

## **A Disaffected Generation? The Youth Vote and Europe's Future**

**Article by Edouard Gaudot**

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In the run-up to the June elections, EU institutions and political forces are courting the younger generation to cast their vote. But five years after young Europeans mobilised around the climate crisis and pushed for a European Green Deal, the perception is that of a disengaged youth, weighed down by multiple crises and uncertainty about the future. Is this picture accurate and is there still hope to change it?

When EU citizens elect a new European Parliament in June this year, a delicate diplomatic dance will begin as a fresh Commission is appointed and new power dynamics emerge at the top of Europe's institutions. Just ahead of political families hitting the campaign trail in Europe and at home, the Commission published a series of proposals to "give young people a greater say in the decisions that affect them".

With age-based impact assessments, a youth strategy, broader participation mechanisms, and advertising campaigns, the Commission is actively courting Europe's youth. It wants to make Europe more appealing, to make common policies more tangible for European citizens and more relevant to the youngest among them.

Brussels clearly believes that the outcome of the European elections will be decided by 18-25-year-olds (or younger, now that the voting age has been lowered to 16 for European elections in Germany, Austria, Belgium, Malta, and Greece). Pessimists will of course say this is pointless, given the younger generation's lack of interest in (European) politics and institutions, where they are under-represented compared with older generations.

A number of recent signs explain this focus on Europe's youth who, like the generation before them when they were young in the 1980s, often retreat into indifference.

### **2019: Enthusiasm and democracy**

In 2019, young voters were the surprise. Rising from 42.6 per cent in 2014 to 50.6 per cent for the bloc as a whole, turnout in the last EU elections increased for the first time since the switch to direct universal suffrage in 1979, when the post-war generation participated in the first European poll. Surveys after the election showed that turnout rose across the board, regardless of social class, age, attitude towards the EU, or nationality.

Besides the geopolitical upheaval caused by the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump in 2016, there were two additional factors behind this renewed enthusiasm for European democracy. First, the stakes were dramatically illustrated by a clash of narratives, with heroes and villains as clear as any found in a half-decent Hollywood script. Indeed, while it was normal for the likes of Emmanuel Macron or Angela Merkel to be well-known beyond their countries' borders, the same could not be said for a Hungarian prime minister, an Italian interior minister, a Polish party leader, a blustering Brit, or the head of an old French far-right movement. In an ironic paradox of unintended consequences, the popularity of

anti-European figures and far-right Eurosceptic parties helped to Europeanise domestic politics.

Second, youth stepped up their participation. With the largest turnout differentials (+14 per cent for under 25-year-olds and +12 per cent for 25-39-year-olds between 2014 and 2019), younger generations and first-time voters played a key role in reversing the decades-long trend towards abstention from EU elections, regarded as second order by political scientists and citizens alike. This abstention rate had been exacerbated by successive enlargements that brought into the fold Eastern European countries where electoral turnout has remained historically low since the end of the one-party system.

Spurred on by a young Greta Thunberg addressing European and global assemblies, "generation climate" seized the opportunity to make their voice heard. After taking to the streets of Europe's cities to demand their elders properly address threats to their future, the young activists of Fridays for Future and other movements managed to convince some of their cohort to go out and vote. Surprising opinion pollsters with their numbers and votes, young Europeans handed a historic result to Europe's Greens, who won 10 per cent of seats in the European Parliament

Keenly aware of the message delivered at the ballot box, the opinion polling conducted before the elections, and the economic potential offered by green growth, European leaders placed the green transition at the heart of the policy agenda for the new term. And the new President of the EU Commission solemnly made ambitious pledges for a climate-neutral Europe by 2050. In a way, the European Green Deal was the 2019 youth's doing.

## **Anger and pessimism**

Five years later, everything has changed. First, the pandemic and successive lockdowns thwarted climate marches – and sapped the spirit of Europe's youth. From France to Poland and Italy, where the devastating effects of Covid-19 were first felt, studies have highlighted the pandemic's profoundly traumatic impact, especially on the most vulnerable and most deprived in society. Germany's youth, who swelled the ranks of Green voters in 2019 and 2021, were hit particularly hard, becoming a sort of "Generation Reset" for some observers. At European level, Eurofound's 2021 report on the impact of Covid-19 on young people in the EU raised concerns about mental health and economic insecurity.

