

Conference on Youth Participation
“Active Citizenship in the European Union: Participation and Responsibility”

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Active Citizenship and Participation in Germany
Conference Paper

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would first like to thank the organizers of this conference for giving me the opportunity to talk about a topic that is very important to me. Youth participation is currently on the political agenda of many national and European protagonists - as it is in Germany. It calls for an exact definition and concrete measures as to how such participation is to be achieved.

In my position as a researcher at the Research Group “Youth and Europe” at the Centre of Applied Policy Research of the University of Munich in Germany, I will look at the topic of active citizenship and participation in Germany in light of the relationship between politics, youth and Europe. Please note that I will not go into detail on the situation in Germany, but that my observations are based on my experience in Germany, Therefore I will take the liberty of a slight change in topic and speak about **„Active Citizenship and Participation from a German Perspective“**. In the context of the current „European Year of Citizenship through Education“ I would also like to focus on the meaning of civic education. I will point out what I consider to be some of the central points and perhaps also starting points for exchange of our different experiences with, points of views on and expectations of promoting youth participation in our countries, and therefore in Europe.

I will start by taking a look at the results of the referenda in France and the Netherlands. Several conclusions can be drawn here, which are also relevant for the situation in Germany, even though the German people were not asked to vote on the Constitution/Constitutional treaty.

A section of the European population has already said “no”- The results of the French and Dutch referenda on the Treaty on Constitution for Europe were more than clear: Almost 55% in France and 62% in the Netherlands rejected the proposed European constitution, with which the European Union wanted to reach the ambitious aims of democratic decision-making, transparency and institutional efficiency. The referenda themselves were meant to include European citizens as much as possible. This appears to have failed, particularly in view of the cancellation of the British referendum for the moment.

A remarkable thing about the reactions to the referenda outcome is that the resulting analysis has concentrated almost purely on the institutional and political consequences for the EU. A further deficit that the rejection of the European Constitution has revealed is either ignored or only mentioned in an aside: The clear failure to involve the citizens of the EU, respectively the failure to get European aims and basic values across to citizens. As a result one could conjecture that while Europe is clearly facing a crisis, this crisis is not exclusively an institutional one. It is always based in the disquieting distance that has arisen between politics and citizens and in the obvious inability to bridge this distance through information and offers to encourage participation. The reasons for the rejection of the Constitution are therefore to be found in the short-sightedness of the referenda. The mere use of a referendum as an instrument does not ensure real co-decision when the decisive factor of a sustained anchoring of real participation is ignored.

Tuning to Germany, we see a similar situation, even though no referendum took place. Those in political and educational circles call loudly for more participation among young people, in particular when basic problems of political and social interaction are being discussed and innovation solutions are being sought. What participation actually means remains unclear. As to continuous input from young people into politics, only a few successful examples are to be found. The future expectations of politics and society are more focused on profitable sectors such as information and biotechnology than on youth as social capital.

How important it is to involve the younger generation as much as possible in political debate and social decision processes with focused programmes is often underestimated in Germany. In current youth studies political involvement is judged as being unimportant by most young people. According to surveys the term “politics” elicits negative association among the youth. The clear decrease in explicitly political interest in the younger generation, currently at 34%, as well as the decrease in voluntary involvement in political parties, organisations and societies brings the danger that democracy is losing its foundation. The difficult labour market situation at present is making fear of the future foremost, which has a paralysing effect on the general willingness to get involved.

The key question is therefore what education, society and politics can do to encourage the involvement of young people above generation barriers and to ground solidarity between generations above and beyond family matters. Young people need to be motivated to and supported in getting involved, so they can bring their own interests into official processes and so that youth participation goes beyond being symbolic and substituting serious approached to political renewal.

Participation can cover a variety of ways of influencing events. The following five models are the most established in Germany:

Firstly, representative participation where young people are elected to bodies or are delegated, for example in local youth councils, which are particularly active in the state of Baden-Württemberg.

Secondly, open participation, characterised by open access and the possibility to get involved spontaneously, for example youth summits which are designed and offered as models on a varied topics by my institution among others.

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Thirdly, project-orientated participation, by which projects with a limited content and timeframe are meant, for example project days in schools.

Another form of participation is the representation of youth in adult bodies, for example, as representatives of interest groups in planning groups on local development, as obligatory in the children and youth concept of the city of Munich.

A fifth model is through contact with politicians, something enabled by offers of the politicians themselves, to, for example, join debates and discussions in schools or youth clubs.

What is important in all of these forms of participation is that the focus is on the ability to tie youth participation in with regular political processes and on constructive cooperation between decision-makers and young people. Young people not only have a particular relationship towards politics and their own ideas on how to approach the various political issues, but are also dependent on politics in their daily lives. If the state wants to tap in on the potential more participation by young people involves, then a youth-orientated exchange of information must offer a foundation for further participation. Another prerequisite for further participation are adequate intermediary structures for improving communication between state and non-state actors and institutions and young people. The initiation and promotion of generation-bridging educational projects are also advisable in order to improve young people's relevant social skills.

The focus should be on showing or finding the varied levels of possibilities for youth participation and linking these in order to strengthen the sense of community in society. Youth participation can lead to social integration when a section of society through social classes is reached. At the same time, politics needs to reach out and enable participation at varied levels. Here the generation-bridging aspect is of central importance. If youth initiatives are anchored in the established adult world and relevant projects are of consequence, then the State **will** benefit from renewal, innovation and a sense of dynamism.

So how do we define youth participation as the basic prerequisite for active citizenship?

Let me recap briefly. Youth participation is based on an integral approach, which must build on the following two supporting pillars;

1. Participation and youth participation cannot exist independent of society, but must be interdisciplinary and bridge generations. The involvement of young people needs an institutional frame, just as for other groups.

