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Elections to the EP in 2009: Youth, Europe and the role of peer-group activities

In the last European Parliament Election in 2004, only 43,7 per cent of the German population took part, while the lowest number of participation fell in the group of young voters at the age of 21 to 25. Their turnout was only 30,5 per cent compared to the highest number of 51,9 per cent among those 60 years or older. Looking at the last elections to the German Bundestag in 2005, the situation is not as bad as such, but the tendency is the same: young voters at the age of 21 to 25 were definitely the group with the lowest turnout: only 70, 2 per cent voted, while the highest participations (84,6 per cent) falls into the 50-60 year olds.

Generally, the participation in elections increases with age. However, there is a significant gap between the willingness of young people towards participation as such and the turnout in elections. Furthermore, an even more remarkable gap between the participation on a national and European level exists. In the light of the 30th anniversary of direct elections to the European Parliament education should ask how to overcome this gap and how to win more young people for their rights and duties as citizens in the European Union.

How can young people be motivated to participate politically? What impact do decisions by the European Union have on adolescents? Which information do young people need in order to come to a deeper and sustainable understanding of Active European Citizenship and the European Union itself?

The importance of involving the younger generation as much as possible in political debate and social decision processes with focused educational 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 associations among the youth. The clear decrease in explicitly political interest in the younger generation, currently only 34%, as well as the decrease in voluntary involvement in political parties, organisations and societies entails the danger that democracy is losing its foundation. The difficult labour market situation at present scares of the future prospects, which has a paralysing effect on the general willingness to get involved.

Politics unimportant for the younger generation

Therefore, the key concern is how education, society and politics are able to encourage the involvement of young people in general. And how to get young Europeans in order to take actively part in the European elections as young or even first time voters in the EP elections. One thing is for sure: Young people need to be motivated and supported to get involved. In this way they can bring their own interests into official processes, so that youth participation goes beyond being symbolic, limited to an election day and substituting serious approaches.

Youth and Europe need adequate information and intermediary structures

Participation can cover a variety of ways, events and instruments, elections are only one of them. But we have to take all of them into consideration, if we want to strengthen the decision to vote – “far away” on the European level:

Importance to further offers to be involved

- **Open participation activities**, characterised by an open access and the possibility to get involved spontaneously, for example youth summits which are designed and offered as models on varied topics.
- **Project-orientated participation**, which implies projects with a limited content and timeframe are meant, for example project days on the European Parliament in schools.
- **Direct contact** with politicians, something provided by the politicians themselves, to, for example, join debates and discussions in schools or youth clubs (among others via “structured dialogue” – since 2006 a new instrument of the EU).
- **The representation of youth in adult bodies**, for example, as representatives of interest groups in planning groups on local development. This is made for instance obligatory in the children and youth concept of the city of Munich.
- **Representative participation** where young people are delegated or elected to bodies, for example in local youth councils, which are particularly active in the state of Baden-Württemberg or Schleswig Holstein.

While looking at these main formats of participation the following two points are crucial:

- to focus on the ability to **connect youth participation with regular political processes** and
- to stress on a **constructive and long term based cooperation between politics (decision-makers) and young people**.

Specific information as basis for participation

If we want to have more young people involved in regular political processes and at the end in the elections, then specific youth information is needed, which offers a foundation for further participation, as well. Another prerequisite for active participation are adequate intermediary structures for improving communication between “Youth and Europe”. This is true for both, the local and the European level.

The focus should be on showing the various levels of possibilities for youth participation, where official elections are only one of them. They could be a door opener or starting point if there will be follow up projects on a grass root level. Or the other way round: The key factor for participation on European level is European identity of young people.

