Young adults’ societal engagement in Europe: The role of socio-economic background and the larger societal context

Panel: Alternative forms of social participation

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Social engagement as youth agency

- Social and political engagement refers to “activities by ordinary citizens intended to influence circumstances in society that are of relevance to others” (Ekman and Amnå, 2012)
- According to Adler & Goggin (2005) they stretch from:
  - private
    - (individual)
    - action
  - to public
    - (collective)
    - action
- Can be said to include also standby engagement (Amna & Ekman 2014)
Standby engagement

- Amna & Eckman 2014: “People stay alert by maintaining their political knowledge and nurturing their political interest in order to get involved when needed.”
- To bring up political issues with family members, peers, schoolmates, and Internet friends is a way for young people to be politically active in private spheres, thereby also preparing themselves (and others) for future public actions.

➔ Building up upon the **Cognitive mobilization model**: Individuals with higher levels of political interest /information will be more likely to become dissatisfied + inclined to protest (Norris 1999, Dalton 2008)
Political inequality among and within young adults

- Youth differs! Very different trajectories are followed by youth based on their opportunities structure (social and economic capital \(\Rightarrow\) Raffo & Reeves, 2000) and their imaged future (Evans, 2002)
- Youth leading an accelerated adulthood do not have the same possibilities as those with an emerging adulthood to engage as they face different challenges \(\Rightarrow\) bounded agency
  - Different forms of engagement lead to different forms of representation (Busse et al., 2015)
  - Social disparities among youth and between youth and older population seem to translate into political inequality (Schneider & Makszin, 2014).
The influence of the political setting

- Institutional setting (e.g. McAdam, 1996, Meyer 2004, de Moor 2016) ➔ political opportunity structures
- Normative setting (Schwanitz 2017)
  - Life chances (trajectories of young people’s lives)
  - Agency (relationship between individual-level variables and efficacy beliefs)
Research questions

How does bounded agency translate into restricted youth political and social participation?

- Q1: How high is the degree of education-based participatory inequality among youth in Europe?
- Q2: Which role does the socio-economic status play for social engagement and activism among youth? Which other individual characteristics matter?
- Q3: Which settings enable youth to participate?
Methods

- **Data**: European Value Survey 2008 Cross-sectional data
- **Sample**: Young people from 18-29 years of age
- **Latent Class Analysis** used to differentiate typical behavioural profiles – without prior theoretical conceptualisation/fixation
- **Multinominal multilevel analysis** of 32 European countries

- Three different outcomes are analysed in-depth:
  - **Standby engagement**: discussion of politics with friends, following politics in the news, being interested in politics ➔ divided into low/high engagement
  - **Activism**: joining unofficial strikes, occupy buildings or factories; attending lawful demonstrations; signing petitions ➔ divides between low activism/ legal activism/ legal and illegal activities
  - **ACTIVE**: being either standby engaged or engaged in activism
How do activism and standby engagement link?

Standby engagement coined by Amna & Ekman (2014).

Of those standby engaged, 81% are engaged in activism.

Of those engaged in activism, however, those standby engaged only form 30%.

Standby engagement therefore seems to form one road towards activism but not the sole one.

➔ It is more important in societies where no general climate of social engagement prevails.
The prevalence of high activism profiles and the impact of standby engagement

- % of pop with a high activism profile
- %diff due to standby engagement
Q1: How high is the degree of education-based participatory inequality among youth in Europe?
ACTIVE Youth (through standby engagement or activism)

No clear pattern

Clear educational pattern

Rather high educational inequality, however not in all European countries.
Q2: Which role does the socio-economic status play for social engagement and activism among youth? Which other individual characteristics matter?
Engagement profiles: bottom-up explanations

Micro-level indicators

Percentage change in "Active" category

No significance of:
- Efficacy
- Unemployment
- Experience of unemployment

Different to stronger activity forms also no significance of:
- Income
- Satisfaction with democracy
- Trust in government
- Trust in political parties
Q3: Which settings enable youth to participate?
Engagement profiles: top-down explanations

- Macro-level indicators
  - Freedom of the press (*)
  - Freedom of the press squared(**)
  - GDP (**)
  - Functioning of government (/)

Youth-specific:
  - Youth transition regime(*) ➔ index of youth employment opportunities, governmental youth support, educational quality
  - Integration of disadvantaged youth(+) ➔ educational inequality
Common contexts for social engagement

- **Micro:**
  - Education is a key predictor of broad social engagement
  - **Discussion about social topics at an early age** are however able to decrease low engagement even when resources are low
  - More than trust in political institutions, it is **trust in other people** that is able to increase political and social engagement

- **Macro:**
  - **A lack of sufficient resources** for activism can be one source of lower social involvement. Low engagement is mostly present in countries that have low material resources and/or give fewer resources to young people.
Which policy recommendations can be drawn?

- The influence of political discussions gives importance to the role of the school to strengthen political debate in the classroom and create a culture of participation.
- The importance of social trust would speak for promoting community action that bridge the gap between younger and older generations.
- The solution is not placing an even higher focus on education, but providing alternative systems next to the educational system that support a culture of participation (putting even more pressure, won’t restore trust in society).
... if we don’t hear youth, we forgo social change
References