2. Young people are primarily interested in their own surroundings. Participation is always successful when it results from being directly affected by something. Possibilities to get involved must therefore take into account how young people live and offer tangible solutions.

It has also become clear that youth participation is part of a wider social context, which makes its promotion a task to be tackled across a broad spectrum of political areas. It must also be taken into consideration that not all young people are the same.

How has the political arena reacted to this challenge? The 2002 Children and Youth report of the German Federal Ministry for Family, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth has come up with a definition of youth politics which it considers to be “life situation politics”. Here a differentiating political understanding is meant, which considers the wide-ranging social differences in the life situations of young people. The focus of this policy is the wellbeing of the children and young people living in the Federal Republic of Germany. This approach has three basic ideas:

1. The explicit consideration of existing differences among children and young adults in sex, education, social class, religion, immigration background and age
2. Respect of the subjective personal lifestyles of children and young adults
3. The creation of positive living conditions for children and young adults is seen as the priority of youth politics.

The implementation of these points in practice has been summarised by the Federal Ministry for Family, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth in their 11th Children and Youth report in 2002 under the heading of “10 point catalogue of recommendations for the 21st century”. Here problems likely to be faced in the future are named and bundled. Here the Ministry also makes demands that go beyond its own competences. These are however somewhat vague, the support of active citizenship and participation is only briefly mentioned. In order to rebut the frequent criticism of the lack of commitment of youth politics therefore, it is important to establish a connection to young people’s daily lives and to work out the above-mentioned points in detail.

Youth work is referred to as an indispensable area for children and young people to learn participation in democratic procedures and therefore as a civil form meeting different social

interests. Civic education is the heart of youth work; its value and range of possible use should not be underestimated. Civic education is the catalyst for youth participation. Here the Children and Youth report itself points out the lack of a clear definition.

The financial support of circa 15% from local authorities for youth work and youth social services is low, when the actual need for civic education is considered, according to estimates of experts in the area- and increasing potential for social and cultural conflict. German youth politics and the civic education landscape in Germany agree in general that children and young adults clearly need to be supported in developing a sense of responsibility, inner strength and democratic values.

Also important is tapping in on the potential of social and political involvement among young people and developing the necessary skills for such involvement in everyday school life, youth work and community at large. There is also agreement on the appropriateness of using activating, creative and innovative methods in get through to the younger generation. Innumerable publications point out the need for new areas of action for civic education, which enable the development of democratic thought and action. However such calls are unfortunately not binding and are only suggestions. It is clear that the varying aims at and calls for encouraging more involvement among young people need to be coordinated in order to increase the sustainability of educational measure, despite the lack of funding.

When we look at the current social situation and political framework in Germany, we can draw the following conclusion. There is a large number of approaches to improving the level of participation among young people in civil society. These approaches, however, need to be coordinated and linked in order to guarantee their implementation. To make this possible, concrete structures are needed. A short-term project, as common in the current financial situation, has only a limited chance of leading to serious and sustainable youth participation. In this context, such projects need to tie extracurricular offers in with school curricula. Based on the official policies and the demands of those involved in civic education, a lot has to be done. Obviously the pressure is not yet high enough to bring forth the necessary reforms.

Future developments will show that youth participation can become a key spectrum-bridging factor, if politicians do not ignore the fact that the developing social and demographic crises call for a new educational concept.

However Germany is nowhere near this development. A growing section of non-voters in federal, state and European elections and the decrease in memberships in political parties are at least causing alarm among politicians. The German Parliament, for example, recently requested a report from the Government on the situation of young people in Germany. The importance and focus of youth policy was analysed in the initial request and calls for concrete measures to promote democracy and participation were included. The Federal Government responded that they want to concentrate on making social involvement and participation more attractive for young people, as many young people are not only not interested, but also do not trust those in politics.

Young people are also uninformed as to their rights and possibilities to become active citizens. A national programme was developed to combat this lack of information. Within the framework of the „Project P- get involved” campaign, in German „projekt P- misch dich ein”, opportunities for young people from various institutions and organisations to take part in society were developed and tested. The aim of the initiative is to encourage political interest and activity among young people in Germany. To date around activities in around 200 local, regional and national projects with 6,000 young people have been funded through the programme. Children and young people are given the chance to bring their own concern into Project P, which in turn passes these concerns onto the Federal Cabinet. In a few days, the initiative will get support from a very large youth festival in Berlin.

Whether this new approach will be successful and accepted by German youth remains to be seen. In order to fulfill its purpose it must fulfil four conditions: it must be sustainable, qualitative and target-group orientated, it also needs to highlight further possibilities of getting involved after the programme itself has run out.

Of course, such educational work obviously must be tailored for the educational and informational needs of young people. Young people learn differently to adults. Media such as the press, television and radio are used quite differently and lag behind use of the internet for information purposes. A tried and proven concept of reaching young people is peer-group education, which aims at informing and learning together in familiar surroundings. This

approach has been particularly effective in youth work when young people themselves are the instructors or multipliers, as the more relaxed atmosphere aids the learning and teaching process.

Wrapping up my talk, I want to say some last words on the importance of civic education. Lets us return for a moment to our starting point, the rejection of the European Constitution. This has created, as a consequence, new educational demands in Europe, where the aspect of strengthening citizens' skills needs to be highlighted. In this context the "European Pact for Youth", an initiative of President Zapatero and Chancellor Schröder with their French and Swedish colleagues, is a symbol of hope, if it is followed up by concrete measure and filled with life. I welcome any questions and comments and want to conclude by noting that only when the topic of "active citizenship and participation" begins to bore us, have we really reached anything.

Thank you very much for your attention.

(I appreciate any comments and will be glad to answer any questions, also later over coffee and dinner. I hope you all enjoy the rest of the conference.)