	13
Other Western European countries: moderate-high levels of both electoral and unconventional youth engagement		
Belgium	36	4
Austria	40	16
Spain	30	10
Portugal	22	9
United Kingdom	45	11
High levels of youth electoral participation, low levels of youth unconventional engagement		
Italy	35	18
Netherlands	31	20
Moderate-low levels of youth electoral participation, low levels of youth unconventional engagement		
Hungary	58	23
Bulgaria	30	11
Poland	25	14
Latvia	--	--
Slovakia	--	--
Slovenia	--	--
Cyprus	--	--
Low levels of youth electoral participation, moderate levels of youth unconventional engagement		
Croatia	28	14
Czechia	41	18
Ireland	--	--
Low levels of youth electoral participation, high levels of youth unconventional engagement		
France	25	15

*Excluding the non-eligible to vote.
Source: European Social Survey data, Wave 9 (2018), no. 37666. Data unavailability (--) is due to insufficient sample size.

As we can see in Table 3, differences are scarcely related to groups of countries as identified in Fig. 2. In all Western European countries, the education gap is very relevant among youth, and much wider than among adults. The only difference is represented by Sweden, where it is lower than in other countries and closer to what detected among older cohorts. No relevant differences may be detected between countries based on their traditional level of general turnout or on the socio-economic condition of younger generations. The gap is wide and much wider than among older cohorts in Eastern European countries as well.

6. Discussion and conclusions. A withdrawal from electoral participation marked by class positions.

The comparison between national levels of youth engagement only partially corroborates the predictions based on social centrality, since younger cohorts tend to reproduce older generations' attitudes towards participation, while contextual traits rooted in national history, such as the ones related to political culture, keep their influence on youth political behaviour. Our first hypothesis, however, finds a clearer corroboration in the individual-based analysis, showing that young, as well as adult Europeans holding socially central positions are more willing to be politically active than those who are socially more peripheral, whether we use educational level or respondents' household income feelings as an indicator to measure social centrality.

On the contrary, our second hypothesis only finds partial corroboration. When we measure social centrality by educational level, we can assess that the gap among adults and older people is wider for what concerns unconventional participation than electoral participation, consistently with our hypothesis. Differently, when we measure social centrality through feelings about household income, the opposite is true (although the difference is less relevant). These results may suggest that the resources that matter most in explaining unconventional engagement are related even more to education than to the individual/family economic situation. This is also confirmed by results concerning youth, where unconventional participation appears to be decidedly more affected by educational level than by feelings about income. This result can be read in line with the tendencies highlighted in the theoretical framework, which pointed to the possibility that political participation would increasingly depend on the capacity to construct an autonomous, individualised relationship with politics, outside the processes of identification in homogeneous groups supported by solid institutional references (Bennett and Segerberg 2013); but this capacity on its turn depends, plausibly, on the control of cultural and cognitive resources even before economic ones.

Among youth, however, contrary to what our second hypothesis would suggest, regardless of the item used to measure social centrality, its impact is widely more relevant on conventional than on unconventional engagement – although differences are greater if educational level is used as an indicator.

This unexpected result signals the need for new interpretative hypotheses and hopefully inspires the development of new empirical research, both quantitative and qual-

itative, capable of explaining it comprehensively. Such a result cannot plausibly be explained by resorting to the characteristics inherent in that specific participatory repertoire, given that, as evidenced by literature, it is unconventional participation that requires a greater personal investment and therefore greater quantities of resources on which to rely. Nor does apathy or retirement into the private sphere appear to be convincing motivations, given that recoil against electoral participation is not evenly spread over the young population, but is in fact strongly unbalanced on the basis of social centrality.

Consequently, in order to explain these results, it appears plausible that we must consider youngsters' scepticism and bad judgments about electoral and party politics (Bruselius- Jensen, Pitti and Tisdall 2021), also highlighting that this disaffection is strongly marked by a class dimension.

Thus, it is the concept of class that seems to take on a central role, although connoted more in terms of cultural resources – also linked to the ambitions and professional and existential trajectories that young people set for themselves – than in strict connection to family economic conditions. Class has lost relevance as a line of conflict and a dimension of collective identification, even within left-wing parties and movements, which for decades have shifted the centre of gravity of their identity towards other axes of conflict and revendication, such as those linked to gender, race, or sexual orientation (Inglehart 1977; Kitschelt and McGann 1997). At the same time, it has acquired greater importance in relation to the processes of polarization in the distribution of wealth and the growing inequalities within individual states. It may be said that, while class was becoming increasingly irrelevant as a political dimension of conflict and belonging in the past few decades, it is electoral politics that has become increasingly irrelevant in the eyes of young people coming from lower-class positions. This class-marked abstentionism can arguably be read as a declaration, on the part of the most fragile young Europeans, of their evaluating electoral politics as something that cannot really change or ameliorate their lives. Recalling O'Toole *et al.*'s warning that youth disaffection from politics should be read more as their being "left out" rather than "tuned out" – meaning that the problem is not young people's disinterest in politics, but, if anything, politics' disinterest in young people and its inability to deal with issues that are relevant to their everyday lives (O'Toole *et al.* 2003; Henn *et al.* 2005) – what emerges here is a dynamic of exclusion from electoral politics that affects the most fragile among European youngsters. Such exclusion largely tends to cut across national differences concerning both political cultures and youth economic conditions.