Participation creates, forms and strengthens youth identities

No doubt: Social, societal and political participation maintains a number of advantages especially for young people: they are given the chance to develop confidence and social competence. They also learn to think in a focused and inter-linked way. Furthermore they gain first respective experiences during independent project work and with the development of creative methods of resolution. These experiences will definitely pay off later on in the course of their professional and private lives. They also establish contacts beyond their own peer groups. Therefore it is undeniable that societal participation is beneficial for the self-development of adolescents. But: the personal determination of one’s identity is an extremely,

never ending process. The most diverse circumstances influence it and determine whether a person in the course of his/her socialisation becomes a political, democratic or even convinced European. The individual has to deal with his surroundings and his values critically while identifying and outlining his origins.

If Europe becomes an additional reference object, the whole process becomes more difficult:

1. Europe as such is impossible to define by saying only some words – the definition of “EUrope” is complex and unclear itself.
2. The relationship between Europe and adolescents is highly ambiguous. But even if only the political dimension of Europe is being referred to – as in the recent debate about active civic participation – the process of identity determination is not made easier.
3. Only a small fraction of people have a distinct political identity, for the majority social, cultural and geographic affiliations are more relevant.

Especially for adolescents the European Union as a political framework is too complex, too inconsistent and too dependent on extensive knowledge for the individual process of identity building.

Complexity impedes process of identity building

Youth and the political framework of the EU – skepticism and a lack of knowledge
Adolescents in the age of 15 to 25 represent a tremendous potential within the EU with approx. 75 million people. They consider the open borders as well as the personal freedoms for travel, studies and work within Europe as given. Nevertheless, young adults consider established politics in general and European politics in particular with skepticism and feel a lack of understanding and knowledge.

Developments in Europe are becoming increasingly important for the environment of adolescents: they create opportunities, but also harbors risks for the arrangement of education, professional and life courses. But it is especially this young generation which will be living in the future Europe and will be living shaping it. Young people in the European Union undoubtedly have the most optimistic attitude towards the EU membership: nearly two thirds of the 15-24 year-olds believe that the EU membership of their country is a good thing. Also regarding the future of the European Union and the EU enlargement this positive mindset is continued. Nevertheless the positive attitude towards Europe remains superficial, diffuse and without further reflection, at times even contradictory. The young generation does indeed recognize the increasing relevance of the EU in general, is aware of the necessity of the political entity of the EU and has a high degree of confidence in the EU's competence as a problem-solver.

However, young people do not see the connection between the aforementioned aspects and their personal lives. This is often rooted in the lack of exact knowledge of the EU's functioning: according to the Eurobarometer 62% of the adolescents in Germany think they know little of the EU, 10% even believe they know nothing of the EU, its institutions and European politics. In contrast, **only 2% of the polled adolescents feel that they are very well informed**. This development is problematic as it raises the issue of whether the European unification process is built on a solid foundation and whether despite the high degree of ignorance young European citizens can have a European consciousness.

Gap between relevance of the EU and its impact

Identification of the young generation with Europe – Requirements and approaches

The European identity is often captured in the statement of agreement with the European Union and measured in the question how the European citizens are related to Europe. This equalization cannot do justice to the complexity of a European identity. The Eurobarometer 65 (2006) gives full consideration to this difficulty by including two separate reference parameters for both these questions. The results show that people within all age groups feel a strong connection with their country, then their region and then with their local authorities. Europe only comes fourth with significant distance. The EU as a political and economic entity falls far behind.

Weak connection of younger generation with the EU

Nevertheless emotionally and fundamentally the EU is considered positively by adolescents. They approve of the EU as a political framework, but also express precise expectations towards the political actors. Even though the promotion of an active European civil society and particularly the participation of adolescents has become a major emphasis in the European communication and youth policy, adolescents estimate that their chances for participation are fairly low and assess these reluctantly and negatively. 57% of adolescents in Germany are under the impression that their opinion is irrelevant in the EU. They express a wish for more education programs in schools, more programs for voluntary work and more consultation opportunities for adolescents.

