

## THE TOPIC

The participation of young people in politics, which is the subject that this issue of the Magazine is devoted to, is one of those topics that, at a first glance, seems to have been fully dealt with in the past, so much so that nothing new can be added, apart from mentioning once again, the pessimistic predictions that can be gleaned from public opinion. However, if one goes more deeply into its characteristics and the way it has evolved, paying particular attention to the different contexts in which this participation takes place, one finds it surprising just how complex the matter is, how difficult it is to reach final conclusions one way or another and, above all, how little we know about why and how young people participate in politics in this globalised society.

At first glance, everything has already been said about young people's political participation, the theme of this new issue of the *Revista de Estudios de Juventud*, and it is only possible to again confirm pessimistic predictions on the topic among public opinion. However, as we carry out a detailed analysis of the characteristics and the development of this topic, paying attention to the different contexts where it takes place, the complexity it hides, the difficulties to establish conclusions in one sense or the other, and above all, how little we know about why and how young people participate in politics in this globalized society is surprising.

Most of the times, common negative judgments by adults regarding political participation of today's youth, comparing the hypothetic previous situation where patterns of participation seemed to be the rule and not the exception, are not based on systematic evidences. On the contrary, they rather constitute a symptom of confusion and disorientation of adults that face processes of change that not only affect the new generations that access public sphere, but also –and very specially– adults themselves. These processes of change that are deeply modifying the relation of citizens to politics are very strong and affect young people due to their life situation, as they are trying to define their personal and social identity. The uncertainty that is a natural part of youth transitions, the resistance against long-term commitments or the trend towards presentism that characterizes young people's engagement in social issues, sometimes make it difficult to see what really is changing: the relative position of politics in social life, and at the same time, the relevance given by citizens to the activities developed in this field. Therefore, the study of predominant patterns of political participation of young people can provide us with interesting elements in order to improve our understanding of the socio-political changes that are taking place, answer some of the questions related to this issue and analyze the contradictions that arise in societies that assume democracy as an inevitable fact of their life-style.

The objective of social scientists has to be to find research methods that are appropriate to describe the complexity of the topic, that allow precise assessment of possible changes in attitudes and behaviours of young people in the field of politics and provide key explanations to understand their nature and meanings.

In order to carry out this task the first difficulty we will have to face is the analytical perspective usually used in researches about political participation, with assumptions that do not adapt to the characteristics of today's liquid societies, using Bauman's terminology. Traditional approaches used by political sciences based on the quantification of the number of activities carried out by citizens and the identification of typologies depending on the

type and quantity of actions are obsolete in the context of constant change, uncertainty and the disappearance of the reference models that characterize our societies. In this situation, there is not consensus about what activities are to be considered political. Traditional limits that identified and separated different fields of the social life have dissolved or, at least, have deeply changed.

Besides, clear and predictable patterns of political behaviours of the citizens have disappeared. Therefore, discontinuous patterns are every time more frequent, and citizens change between stages of sporadic, almost volcanic eruptions of public activity and stages of apparent apathy and lack of interest. Researches about political participation need to adapt to the new situation, paying attention not only to who participates and how they do it (participation as accumulation of individual activities), but above all to key issues like the meaning of political participation for citizens, their motivations and the context of meaning and experience of the different forms of participation (participation as a collective phenomenon). Only focusing on these aspects, and how they relate to each other, we will be able to understand the position of political participation in today's societies and its importance for the citizens.

The second difficulty is related to the specific characteristics of young people's political participation: patterns of participation are not always coincident with predominant forms of participation among adults, due to the different meanings of participation and mobilization among young people, who are in a constant and uninterrupted process of definition of their own identities. The importance of the social context, the expressive dimension of youth actions and the search for new forms of communication are some of the components that make participation of young people in the public sphere a very complex issue. But of all these aspects, the main source of complexity is caused by the increasing loss of prestige of explicitly political meanings among young people, that is, those meanings that identify politics with institutional processes; at the same time, there is a weaker separation between the social and political sphere, and between the public and the private sphere. In this context, a high number of young people's practices, especially those with which they identify, are in risk of being excluded of the field of concerns of researches or at least of not being understood in all their meaning. This is even more serious if we take into account that these practices constitute the main instruments used by young people to influence on the social issues, overcoming the narrow perspective of individual private interests and taking part in the process of transition to adulthood.

With all this in mind we have developed the content of this monographic issue, aiming to provide a varied view of the researches carried out about this issue in different European countries. As it happens with other issues, European comparisons, understood as researches that compare several national cases, as well as separately studying different national contexts, allow us to assess the singularities of the patterns of participation of, for example, young Spanish people, which is the result of our national political culture and historical traditions, and a specific manifestation of a phenomenon with similar characteristics in the wider context of the democratic Europe.