Nor does the objection according to which involvement in other forms can play a counterbalancing role sound really convincing, given that 1) the most socially fragile young people participate less even through the unconventional repertoire; and 2), even if unconventional may be considered, for a number of reasons, as the new conventional (Pitti 2018), one cannot neglect the function of educating to citizenship and legitimizing political institutions carried out by traditional forms of involvement, which are also most closely linked to the circuit of representation (Matonti 2005). From this point of view, the risk would be to minimise the consequences of a kind of abstentionism (Capdevielle 2005) that is strongly related, particularly among youth, to social vulner-

ability, with its possible collateral effects of nurturing alienation and delegitimization of representative institutions.

Responding to such a challenge thus calls into question the processes that have led most Western traditional parties to stifle political conflict and progressively restrict the space of variation between viable proposals and party programs (Katz and Mair 1995; 2009), leading to a problematic erosion of popular sovereignty (Mair 2013) and an increasing self-referentiality of traditional party politics. Mainstream parties have converged on the neoliberal agenda and on the dogma of T.I.N.A. (There Is No Alternative, citing Mrs. Thatcher), which have legitimized the exclusion from viable political options of those individual and collective actors that are the most critical of the mantras of neoliberalism, austerity, and the Western development model.

Moreover, this interpretative key also seems to find support in a disaffection with politics and traditional parties which could be deduced from young people's tendency to favour anti-establishment parties – those which openly challenge mainstream parties – in different voting circumstances in the same years as the survey considered herein. This was the case of the Spanish Podemos, the Greek Syriza, the Italian Movimento 5 Stelle, the French Front National, and France Insoumise, all of which were able to attract relevant shares of support among youth (Lello 2020: 24-25). In other cases, young people supported traditional parties provided these were capable of expressing leaderships and programs in strong rupture with the past, such as in the case of Jeremy Corbyn in the British Labour Party and, outside Europe, Bernie Sanders in the US Democrats (Lello 2020: 24-25). While young people have shown on various voting occasions that they favour alternative parties overtly claiming their diversity to the mainstream, these data tell us that many other young people, and among them especially those from subaltern class positions, have even lost their confidence in the effectiveness of voting itself, thus renouncing this right.

Therefore, the course cannot be reversed through more or less "cosmetic" or communicative choices such as adopting youthful looks and youth-sounding linguistic registers or by lowering the age of electoral participation. What is required is a revitalization of political conflict that can reconnect party politics to conflicts effectively existing in the social fabric. This would allow for a link between parties, fragile youth's concerns, and collective identities taking form in groups and social movements within civil society. Secondly, a substantial, rather than cosmetic answer would imply intervening on factors nurturing different and overlapping dimensions of youth socio-economic disadvantage, with the aim of contrasting and reducing inequalities.

References

Allen Nicholas, Birch Sara (2015). "Process Preferences and British Public Opinion: Citizens' Judgements About Government in an Era of Anti-Politics". *Political Studies*, 63 (2), 390–411. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12110

Arnett Jeffrey (2004). *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from Late Teens through the Twenties*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Beck Ulrich, Beck Gersheim Elisabeth (2001). *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*. London: Sage.

Bennett W. Lance (2007). "Civic learning in changing democracies: Challenges for citizenship and civic education". In: Dahlgren Peter (ed.). *Young Citizens and New Media: Learning and Democratic Engagement*. New York: Routledge, 59–77.

Bennett W. Lance and Segerberg, Alexandra (2013). *The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bennett W. Lance, Wells Chris. (2009). "Young Citizens and Civic Learning: Two Paradigms of Citizenship in the Digital Age". *Citizenship Studies*, 13 (2), 105-120.

Biorcio Roberto (2003). *Sociologia politica*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Bontempi Marco, Pocaterra Roberto (Eds.) (2007). *I figli del disincanto. Giovani e partecipazione politica in Europa*. Milano: Mondadori.

Bourdieu Pierre (1979). *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit.

Bourne Paul Andrew (2010). "Unconventional Political Participation in a Middle-Income Developing Country." *Current Research Journal of Social Sciences* 2 (2), 196-2003.