Which factors encourage a positive attitude towards Europe and an approving, reflected EU-orientation? Which are the crucial points for a foundation of European identity with adolescents. Which requirements increase their identification with Europe, in addition to their willingness to participate? Formal and non-formal education deliver **knowledge** and education and strengthen political **interest** (via youth information and topics) dialogue **skills** (including communication and language skills) and the **trust** in self-efficacy (by youth projects and youth exchange programs). Within the scientific debate all four factors are considered as important: Not all four elements have to be developed equally or even completely in order to induce a positive attitude towards the EU. Each criterion can be viewed as a suitable door opener for the development of a European awareness and dedication. Each of these elements can have the effect of creating identities for young people, if they encounter corresponding, tangible offers in their surrounding. Whether adolescents then add an explicit European dimension to their identity in the long-term depends decisively on supporting continuous offers in education.

European consciousness calls for education

Education as basis for a positive attitude

The process of building a European identity has also not been achieved at the highest level of the EU, such as the realization of political goals such as signing the EU reform treaty of Lisbon. There are still strong disagreements on how politics should be designed in many areas reaching to the top levels of the EU. This is reflected in ambivalent attitudes and diffuse fears in the population. One can hardly expect that the development of a European identity will be encouraged and promoted in the face of such sentiments and the lack of clear guidance. Rather it would take a broad, but honest debate with a high level of participation on basic values as well as resources and aims of European politics regarding the future architecture of the EU.

A major obstacle is the fact that the process of building a European identity is difficult to control and has to remain open, as it takes place in the context of maintaining the idea of free individual development. Nevertheless, European politics has exemplified a development including strengths and weaknesses which could be regarded as an approach for modern education for building a European identity. This could constitute the fundamental incentive especially for adolescents in order to participate on a European level with reference to European issues. In this context Europe should not be regarded as a completed entity, but rather as a constructive learning process which depends largely on active cooperation at a local level. European identity in this sense is a societal and political "project" that is linked to a concrete frame of action and decision-making in cooperation with others. European identity evolves through societal discourse and practical social action. If a "pro political-social" European identity construction is understood in such a way it would not require a common cultural, national or ethnic identity. Rather it would depend on collective non-commercial actions and the acceptance of common democratic values.

European identity crucial for a successful participation

Three basic characteristics of a European identity can be deduced from this complex sociopolitical form:

1. emphasis on action
2. strength of integration
3. impact & reflection of values.

Emphasis on action, integration and reflection

Obviously, such educational and informational work must be tailored to the needs of young people.

Rationale of Peer Education

Young people learn in a different way than adults. Media such as the press, television and radio are used quite differently, too. Internet is the information source of the young generation. Against this background, a tested and proven concept of reaching young people is the approach of peer-group education, which aims at informing and learning together in familiar surroundings. This has been particularly effective in youth work when young people themselves are the instructors or multipliers, as the more relaxed atmosphere supports the learning process.

Peer Education is an increasingly popular method of transferring information and advice to young people. It is, however, not a new, but nevertheless successful concept, as young people are mainly influenced by peers on their values and behaviours. A peer group commonly refers to the

Peer-group education in the learning process

- age group
- background
- culture and/or
- social status

which shares similar experience and needs of information and - in terms of peer group education - teaches each other about a variety of different issues. Members of the group are closely connected to each other by a 'common youth culture'. Peers enjoy a higher degree of trust than adults and are considered as credible source, as they tend to have more commonalities of norms and social solidarity. They are therefore better qualified to provide relevant, meaningful, explicit and honest information.

Peer-group education as pillar

Briefly, peer groups play an important and fundamental part in the socialisation of the young generation. As peer groups matter to young people and play an increasingly influential role in a young persons every day life, they also matter their education. Certainly the average child spends more time with peers than with his or her parents particularly during adolescence. For this reason, peer groups should be recognized as an **integral part of learning strategies**. One should take into account, that similar life experiences and empathy of **peer educators are a distinct advantage** over their professional counterparts.

