

Continuity and cleavage in the political experience of young people

In order to define the relationship of European youth with politics today, it is necessary to explain the effects of age, in the sense of one's location in the life cycle; the effects of the period in which they live, linked to the historical and political context that affects all age groups; generational effects, that define a specific attitude and political behaviour of youth and, lastly, the effects of the national cultures of each country.

The aim of the present article is to examine the similarities and differences that exist between the younger generations and their elders, as well as to identify the most characteristic features of their relationship with politics. It is possible to identify certain elements of continuity and certain signs of cleavage in the generational dynamics; with respect to continuity we must point out the decisive weight of the family's political anchoring, a certain permanence in the political disposition of youth as well as of their elders and a relatively stable level of interest in politics, as well as an identical distrust of the political class and a persistent adhesion to the values and mechanisms of representational democracy. In relation to changes, there is a meaningful decrease in party identification, a more problematic attitude towards voting, a greater mobility of political and electoral options and, finally, an inclination towards protesting, especially through the use of demonstrations.

Faced simultaneously with the need to identify with their elders and to innovate, the relationship of young people with politics is built through an identity tension between heritage and experimentation. Heritage prioritizes the logic of identification and transmits the references and signs used up to now, but also the recognition of a political affiliation and, therefore, an intergenerational continuity. Experimentation, on the other hand, introduces the possibility of breaking with one's heritage and models knowledge as political practices from the singularity of each generation and each individual. This interaction gives rise to learning experiences, which make it possible to articulate one's opinions, as well as one's electoral and party options. To this we have to add the role of the political and historical context, and the national cultural specificities in which all political socialization takes place.

In all of Europe and, in general, in the advanced industrial societies, the political participation of young people tends to be questioned and is suspicious of being lacking, insufficient and even flawed in comparison with the behaviour of previous generations. Often young people are referred to, not necessarily as bad citizens, but at least as citizens that are more problematic than their forefathers. Their relationship with politics is a recurrent topic of debate and is often a source of concern, and even gives

rise to alarming and relatively pessimistic diagnoses about the health of Western democracies. The constant increase in abstention, especially in young people, as well as a meaningful decrease in their party identification feeds the idea of a certain de-politization of youth and, in the future, a menace to the political institutions that guarantee a representative democracy. But to what extent is this true? How should we interpret the relationship of today's youth with politics? Do the different generations continue to share the same elements and the references that constitute a common political culture? Or rather, does the political attitude of today's youth obey other models, or other forms of expression different to those inherited from their elders? And how much weight do national cultures have?

1. A family heritage alive at all moments

Not all families have necessarily the same capacity to organize a transmission; political socialization may provide a shortcut, as it is built out of the logic of opposition or as a reaction, or even through references that are not explicitly political. The family, however, supplies the first references (or the first lack of them) and, therefore, plays a decisive role in the forming of later political options. This decisive influence may seem paradoxical, as we see on one hand a real individualization of family life (de Singly, 1996) and, on the other, a relatively profound crisis in political representation (Perrineau, 2003). We need, however, to accept the evidence that politics is still the most resilient factor in the realm of value transmission between generations.

In France, the division between left and right continues to structure ideological alignment. One out of two young persons (49%) recognises that they continue the left or right tradition transmitted by their parents. If we add to that number 22% of people who define themselves as apolitical, reproducing the same absence of choice as their parents, that are neither left nor right, we can conclude that almost three fourths of the young people (71%) can be considered political inheritors (Muxel, 2001).

From a European perspective, these proportions vary in each country; however, affiliation with the left or right wing is not, in general, as marked as in France. Only a third (33%) of the European youth interviewed in eight countries of the Union claimed to belong to the same political area of right or left as their parents, while nearly half of them (47%) define themselves as neither right nor left, like their parents. This means that, in all, close to seven out of ten young people (70%) tend towards an intergenerational political continuity. (1)

In all countries we observe a close relationship between the degree of political involvement of the parents and that of their children. The higher the parents' political involvement, the more involved the young people are; the lower, the less politically involved their children are, as well.