Second, as the pandemic's economic effects were increasingly felt by households and businesses – exacerbated by inflation and soaring energy prices – the Green Deal ran into growing opposition. From the events in the Netherlands in 2019 to the spectacular protests in the winter of 2023-2024, demonstrations by struggling European farmers have taken the place of protests by climate-anxious school and university students. But the wave of rage that has swept through Europe's farming communities is, like the Yellow Vests in France, just one more symptom of deeper tensions and fears felt in the sectors most affected by green policies. Echoing the warnings of European trade unions, these protests have brought into sharp focus the socially acceptable limits of green transition policies. And some European political movements have made this issue the centrepiece of their campaigns for the forthcoming elections.

Meanwhile, the pushback against the Green Deal and with it the capacity for government action against climate change only exacerbates the eco-anxiety that a majority of young Europeans already suffer from.

Third, the world's crises are weighing on young Europeans. The war waged by Vladimir Putin's Russia on the EU's border has had a more immediate emotional impact on the people of Eastern Europe –

especially in Poland and the Baltic states. But it is a source of anxiety in countries like Germany and France too.

On top of this, the growing sense of structural economic inequality and being unfairly denied the prosperity promised to previous generations is also clouding young people's outlook. According to EU Commission figures, 25.4 per cent of 15- to 29-year-olds in the EU were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2020, and the rate of severe material deprivation in that age group rose from 5.4 per cent in 2019 to 6.5 per cent in 2020. Undoubtedly, the situation post-Covid has improved, particularly in Spain, where youth employment has reached its lowest level since 2008 and the start of the sovereign debt crisis. But a sense of persistent inequality, economic uncertainty, and financial insecurity dominate when Europe's youth are interviewed, be it in France, Germany, Cyprus or Poland.

When the prevailing mood is that the political class is unable – or unwilling – to respond to their legitimate aspirations for a world that is better, greener, and fairer towards them, Europe's younger generation may wonder whether it is worth voting at all. And if it is, for whom and for what?

## Hope or disaffection?

Young people do not stay young forever. As the years pass, the world changes, and with it the zeitgeist, too. One young generation is replaced by another. So the question is: what youth will cast their vote in the 2024 European elections?

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The gloomy picture painted above is, to a large extent, reflected in the aspirations of Europe's youth for the 2024 elections, albeit as a positive counterpoint. When asked what priorities they expect the European Union to pursue for their generation in a 2022 Eurobarometer survey, preserving peace (37 per cent), creating job opportunities (33 per cent), fighting poverty and inequalities (32 per cent), and combating climate change (31 per cent) came out on top.

Q17 What do you expect of the European Union for your generation? You can select up to three answers. [MULTIPLE ANSWERS] (% - EU27)



The responses to an autumn 2023 Parlemeter survey show that the context of war has faded. Combating climate change and fighting poverty and exclusion (36 per cent) are, along with the future of Europe, young people's top priorities, which contrasts with older generations, for whom health and economic growth are most important.

The persistence of certain preoccupations from 2019 is already apparent. Young Europeans expect a lot from the EU for their future. They feel overwhelmingly European compared to their elders (81 per cent for 15-24-year-olds and 76 per cent for 25-39-year-olds, or 10 to 15 percentage points more than older cohorts), and know that it is what happens at EU level that really matters.

But, like their predecessors, they remain highly sceptical about the world of politics. This stark trend, amply analysed by political science, dates back to the beginning of the 2000s. There has been a general decline in political participation across Western democracies, and this has been particularly pronounced among younger generations. For many reasons, young people have gradually turned their backs on politics and traditional political representation. Meanwhile, they have increasingly turned to the politics of protest. Whether it is down to shifting value systems, growing distrust of the state and institutions, or the perverse effects of communications technologies and social media, one thing is certain: younger generations' political participation is no longer expressed through the same behaviours as their elders. Voting is no longer central, even if it means suffering paradoxical consequences: Spain's young and angry *Indignados* showed as much when their boycott of the 2011 general election deprived social democrats of a crucial part of their vote, enabling the right-wing Partido Popular to take power.