There are many additional reasons why peer group education should be used as an educational approach. The following four points are considered crucial:

Advantages and effects of peer-group education

1. Multiplier effect

In regard to the high credibility which young people enjoy among others and where resources in the educational sector are strongly limited and large numbers of participants have to be reached, peer group education can have a multiplier effect in the sense of knock-on, cascade or informal learning effects.

2. Inside Expertise

Young people are ready made experts, they have a natural youth perspective on the issues. In the way they affect young people they often 'make things happen', if encouraged and resourced by adults.

3. Successful communication

Youth culture bases much on communication, young people thus have the potential to determine more effective and successful communication by themselves, i.e. through seminars and workshops, simulations and games, music, mass media and discussion.

4. Empowerment

By having a qualified monitoring system, young people are able to stimulate and conduct education and information exchange extensively by themselves, depending on the setting a programme is operating in. In addition, peer group education can help to foster youth participation in programmes of formal and informal education and in the society in which they live.

Conclusion: young people as active players in the educational process

Peer education is an approach in youth voters' education which empowers young people to work with other young people, and which draws on the positive strength of the peer group. By appropriate training and support, young people become active players in the educational process rather than passive recipients of a set message. Central to this is a good collaboration between young people and adults. By giving young people opportunities, they are able to create their own programmes of education and information in order to deal with problems that affect them or to give inputs to debates which are relevant to them. Education thus becomes a social process, establishes forums to explore new frontiers and helps to solve problems. Since young people gain a better understanding of young people's viewpoint, their qualities like commitment, loyalty and idealism can be engendered.

As already mentioned above, peer group education can be applied in different educational settings. There is not 'the only way' to do it – furthermore, a wide spread

diversity of approaches is the key for a successful learning. **Peer group activities in the light of the Elections to the European Parliament in 2009** should include educational approaches both: within and outside school. How we refer to these approaches depends a lot on the context, a supplementary approach between formal and non-formal education is needed.

For the facilitation of the planning and to avoid confusion, three general pillars can help to draw a dividing line:

Forms of peer-group education

1. Peer-group education in formal educational settings

In schools, peer group education is mostly initiated by teachers with the aim of subsequently referring responsibility of the programme to the students. The role of the teacher has to change from initiator and teacher to facilitator and consultant. In the ideal case, a teacher should become redundant for the programme. For a better understanding of the forthcoming European elections, the Research Group Youth & Europe i.e. trains its so called Junior Team in adequate methods and topics in order to come to the class room with relevant information on the European Union. Simulation Games and interactive approaches raise young people's interest in the work of the European Parliament as such and should motivate them to go to the polls.

2. Peer group education in informal educational settings

Peer group education in 'out-of-school education' is especially relevant for youth organisations, youth services, youth agencies and youth and social work in general. The challenge to the professionals and adults in out-of-school education is the step by step withdrawal from the education programmes. This eventually leads to a loss of 'control' and to take over only guidance and monitoring allowing for action alongside the structured programmes of the organisations, agencies and services. One of the substantial advantages peer group education programmes offer, is that they can reach out to a wider public than only to the "members" of the organisation and can therefore bring about synthesis and enrichment for the institutions.

3. Peer-group education initiated by young people - grass roots initiatives

Young people feel the urge to gain the support of other young people for a subject or issue they consider important or feel strongly about. Consequently they organise action with multiplying effects. This is the *pure* peer group education without any adult influence, peer led from the beginning to the end of a 'project'. The Research Group Youth & Europe pays enormous attention to this basic idea of peer group activities. By giving enough space for the development of youth based methods and innovative approaches concerning a sort of "youth campaign" for the European election in 2009, a special workshop for Junior Teamers is offered in September 2008.

Wrapping up, youth participation has to be based on an integral approach, where youth participation is part of a wider social and educational context, which makes its promotion a task to be tackled across a broad spectrum of political areas – not only against the background of elections.

This analysis was an input, given by from Eva Feldmann-Wojtachnia (senior fellow of the Research Group Youth & Europe) during the Conference [Networking for the European Parliament Elections 09](#) at Strasbourg, 11-13 June, 2008.

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