Among the young people who have grown up in a politicized family context, we observe more positive attitudes towards politics: 80% of them declare to be interested in politics (while, in the case of the young people whose parents present a low level of political involvement, this proportion is only 14%) and 29% claim to be close to a political party (7% in the case of low parental involvement in politics). Their opinion with respect to the efficiency

(1)
The survey EUYOUNGPART financed by the European Commission in 2004 about the political participation of young people in ages between 15 and 25 years of age (n=8,000); young people from eight countries were interviewed (France, Germany, United Kingdom, Italy, Finland, Austria, Eslovakia and Estonia). The results of the study are available at the website EUYOUNGPART.

of political action is more favourable (40% compared to 16%) and they are more trusting with respect to political institutions (21% have trust in them, compared to 9% amongst those whose parents show a weak political involvement).

The family environment establishes, therefore, a series of political predispositions whose impact is verified in the behaviours that will be adopted. Thus, 83% of the young people whose parents are politically involved exercise their right to vote (a percentage that only reaches 37% in the case of parents with a lower level of political involvement). This effect is also verifiable in the case of non-conventional political participation: 36% of youth whose parents are politically involved have already taken part in a demonstration, whereas only 7% of those whose parents have scarce political involvement have done so.

Table 1. **Types of political affiliation and political relation (%)**

| | Very interested in politics | Close to a party | Has voted | Participated in a demonstration | Member of an association | Thinks political action is very efficient | Very confident in political institutions |
|--------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------|-----------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Right wing party | 52 | 37 | 75 | 17 | 54 | 30 | 26 |
| Left wing party | 57 | 31 | 74 | 40 | 56 | 38 | 16 |
| Apolitical affiliation (neither left nor right) | 25 | 8 | 50 | 10 | 42 | 19 | 11 |
| Total | 37 | 17 | 59 | 19 | 48 | 25 | 14 |

Source: survey EUYOUNG (2004).

Depending on the parents' ideological orientation and on the different types of political affiliation, we observe differences in the attitudes as well as in the political behaviour of young people. The political profile of those who inherit left or right wing tendencies is not the same as those who do not present an ideological continuity. The first group presents more structured political options and more settled behaviours, while the second seems to be more distant, less interested in politics, less involved. 52% of the young people who declare themselves as right-wing and 57% of those who express left-wing tendencies manifest that they are interested in politics. In the case of those who declare themselves as neither belonging to the right nor the left, like their parents, this percentage drops to 25%. Moreover, a political affiliation with the left or the right guarantees the conditions for a firmer political participation: 75% of those who claim to be on the right and 74% of those who claim to be on the left, like their parents, participate in the elections, while this proportion decreases to 50% in the case of those who declare themselves to be apolitical. Young left-wing inheritors are carriers of a protesting culture that is clearly more established than that of young right-wing inheritors: 40% of them have already participated in a demonstration (while this percentage is 17% in the case of young people with right-wing affiliation and 19% in the total of those interviewed). The former are always more anti-establishment and tend to believe in political activism, while the latter seem to be more conformist and have more confidence in political institutions.

2. The need to experiment

In Europe, in general, the political context has experienced a profound change. Numerous references and models have appeared; young people are confronted with the insufficiencies of the political systems, at the core of which their affiliations and identification are more random, less firm.

The meanings associated with the right or the left have had the opportunity to be re-established throughout the evolution experienced by the political situation; moreover, the challenges or expectations that exist in the interval of one generation, that separates the young from their parents, do not necessarily coincide. But, above all, what can be observed today is a generalized weakening of political, ideological and party identification. In France, as in many other European countries, the division between the right and the left is getting weaker and weaker, even though it still structures many challenges that form part of the social and political debate (such as the orientation of the electoral options). According to the figures in the second wave of the French Political Barometer (September of 2006), 34% of the French (and 39% of young people between the ages of 18 and 30) do not claim an affiliation with the left nor with the right. (2) And this weakening can be observed throughout a large percentage of European countries. Among the young Europeans between the ages of 15 and 25 that were interviewed in the eight countries included in the Euyoupart survey, more than half (55%) claimed to be politically neither on the left nor on the right. (3)

At present, only half of the Europeans of the Union declare themselves close to a political party (50%, and the percentage goes down to 41% in the case of the young between 18 and 24 years of age). (4) For an ever-increasing number of people, the references that allow one to select options (mainly electoral ones) are not related to an affiliation or to the recognition of a common ground, but rather as an opposition or as an expression of a will of political separation. Electoral options tend to arise from this sort of “negative political attitude”, although the reach and consequences of this fact vary in the different generations.