Bruselius-Jensen Maria, Pitti Ilaria, Tisdall E.K.M. (2021). *Young People's Participation: Revisiting Youth and Inequalities in Europe (1st ed.)*. Bristol: Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1h0p56r

Bruselius-Jensen Maria, Nielsen A.M.W. (2021). "The participation project: how projects shape young people's participation". In Bruselius-Jensen Maria, Pitti Ilaria, Tisdall E.K.M. (2021). *Young People's Participation: Revisiting Youth and Inequalities in Europe (1st ed.)*. Bristol: Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1h0p56r.13

Capdevielle, Jacques (2005). *Démocratie: la panne*, Paris: Textuel.

Cavalli Alessandro, De Lillo Antonio (Eds.) (1993). *Giovani anni '90. Terzo rapporto Iard sulla condizione giovanile in Italia*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Chiapello Eve and Boltanski Luc (1999). *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*. Paris: Gallimard.

Cuzzocrea Valentina, Bello Barbara Giovanna, & Kazepov Yuri (Eds.). (2020). *Italian youth in international context: belonging, constraints and opportunities*. Abingdon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Dalton Russel J. (2009). *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation Is Reshaping American Politics*, revised edn. Washington, DC: CQ Press.

Dalton Russel J. and Wattenberg Martin (Eds.) (2000). *Parties without partisans. Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies?* New York: Oxford University Press.

Dalton Russel J. (1996). *Citizen Politics*. New York: Chatham House Publishers.

Diamanti Ilvo (Ed.) (1999). *La generazione invisibile. Inchiesta sui giovani del nostro tempo*. Milano: Il Sole 24 Ore.

Ekman Joachim and Amnå Erik (2012). "Political Participation and Civic Engagement: Towards a New Typology." *Human Affairs*, 22, 283–300.

European Commission (2017). *Employment and Social Developments in Europe 2017*. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu.

European Commission (2009). *Youth in Europe: A Statistical Portrait*. Bruxelles: European Commission. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/3217494/5786625/KS-EX-14-001-EN.PDF

European Commission (2007). *Young Europeans: Survey among Young People Aged between 15–30 in the European Union* (Eurobarometer 202). Bruxelles: European Commission. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/public_ opinion/flash/fl_202_sum_en.pdf

European Commission (2001). *European White Paper on Youth*. Bruxelles: European Commission.

Flanagan Constance (2009). "Young people's civic engagement and political development". In: Furlong A (ed.) *Handbook of Youth and Young Adulthood*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 293-300.

Furlong Andy, Cartmel Fred (2007). *Young People and Social Change*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Fox Stuart (2015). *Apathy, Alienation and Young People: The Political Engagement of British Millennials*. PhD thesis. Nottingham: University of Nottingham. P. 4.

Garcia-Albacete Gema (2014). *Young People's Political Participation in Western Europe: Continuity or Generational Change?*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gaxie Daniel (1978). *Le cens caché: inégalités culturelles et ségrégation politique*. Paris: Edition du Soleil.

Giddens Antony (1990). *The consequences of modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.

Gozzo Simona (2010). Le giovani generazioni e il declino della partecipazione. *Società Mutamento Politica*, *1*(2), 165–182. https://doi.org/10.13128/SMP-9281

Grasso Maria T. (2014). "Age, Period and Cohort Analysis in a Comparative Context: Political Generations and Political Participation Repertoires in Western Europe". *Electoral Studies*, 33, 63-76. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2013.06.003.

Hay Colin (2007). *Why We Hate Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Henn Matt, Weinstein Mark, Forrest Sarah (2005). "Uninterested youth? Young people's attitudes towards party politics in Britain". *Political Studies*, 53 (3), 556-578. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2005.00544.x

Howard Mark Morjé (2002). "The weakness of post-communist civil society". *Journal of Democracy*, 13 (1), 157-69.

Inglehart Ronald, Welzel Christian (2005). *Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Katz Richard S., Mair Peter (2009). "The Cartel Party Thesis: A Restatement". *Perspectives on Politics*, 7 (4), 753-766.

Katz Richard S., Mair Peter (1995). "Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy. The Emergence of the Cartel Party". *Party Politics*, 1 (1), 5-28.

Kestilä-Kekkonen Elina (2009). "Anti-party Sentiment Among Young Adults". *Young* 17 (2), 145-165. https://doi.org/10.1177/110330880901700203

Kitanova Magdelina (2020). "Youth political participation in the EU: evidence from a cross-national analysis". *Journal of Youth Studies*, 23 (7), 819-836. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2019.1636951

LeDuc Lawrence, Niemi Richard, Norris Pippa (2014). *Comparing Democracies 4: Elections and Voting in a Changing World*. London: SAGE.

Lello Elisa (2020). "Youth and politics in Italy in times of populism". In: Valentina Cuzzocrea, Barbara Giovanna Bello, Yuri Kazepov (Eds.) *Italian Youth in International Context. Belonging, Constraints and Opportunities*. London: Routledge, 23-40.