Young Europeans are "less collectivist and more individualist, cause-oriented, engage in single-issue organisations and other forms of engagement that do not require long-term commitment, and are more likely to be members of informal groups, participate in protest politics and focus on specific issues or political causes" insists Tomaž Deželan, Professor of Political sciences at the University of Ljubljana.

## **Which youth? Which Europe?**

With the European elections less than two months away, the question remains: will the continent's youth have the same impact on results as they did in 2019? And if so, what will their priorities be?

Even when young Europeans are mobilised, they vote significantly less than older generations. Furthermore, according to Eurobarometer polling, their interest in the coming election remains mixed: it stands at barely 50 per cent for 15- to 24-year-olds, yet rises to 60 per cent for 25 to 39-year-olds, higher than all other cohorts, which suggests that the interest shown by 2019 voters remains. That said, in the 2023 Parlemeter, 56 per cent of 15- to 24-year-olds said that they will definitely vote, as did 67 per cent of 25- to 39-year-olds, which places them on a par with older cohorts.

Furthermore, their preoccupations seem to have shifted. Environmental crises, economic anxieties, and a certain frustration with a political world that appears impotent or deaf to their demands are fuelling an appetite for radicalism. This explains the appeal of radical movements to Europe's youngest citizens.

In Poland, for example, electoral volatility has always been a result of one-off youth mobilisations. Young people make up the bulk of social movements like the 2016 *Czarny Protest* ("black protests") in defence of women's rights. But the need for radicalism and young Poles' mistrust of their political class and national leaders has also been expressed by repeated bouts of voting for anti-establishment candidates or parties, like the libertarian Palikot Movement (*Ruch Poparcia Palikota*) in 2011, or the far-right populist Kukiz-15 party led by rockstar Paweł Kukiz in 2015. According to opinion polls, more than 10 per cent of

young people intend to vote for the far right in June 2024, while 25-29 per cent say they will support the national-conservative PiS. In Italy, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia remains extremely popular at 29 per cent, after coming first among 25- to 39-year-olds and second among 18- to 24-year-olds in the 2022 general election. In France, the Rassemblement National is polling first in every age group, and has a commanding lead among the youngest voters.

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Young voters are fairly representative of this general shift: all forecasts point to a clear upswing in support for the radical and far right, represented by ECR and ID groups in the European Parliament. The European Council on Foreign Relations, a think tank, is forecasting large gains for anti-European populists at both ends of the political spectrum, who are expected to come first or second in 18 out of 27 member states. This is consistent with other polls of polls: the radical and far right are set to surge, principally at the expense of greens and liberal centrists – the biggest winners in 2019.

To interpret the dynamics of these elections, Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev proposes an alternative to the conventional framing of Left/Right cleavages and pro/anti-European integration stances. He argues that European societies contain different “crisis tribes” whose members have in common a shared trauma suffered during key events of the past few decades. Germany and Austria, for example, are the only countries whose citizens choose immigration as the issue that has most affected them, which explains the rise of the far-right AfD party and its support among young voters, as well as the potential success of Sarah Wagenknecht's new left-wing populist party. In France and Denmark, citizens point to climate change as the most impactful crisis, while the Portuguese and Italians mention global economic turmoil. In Spain and Romania, the Covid-19 pandemic is the principal trauma. And, unsurprisingly, Estonians and Poles feel most affected by the Ukraine war and the Russian threat.

Society is fragmented politically, and Europe's youth are not a monolith. Young people who are worried about the climate may set aside their grievances with the system and vote for Green or centrist parties, as they did in 2019. But others seem torn between staying at home or voting for extremists – even if that means bolstering the ranks of those advocating a purely nationalist, regressive, and illiberal vision of European integration.

Therein lies a message of anger and distress that institutions and political families invested in the European project would do well to heed. It will take more than the EU for You advertising campaign to reverse this trend. A better idea would be to organise young citizens' conventions that are decentralised (i.e. not held in Brussels) and devoted to the concerns highlighted by opinion polling.

The elections are drawing near, but it may not be too late to give young people a voice so they can embrace the future with renewed confidence.

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