The adult age groups and, particularly, those in which the parents of today's youth belong, learned their first political lessons in a universe where the ideological markers, the separation between the left and the right and the great references of the relation of political forces on an international scale were clearly established. This is not so in the case of young people. In this sense, political experimentation prevails. Contrary to the experience of their elders (who, while leaning more and more towards autonomous and spontaneous forms of protesting, keep the memory of the traditional forms of action and commitment), they take their first political steps and vote in their first elections without the help of references that they can easily use. Their political socialization becomes, in fact, more experimental; they strive to escape from the schemes of political parties and trade unions, concentrating more on specific, concrete and determined actions. On the other hand, a series of values that defined political families as either being left wing or right wing have become a shared heritage. Human rights, solidarity, democracy, market economy, the struggle against unemployment or even security issues, for example, are at present cross references and topics used by most of political forces to mobilize their followers.

So, today's youth experiments the need to undertake a transition between diverse reference universes, different political cultures. They face a great

(2)
Barometro political developed by CEVIPOF, from March 2006 to February 2007. The results of the study are available on the website of CEVIPOF.

(3)
Op.cit

(4)
Survey after the European elections in 2004, Eurobarometre, European Commission, July 2004.

variety of parameters and reading lists for deciphering their environment, which results from an enormously complex political and social world.

3. An increasingly critical relationship with politics

If analyzed on a European scale, the relationship of youth with politics shows, in comparison with that of their parents, the impact of national differences and specificities more than the distance existing between both generations. In front of such a mirror, the attitudes of young people, frequently, merely amplify the features that characterize the relationship of Europeans with their institutions and political organizations, and also with respect to the field of political activity in general.

It is true that their interest in politics continues to be relatively weak, although in many countries the differences are slight. Likewise, party links seem relaxed and, with the exception of Sweden, the number of young people that declare themselves as close to a political party has decreased. Between young people and their parents there is a gap of, at least, an average of ten points. And it is evident that party identification is notably weaker in the younger generations. However, the relative similarity of feeling politically competent is surprising, as it seems that in most cases this feeling is even stronger in young people than in older groups. In many cases, the political mistrust is perfectly comparable, and the observed variations are more due to national contexts than to the existence of an authentic generation gap.

Table 2. **Relation with politics**

| | Germany | Spain | France | United Kingdom | Italy | Netherlands | Poland | Suecia |
|------------------------------------------------------|---------|-------|--------|----------------|-------|-------------|--------|--------|
| Is very or quite interested in politics | | | | | | | | |
| 18-30 years | 51 | 20 | 31 | 46 | 23 | 65 | 30 | 55 |
| Total | 64 | 21 | 40 | 52 | 33 | 66 | 40 | 57 |
| Diference | -13 | -1 | -9 | -6 | -10 | -1 | -10 | -2 |
| Thinks often that politics is too complicated | | | | | | | | |
| 18-30 years | 29 | 38 | 43 | 43 | 37 | 30 | 43 | 34 |
| Total | 26 | 43 | 44 | 41 | 40 | 32 | 44 | 27 |
| Diference | +3 | -5 | -1 | +2 | -3 | -2 | -1 | +7 |
| Does not trust the politicians: | | | | | | | | |
| 18-30 years | 33 | 46 | 27 | 22 | 29 | 10 | 49 | 13 |
| Total | 32 | 38 | 32 | 28 | 31 | 12 | 48 | 15 |
| Diference | +1 | +8 | -5 | -6 | -2 | -2 | +1 | -2 |
| Feels close to a political party | | | | | | | | |
| 18-30 years | 33 | 35 | 37 | 33 | 37 | 49 | 16 | 70 |
| Total | 48 | 50 | 50 | 48 | 45 | 58 | 29 | 69 |
| Diference | -15 | -15 | -13 | -15 | -8 | -9 | -13 | +1 |

Source: ESS 2003.