Without a doubt, there are more similarities than differences, as we face the same problems in a shared context of globalization. Therefore, different European researches carry out trans-national comparative projects in the field of young people's participation, like *EUYOUPART –political participation of young people in Europe– development of indicators for comparative research in the European Union*. This research is funded by the 5<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme of the European Commission and it includes eight countries (Austria, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Slovakia and the United Kingdom). This research faced a double objective: a) a methodological objective aiming to define quantitative objectives on a European level to use as a reference for future comparative researches about young people's political participation; b) an analytical objective, aiming to collect relevant data that allow analyzing and understanding behaviours of participation of young people, as they are a fundamental element to take a glimpse at the future of democracy in Europe. Most authors participating in this monographic issue use, more or less directly, approaches or results of EUYOUPART for their respective works. In some cases they also use other international researches like the European Values Survey, the European Social Survey or the European Electoral Study.

Apart from the comparative approaches, we also tried to answer to the problems of studying political participation today, in the context of societies that are in the middle of a growing process of deinstitutionalization, where politics has lost its previous central position and many young people do no longer become adults by coping with a series of pre-established stages, like becoming an adult who accepts the obligations of political participation. All authors have tried to answer the question about what is political participation and about how to analyze political participation of young people. The reading of the articles presented in this issue will show us similarities regarding the diagnosis of the situation and the proposals to deal with the situation. Although it is the readers who have to reach their own conclusions, we can highlight the need of overcoming institutional definitions of political participation, the relation between analyses of participation and the processes of change that are shaping the citizen-politics relation in our societies and the importance of continue studying the meanings of participation in social life and politics for young people, but not as isolated events, but as a component more of life-experience.

The articles in this monographic issue can be divided into four main blocks: the articles by Benedicto and Muxel analyze the great changes in the relation between young people and politics in general terms. As an introduction to the thematic field of this issue Benedicto uses different empirical evidences to prove that usual negative opinions about the political life of young people are not always right, and that reality is much more complex. An unstable and hybrid character with references to different political worlds characterizes political identities of young people in second modernity. On the other side, Anne Muxel examines the elements of continuity and the signs of break in the relation of new European generations to politics in comparison to older generations. The necessity of experiencing with new forms of relation to politics by young people contrasts with the weight of family and political cleavages.

The second block focuses on the analysis of political participation of young Europeans, specifically as to why they decide to participate or not, and how

they do it. Reingard Spannring, a member of the research team of EUYOUNG, uses qualitative and quantitative results of the comparative research to explain low levels of political participation among young Europeans through the changes of the structural conditions of the political context. According to his analysis, apparent apathy of young people reflects the frustration with regard to how the political system works, where young people do not find the answers to their needs in a context with less risks and more security. In his article, Antonio Jaime compares differences in the patterns of participation of young people for the last three decades in Europe and the evolution of the trajectories of each of these generations using data of three waves of the EVS. He reaches the conclusion that the life-cycle effect has more impact on participation than the generational effect. He also highlights the changes that seem to be taking place in non-conventional participation, which is no longer limited exclusively to young people, as it was the case in the 1970's, but also older generation make use of this form of participation.

The third block includes the analysis of national cases, specifically the United Kingdom, Italy and Spain. Martha Wörsching presents the British debate about young people's political participation, highlighting the growing concerns regarding youth and, specifically, regarding their low levels of interest in formal politics and the low voter participation. Wörsching focuses on the unfavourable situation of young British people in the social and political system, their experiences of inequality and social exclusion, as well as the lack of capacity in the field of public decision-making. Regarding Italy, Marco Bontempi tries to explain the permanence of significant levels of participation among young Italians, as well as the transformation of meanings and predominant forms of participation. Young people's participation can be explained through the loss of centrality of the political system in social life and the changes in the meanings of political categories. Lastly, Gema Garcia Albacete studies the engagement of young Spanish people in comparison to adults and throughout time, using empirical evidences provided by studies carried out by the Spanish Centre for Sociological Researches. The repeated thesis of the political apathy of young Spanish people is not confirmed or, at least, we can say young people are as apathetic as the adults. On the other side, new generations socialized during democracy do not participate more than previous generations, which would prove, as stated by the author, that democracy does not promote participation and engagement by itself, institutions should find instruments to promote a more active citizenship.

The fourth block focuses on the relation between young people and the European Union. Researchers of the German Youth Institute analyze the attitudes of young Germans towards Europe, showing the generalized importance of the European experiment and the growing repercussions of Europe on young people's life. But the most interesting result of this analysis is the existing relation between the personal situation of young people and the development of a European conscience: situations of disadvantage negatively affect the image of Europe among young people. Araceli Serrano's article focuses on a specific form of political participation: voter participation in European Parliament elections, a process where young Europeans explicitly express their belonging to a common political community. The feeling of belonging and the pride of being a European

citizen are the best variables to explain young people's participation in the 2004 elections.

The last article, by Andreu López Blasco, analyzes a specific segment of the youth population in European societies: the group of young immigrants. Using the results of a German research that compares political orientations of young Germans and young immigrants, the author highlights the similarities regarding opinions about democracy, trust in institutions and even forms of participation of young adults, independently of their origin. However, differences are also very high, mainly due to the deficits in terms of education and labour situation of young people with immigrant origin.

The monographic issue ends with a methodological note that explains the characteristics of the German Youth Survey and the interesting possibilities of the use of replication strategies to analyze the resources, opinions and behaviours of young people in the context of the social changes of the last decades.

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