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Think young people aren't interested in politics? You'll be surprised

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The MYPLACE study found that 70 % of young people voted in their last national election. Image Credit: Shutterstock/MJTH

Young people across Europe are not politically disengaged as is commonly assumed, a research study has found.

In fact, most of them vote and fully support democracy, even if they think things could be improved and politics should become more about the common good and less about corporate and elite interest.

That's the take-home message from the EU-funded study MYPLACE, whose findings across 14 European countries including Croatia, Denmark, Germany, Russia and the UK revealed that 42 % of young people, defined as 16 to 25 years old, are interested in politics, and 70 % of those who are eligible voted in their last national election.

European youth see voting as the most effective form of political action. Only 8 % consider it pointless. They believe that politics ought to be the pursuit of the public or collective good, but they do think that it has strayed from this ideal.

However, close to 70 % of young people are cynical about politics and think politicians are corrupt and that the rich have too much influence in politics, the study found.

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'Beneath the lack of trust lies an almost universally negative evaluation of politicians and political parties,' said Professor Hilary Pilkington from the University of Manchester, UK, who coordinated the project.

'The loss of trust in politics and politicians is strongly linked to the perception of politics as having strayed from the pursuit of the public or collective good into a realm of self-promotion or pursuit of material self-interest.'

This means that young people do not reject politics *per se*, just this distorted view of it, she said. The vast majority still supports multi-party democracy with free opposition, they just think it could work better.

Despite this, there is a huge diversity across Europe in young people's attitudes to democracy and politics. For example, young people in Denmark and Germany were most strongly pro-democracy while young people in post-socialist countries of Europe – especially Russia, Latvia and Slovakia – were most critical or least supportive of key institutions of liberal democracy. Cynicism towards politics and politicians was highest in the Mediterranean countries, such as Greece, Spain and Portugal.

'Denmark and Germany come out high consistently across a range of measures so, for example, it could be said fairly confidently that this pro-democracy stance is correlated with higher levels of trust in political institutions,' said Prof. Pilkington. 'In relation to post-socialist states, it could be said that general approval for democratic systems is accompanied by strong dissatisfaction with how democracy works at the moment in post-socialist European societies.'

Direct democracy

Despite the cynicism, young people continue to dream of a better collective future. They would like to see more direct forms of democracy, a better economy so people can earn a living, and improved and more honest communication between politicians and people.

'It was striking that many respondents expressed more general aspirations to live in a more considerate, tolerant and solidaristic society,' said Prof. Pilkington. 'Despite the very real challenges politicians and political parties face in gaining public support and trust across Europe, our data show that in relation to youth at least, the door is half-open, not half-closed.'

Perhaps a much bigger threat to democracy comes from ever-growing digital surveillance, which is increasingly permeating all spheres of individual and social life, according to another EU-funded research project IRISS. The project aims to understand the impact of surveillance on people's lives in order to find out if it is having an effect on democracy.

'The technological infrastructure of surveillance societies can be used to manipulate and control citizens, shaping their mindset,' said Dr Reinhard Kreissl from the Vienna Centre for Societal Security, Austria, who coordinated the IRISS project. 'This can have detrimental effects on the democratic process, since citizens can easily be manipulated, if not blackmailed, based on their internet activity for example.'

'We are sleepwalking into a society of digital supervision, social sorting and soft control,' said Dr Kreissl. He added that this turns citizens into machine-readable, leaking data-containers that can be remote controlled. For example, he said, internet providers tailor the content we see, such as adverts based on our search history, and as such attempt to remote control what, when and how we see things on the internet.

Technology is not all bad, of course, and it can help make life more convenient. But we end up trading privacy for convenience, giving up personal data to private and public bodies.

Surprisingly, most people are aware of the issue and have developed their own reactions and responses to it.

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*Professor Hilary Pilkington
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‘Citizens are aware of the new economy of data, where the user becomes the product,’ Dr Kreissl said. They adapt to this situation and also develop smart reactions, sometimes even exploiting the surveillance technology for their own means, for example, tracking friends, kids, and spouses using social media.

But clearly, for democracy to keep flourishing in Europe politicians and society have some clear tasks ahead of them: cleaning up politics’ bad image and reining in potential abuses of the new digital era we live in.

More info

[MYPLACE](#)

[IRISS](#)