Depending on the country, however, certain differences show up more flagrant that remind us of the weight of historical or national contexts on the relationship that individuals may establish with politics. A clear difference

can be observed between the countries in the north and those in the south of Europe. This division reflects specificities due to the religious cultures of these European regions, Protestantism in the north and Catholicism in the south, whose powerful influence affects their political cultures. In the northern countries of Europe, the level of political involvement is higher and the political participation of citizens is more intense. In the southern countries, on the other hand, politics seems more remote from the population, who grant it less legitimacy. Thus, the level of interest in politics is clearly higher in the Netherlands, Sweden and Germany, while the lowest values are in Spain and Italy. France occupies an intermediate position and does not stand out for its particularly high participation. Four Frenchmen out of each ten (40%) claim to be interested in politics, while the percentage declines to three out of every ten (31%) in the case of the young. The great majority expresses, therefore, a relative lack of interest. Equally, the feeling of political competence is again more positive in the three previously quoted countries (Germany, Netherlands and Sweden), where citizen and political education have been significantly developed, not only precociously in the school environment but also through mechanisms oriented towards the entire population.

The countries where the level of trust in politicians seems to be highest are the Netherlands and Sweden. In Poland, a country that during many years has suffered from important political crisis, but also in Spain, mistrust reaches maximum levels, among the young as well as among the population in general. Again, French politicians are subjected to an intermediate level of mistrust within the overall European panorama. Finally, party identification seems clearly more solid in the countries that also register a high level of political involvement, as well as competence and political trust. In the Netherlands and, mainly, in Sweden, a wide majority of the citizens declare themselves to be close to a political party (58% and 69%, respectively). In Sweden, even, there is no regression whatsoever of the party links in the younger generations. We are dealing, no doubt, with a rare case in Europe: seven out of ten young Swedes declare themselves close to a political party. In the case of the young French, this proportion is barely over a third of the total (37%).

4. The young, in front of political decisions

In the particular period of the years of youth, the entrance into politics cannot be described other than as a phase of identity construction and of transition. This specific phase of political socialization is often subjected to the conditions of acquiring the status and social roles of adults. From Latin *morituri*, which means to agree on a time limit, the idea of a moratorium responds very accurately to the characteristics of this process. Thus, it takes longer to reach a permanent professional status, and much greater difficulties must be dealt with; today's youth begin marital life and paternity/maternity at an age closer to the thirties than the twenties and they live at their parents' home longer. The delay and disconnection at the threshold of adult life have consequences on political attitudes and behaviours, and there is an observable delay in the initial stages of young people's electoral participation. The specificity of this *electoral moratorium* during early adulthood can be explained by the fact that the individual is going through a tremendous density of experiences, arbitrations and negotiations (Muxel, 2001). The gap between acquiring an objective right at the age of 18 and actually exercising

that right results from the adjustment work and the identity negotiation between the influence of one's heritage and early education (especially in the family environment) and the experimentation that characterises one's first steps in adulthood as well as in politics.

Depending on the individual's biographical circumstances and timetable of professional insertion, this moratorium may end up being more or less accentuated, and the "off-side" situation of electoral decisions does not have the same meaning. Unemployed youth present the greatest delay, and their abstaining is tightly related to the sociological factors corresponding to their situation. On the other hand, the level of political integration of young adult students is still higher, although there is a growing intermittence in their voting habits, which varies depending on their objective availability, but also on their political ideas.

The effects of any specific political situation accentuate and modulate to a greater or lesser degree, according to election results, the length of this delay. At present, the strictly political motives for abstention are more and more relevant, reflecting a difficulty in recognising and accepting what the political parties are offering. Political abstention, be it because of a lack of identification, opposition to the electoral options or as an expression of discontent, has meaningfully increased in the last years, especially among young voters. Frequently, young voters have proven to be doubtful until the very last moment and are more volatile in their opinions.