Lello Elisa (2015) *La triste gioventù. Ritratto politico di una generazione*. Rimini: Maggioli.

Mair Peter (2013). *Ruling the void: The hollowing of Western democracy*. London: Verso books.

Mair Peter (2007). "Political opposition and the European Union". *Government and Opposition* 42 (1), 1-17.

Manin Bernard (1995). *Principes du gouvernement répresentatif*. Paris: Flammarion.

Matonti Frédérique (Ed.) (2005). *La Démobilisation Politique*, Paris: La Dispute.

Milbrath Lester W. and Goel Madan Lal (1977). *Political Participation*. Chicago: Rand McNally.

Morlino Leonardo, Raniolo Francesco (eds.) (2017). *The Impact of the Economic Crisis on the South European Democracies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Norris Pippa (2003). *Young People and Political Activism: From the Politics of Loyalties to the Politics of Choice?*. Paper presented to the council of Europe Symposium, 'Young people and democratic institutions: From disillusionment to participation', Strasbourg, november 27-28.

Norris Pippa (2011). *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

O'Toole Therese, Lister Michael, Marsh Dave, Jones Su, and McDonagh Alex (2003). "Tuning out or left out? Participation and non-participation among young people". *Contemporary Politics*, 9 (1), 45-61. DOI:10.1080/1356977032000072477

Olson Mancur (1971). *The logic of collective action*. Harward: Harvard University Press.

Papadopoulos Yannis (2013). *Democracy in Crisis? Politics, Governance and Policy*. London: Palgrave.

Pirni Andrea, Raffini Luca (2022). *Giovani e politica. La reinvenzione del sociale*. Milano: Mondadori.

Pitti Ilaria (2018). *Youth and unconventional political engagement*. Cham: Palgrave McMillan.

Pizzorno Alessandro (1966). "Introduzione allo studio della partecipazione politica". *Quaderni di Sociologia*, (15), 235-287. https://doi.org/10.4000/qds.2487

Pleyers Geoffrey, Capitaine Brieg (2017). *Mouvements sociaux: Quand le sujet devient acteur*. Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme. DOI : 10.4000/books.editionsmsh.9891

Raffini Luca (2013). "Moratoria di classe, eclissi del ceto medio o incongruenza di status? Il posto dei giovani nella società della precarietà". *SocietàMutamentoPolitica*, 4 (7), 207-230. https://doi.org/10.13128/SMP-12975

Ricolfi Luca (2002). "L'eclissi della politica". In: Buzzi Carlo, Cavalli Alessandro e de Lillo Antonio (a cura di). *Giovani del nuovo secolo. Quinto rapporto Iard sulla condizione giovanile in Italia*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Rosenstone Steven J., Hansen John Mark (1993). *Mobilization, Participation and Democracy in America*. New York: Longman Publishing Group.

Sawicki Fréderic (1997). *Les réseaux du parti socialiste. Sociologie d'un milieu partisan*. Paris: Belin.

Schmidt Vivien (2004). "The European Union: Democratic legitimacy in a regional state?". *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 42 (5), 975–997.

Schlozman Kay Lehman, Verba Sidney, Brady Henry E. (1995). *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism and American Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Sloam James (2016). "Diversity and Voice: The Political Participation of Young People in the European Union". *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 18 (3), 521–537. https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148116647176

Spannring Reingard, Ogris Gunther, Gaiser Wolfgang (2008). *Youth and Political Participation in Europe: Results of the Comparative Study of EUYOUPART*. Opladen: Barbara Budrich.

Stoker Gerry (2006). "Explaining Political Disenchantment: Finding Pathways to Democratic Renewal". *The Political Quarterly*, 77 (2), 184–194. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-923X.2006.00761.x

Tisdall E. K.M. (2021). "Meaningful, Effective and sustainable? Challenges for children and young people's participation". In: Maria Bruselius-Jensen, Ilaria Pitti, E. Kay M. Tisdall (eds). *Young People's Participation. Revisiting Youth and Inequalities in Europe.* 217-234.

Touraine Alain (1998). *Libertà, uguaglianza e diversità*. Milano: il Saggiatore

Van Deth Jan, Ramón Montero José., Westholm Anders (2007). *Citizenship and Involvement in European Democracies: A Comparative Analysis*. London: Routledge.

Verba S., Schlozman K., Brady H.E. (1995). *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism and American Politics*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

Vukelic J., Stanojevic D. (2012). "Environmental activism as a new form of political participation of the youth in Serbia". *Sociologija* 54 (2), 387-99.

Whiteley P. (2012) *Political Participation in Britain*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ysmal C. (2005) French Political Parties and Linkage, in Römmele A., Farrell D.M., Ignazi P. (Eds.), *Political Parties and Political Systems. The Concept of Linkage Revisited*. Westport: Praeger.