Table 3. **Voting and abstention in the European elections of 2004 (%)**

| | Voted | | Did not vote | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| | Voted always this way | Decided the vote a few days prior or on the same voting day | Never votes | Decided the vote a few days prior or on the same voting day |
| 18-24 years | 35 | 31 | 30 | 39 |
| 25-39 years | 48 | 23 | 21 | 31 |
| 40-54 years | 51 | 17 | 16 | 37 |
| 55 years and above | 60 | 15 | 18 | 32 |
| Total | 52 | 19 | 21 | 38 |

Sources: survey after the European elections of 2004, Flash Eurobarometre 162, produced by EOS Gallup Europe, June 2004

The electoral decision, whether it results in voting or abstention is subjected, therefore, to contingencies that are more and more difficult to foresee and control. In generational dynamics, there appears to be a new model of electoral behaviour that is characterized by a great volatility. The analysis throughout Europe of participation in European elections shows significant differences between young people and their elders. Whereas 60% of the voters 55 years of age or older recognise a loyalty to their previous votes, this percentage drops to 35% among young people between 18 and 24 years of age and to 48% among voters between 25 and 34 years of age. Young

voters appear perplexed: while 15% of voters aged 55 and older recognise they had decided their vote a few days before the elections or on the election day itself, this number is more than doubled (31%) in the case of young people between 18 to 24 years of age (Muxel, 2005). In the dynamics of generation, the profile of electoral decisions and of democratic expression in general is modelled by other uses and customs.

The study of voting patterns and electoral participation among young people in Europe shows important intergenerational differences.

The young differentiate themselves by holding leftist positions that are clearly stronger than their elders', and by electoral options that often favour the more moderate left. Therefore, an important part of European youth is more inclined towards leftist political options. Even though a wide majority of the younger generations assign great importance to voting in their description of a good citizen, the percentage is still smaller than in the rest of the population. Finally, the participation of youth in the last legislative elections was, again, inferior to the rest of the voters. In certain cases, the differences are particularly important like, for example, in Spain and Greta Britain, countries where only 45% of young people voted (as compared to 72% and 67% of the general voters, respectively). In France, the difference in participation between youth and their elders is also important (-17 points), even though a great majority of the young people between 18 and 30 years voted (58%).

Table 4. **Political options relations to vote**

| | Germany | Spain | France | United Kingdom | Italy | Netherlands | Poland | Suecia |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|---------|-------|--------|----------------|-------|-------------|--------|--------|
| Political positioning to the left: | | | | | | | | |
| 18-30 years | 69 | 79 | 68 | 46 | 56 | 47 | 49 | 60 |
| Total | 62 | 67 | 58 | 44 | 54 | 42 | 49 | 53 |
| Diference | +7 | +12 | +10 | +2 | +2 | +5 | - | +7 |
| It is important to vote to be a good citizen: | | | | | | | | |
| 18-30 years | 64 | 41 | 77 | 54 | 61 | 72 | 65 | 83 |
| Total | 73 | 55 | 83 | 67 | 72 | 75 | 73 | 85 |
| Diference | -9 | -14 | -6 | -13 | -11 | -3 | -8 | -2 |
| Voted in the last national elections: | | | | | | | | |
| 18-30 years | 65 | 45 | 58 | 45 | 71 | 74 | 48 | 77 |
| Total | 78 | 72 | 75 | 67 | 85 | 81 | 62 | 82 |
| Diference | -13 | -27 | -17 | -22 | -14 | -7 | -14 | -5 |
| Voted moderated left in the last national elections: | | | | | | | | |
| 18-30 years | 61 | 49 | 69 | 77 | 30 | 42 | 61 | 57 |
| Total | 54 | 50 | 58 | 70 | 33 | 39 | 69 | 57 |
| Diference | +7 | -1 | +11 | +7 | -3 | +3 | -8 | - |

Sources: ESS 2003.

To these generational differences we have to add the specific aspects of each country, which interfere with the relationship that young people establish with the elections.

France and Spain, and to a lesser degree, Germany and Sweden, are the countries in which a more marked orientation towards the left shows up

among the younger generations. In Spain we can observe a strong anchoring in that sense, which defines the ideas of almost eight out of every ten young people (79%).

Sweden is the country where young people most often associate voting with the exercise of citizenship: 83% of young Swedes consider that it is important to vote in order to be a good citizen. France ranks in second place, as 77% of young Frenchmen share the same opinion. Voting, therefore, continues to be at the heart of the French concept of citizenship.

On the other hand, the importance given to voting appears notably diminished in Spain: only 55% of Spaniards (and, of these, 41% of the youngest) consider that a good citizen should vote. Finally, Poland and Great Britain differentiate themselves by a weak participation level in legislative elections whereas the Netherlands, Sweden, Germany and Italy register high participation rates even among young voters. The electoral participation of the French youth is lower, but not as low as the levels seen in British and Spanish youth.

5. The use of the protest

In spite of the fact that voting has always been widely considered a useful and efficient tool among the younger generations, it is not the only means of democratic expression. Research on other forms of participation have shown a broadening in civic and citizen uses, as well as a growing legitimacy of protest mechanisms.

Non-conventional political participation is increasing in all European countries. While only 17% of Europeans had the opportunity to participate in at least two protest actions in 1981, in 1999 this proportion raised to 28% (Bréchon, 2005). This phenomenon is, above all, generational: the oldest generations are the least likely to protest, the baby boomers are more apt to, and those who are reaching adulthood now confirm this tendency. In France, one out of every two young people has participated in a demonstration in the street. Between the two rounds of presidential elections in 2002, one fourth of French youth went out into the streets to protest the presence of Jean-Marie Le Pen in the second round of voting (25% compared to 9% of the general population) (Muxel, 2002).

With the individualization of practices and norms, political behaviours today are made up from a repertory of wider and more diversified actions, at the centre of which participation in protest actions occupies a more and more important space and acquires, at the same time a growing legitimacy. This redefinition of political participation is particularly visible in the case of the younger generations. In France, participation in demonstrations is more common among younger people: 68% of youth between the ages of 18 and 24 (compared to 48% of the people 65 years old and above) declare that for democracy it is extremely or very important for people to demonstrate. Slightly more than a third of the people over 50 years of age (34%) grant the same importance to these two forms of democratic expression (Grunberg, Muxel, 2002).

Through protest, young adults exercise an authentic political activism (Becquest, Linares, 2005). The variety of issues that motivate collective mobilizations show that, far from being indifferent or centring around their own concerns, young people get involved in numerous problems that concern

the functioning and organization of society. The struggle against racism, the support of immigrants and illegal aliens, demonstrations against the National Front... there is no lack of occasions to go out into the streets, and young people often take the initiative for actions in their companies. For the last twenty years, student movements have opposed the majority of the attempts to reform the educational system and the dispositions linked to employment that have emanated from left-wing as well as right-wing governments, achieving always the withdrawal of the governmental proposals.

Far from opposing one another, conventional participation (voting) and non-conventional participation (demonstrations) are closely related and, often, reinforce each other.

The development of non-conventional participation in European societies, in general of a protesting nature, should not be considered a political means of participation that is contrary to electoral participation. A sort of opposition between representative democracy and participatory democracy might be feared, particularly when the latter is full of protesting connotations. This is not the case: citizens value the protesting participation as well as the conventional one, although there are significant differences between the various European countries.

Table 5. Implications and forms of participation in politics

| | Germany | Spain | France | United Kingdom | Italy | Netherlands | Poland | Suecia |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|-------|--------|----------------|-------|-------------|--------|--------|
| Has participated in a demonstration in the last 12 months: | | | | | | | | |
| 18-30 years | 18 | 25 | 25 | 6 | 18 | 3 | 2 | 8 |
| Total | 11 | 17 | 18 | 4 | 11 | 3 | 1 | 6 |
| Diference | +7 | +8 | +7 | +2 | +7 | - | +1 | +2 |
| Could participate in a political group: | | | | | | | | |
| 18-30 years | 28 | 12 | 13 | 30 | 14 | 21 | 21 | 36 |
| Total | 28 | 10 | 15 | 27 | 16 | 20 | 19 | 34 |
| Diference | - | +2 | -2 | +3 | -2 | +1 | +2 | +2 |
| Is or has been a member of an association: | | | | | | | | |
| 18-30 years | 16 | 19 | 16 | 6 | 9 | 18 | 6 | 22 |
| Total | 18 | 18 | 18 | 9 | 8 | 23 | 6 | 25 |
| Diference | -2 | -3 | -2 | -3 | -2 | -5 | - | -3 |
| Has signed a petition in the last 12 months: | | | | | | | | |
| 18-30 years | 32 | 33 | 40 | 43 | 15 | 22 | 8 | 45 |
| Total | 31 | 24 | 35 | 40 | 17 | 23 | 7 | 41 |
| Diference | +1 | +9 | +5 | +3 | -2 | -1 | -1 | +4 |
| Has boycotted certain products in the last 12 months: | | | | | | | | |
| 18-30 years | 26 | 10 | 30 | 19 | 5 | 10 | 5 | 39 |
| Total | 26 | 8 | 27 | 26 | 8 | 10 | 4 | 33 |
| Diference | - | +2 | +3 | -7 | -3 | - | +1 | +6 |

Sources: ESS 2003.

The younger generations' impulse towards protest is not the same in all European countries. In southern European countries, France, Italy and Spain, as well as in Germany, we observe the most significant differences between

the younger age groups and the rest of the population (+7 and +8 points). But France and Spain are the countries where the use of demonstrations enjoys the highest popularity. A quarter of the young Spaniards and an identical proportion of the French declare having participated in a demonstration in the street during the last 12 months. In other places, such as Poland or the Netherlands, the protest culture is scarcest (if not to say inexistent) and the young do not adopt specific behaviours.

Petition signing and the boycotting of specific products involve mainly the younger population. The young people who sign the largest amount of petitions are the Swedish (45%); in Great Britain and France, a considerable number of young people practice this type of political action also (43% and 40%, respectively). On the other hand, only 8% of Polish youth are in the same case. Lastly, boycotts are a political practice that has a wide following in France in comparison with neighbouring countries: 30% of the young French claim to have boycotted certain products throughout the last year. But it is the young Swedes who most use this form of protest (39%), while the Italians and the Polish almost never use this form of political expression (5% in both cases).

Other forms of participation or political involvement do not register significant differences between the young and their elders. Involvement in political organizations or associations affects only a minority of young people, but involvement is not higher in the older age groups either. The membership of political parties, as well as of trade unions, has suffered an important erosion throughout the last two decades. In many countries the proportion of the population that belongs to a political party or to a trade union is less than 5% or 6%. Whereas twenty years ago, a quarter (around 25%) of the active working population of France was involved in trade unions, at present the percentage has decreased to 8% of said population. And membership numbers are even lower among young employees. The number of political party members has always been relatively low (in France, around 4-5%), and the proportion of young people in both fields is very low (between 1% and 2%). Beyond the membership numbers (often very low) of this type of organizations, we observe a progressive disappearance of the figure of the emblematic member, especially in leftist organizations (Ion, Franguiadakis, Viot, 2005); young people have a relatively negative image of these organizations, which does not drive to become affiliated. In Sweden, Great Britain and Germany we see a greater disposition to get involved in political groups, whereas in France this disposition remains weak: only about 13% of young people declare that they could participate in a group of this type.

On the other hand, associations that have a character of social or political involvement and organize the requests of those "without" (without a home, without papers, without a job), or associations that focalize the attention of public powers on human rights and humanitarian issues are more attractive and enjoy higher levels of confidence. Associations can respond better than parties to the need to carry out concrete actions, as well as to the request for efficiency and results and, therefore, to the expectations that today's younger generations may have in matters of commitment. However, very few actually get actively involved, especially in a lasting way. Belonging to an association is, in general terms, a little extended practice. In Great Britain, Italy and Spain very few individuals are involved in associations. In France, the level of involvement appears similar to that registered in Germany and Spain.

Therefore, political mediation is in crisis, which reinforces the demand for direct democracy and expressions of citizen protest; this phenomenon is observed in more manifest way among the young generations.

Having reached the end of our look at the horizon of young people's relationship with politics in France and in Europe, and of the transformations in their form of political participation, we may identify a series of elements of continuity and certain signs of cleavage in the generational dynamics. With respect to continuity, we would have to point out the decisive weight of the family's political anchoring, a certain permanence in the political disposition of the young as well as of their elders, and a level of relatively stable political situation, plus an identical distrust towards the political class and a persistence in adhering to the values and mechanisms of representative democracy. With respect to change, we can point out a meaningful decrease in party identification, a more problematic relationship with voting, a greater mobility of political and electoral opinions and, finally, a propensity towards protest, above all through the use of demonstrations.

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