



European  
Research Area

# EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



## PIDOP – Processes Influencing Democratic Ownership and Participation

**PIDOP Policy Briefing Paper No. 2: What do young people believe and think about citizenship and participation?**

March 2011

### SUMMARY

#### **Objectives of the research**

This research explored young people's self-conceptions, attitudes and belief systems in relationship to citizenship and participation. It focused on 16- to 26-year-olds drawn from both majority and minority groups in nine different national contexts.

#### **Scientific approach / Methodology**

The research employed a qualitative approach. We conducted focus group discussions with 16- to 26-year-old men and women from the majority national group and from two minority ethnic groups in each of nine national contexts, and interviewed individuals identified by the focus group participants as being important sources of influence for them in this domain.

#### **New knowledge and/or European added value**

This research has furthered our understanding of the factors which facilitate and hinder political and civic engagement among young men and women from different ethnic backgrounds in European countries, including their conceptions of citizenship, their perceived lack of political efficacy, and their perceptions of discrimination and injustice.

#### **Key messages for policy-makers, businesses, trade unions and civil society actors**

Young people are interested in political and social life but they feel disempowered in acting. Policy makers at all levels of government, educationists, the media and other non-political organisations need to communicate information to, and foster positive experiences, skills and competencies in, young people in order to empower them.

**Objectives of the research**

The focus group study was conducted with young women and men from different national and ethnic backgrounds. It aimed to explore:

- their understandings of citizenship and of the environmental and human rights issues which are relevant to them
- their sources of information about political and civic processes in different life contexts, and what levels and kinds of political and civic involvement these sources of influence expect from them
- their perceptions of the trustworthiness and the efficacy of different forms of political and civic engagement

The interview study aimed to explore with individuals identified during the focus groups discussions to be important sources of influence:

- their conceptions of citizenship
- the levels and kinds of political and civic involvement which they expect from others and actively encourage, and the strategies that they employ in order to do so

**Scientific approach / methodology**

The research adopted a qualitative approach and involved carrying out: (1) focus groups with young people; and (2) interviews with individuals that the young people identified as being important sources of influence for them. Focus groups were conducted in nine national contexts (Belgium, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Sweden, Turkey, and England and Northern Ireland in the UK). In each of the nine contexts, we conducted focus groups with young people from the majority national group and two ethnic minority/immigrant groups. Within each of the target groups in each of the national contexts, we carried out focus groups with both 16- to 18-year-olds and with 20- to 26-year-olds, including both women and men. We also interviewed two individuals for each source that these young people identified as having a significant influence on their views about political participation. These individuals were significant in different life contexts, and included the family, the peer group, education and learning, media, NGOs and other non-political organisations.

**New knowledge and  
European added value**

To date, much of the existing literature on citizenship, political participation and civic engagement has focused on understanding the factors that predict participation and civic engagement amongst young people from the majority groups in the US and in certain European countries. Existing research in this area has predominantly employed survey and other quantitative methods. As a result, our knowledge on the views and activities of minority groups and on the social and psychological processes involved in the formation of such attitudes is rather limited.

The present study adopted a qualitative approach to explore in depth how young women and men from different national and ethnic groups think about participation and to unpack the reasons for their reported 'apathy'. It also paid attention to the role played by the opportunities afforded to young people in different national contexts, and the interplay between the cultural norms of the host society and those of the country of origin in forming minority individuals' understandings of citizenship and their willingness to participate in societal and political processes. The research was conducted in nine national contexts: Belgium, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Sweden, Turkey and England and Northern Ireland in the UK. Furthermore, the present research examined the views of individuals who are often, and indeed were identified by young people as such, in a position to influence young people's attitudes and behaviours in different life contexts such as the family, the peer group, education and learning, the media, NGOs, and other non-political and political organisations.

The research has generated an unprecedented and significant database of views of young people from 27 national/ethnic groups in nine European countries and from a large number of individuals who are in a position to influence young people's understandings of citizenship and behaviours in this area.

Analyses of these data have confirmed that the levels of political and civic activities amongst young people across all groups were rather low. However the reasons for this were complex and were not just due to a lack of interest (as is often assumed in existing literature and by politicians, policy makers and other stakeholders in this area). For instance, most young people recognised that 'ideally' they should be active citizens and that they fell short of this ideal. However, they often expressed a sense of lack of efficacy either in terms of whether they as individuals could be effective in bringing about change or in terms of the system's responsiveness to young people's views or claims for change. For immigrant groups, these perceptions

of lack of efficacy were often linked to the realisation that they did not enjoy any legal citizenship rights in the host society. There also seemed to be a high level of distrust in politicians and political institutions which then led to an unwillingness to participate in political processes.

Often, the participants felt that they did not have enough information or the competences to facilitate their political participation and civic engagement.

Equally importantly, in some instances, the apparent disengagement of members of some minority and immigrant groups was due to their different conceptions of citizenship and their different perceptions of the relationship between the state and the individual.

However, a substantial proportion of the participants also claimed that their lack of engagement with societal and political matters was due to their being preoccupied with either trying to cope with everyday life or other interests. The former reasons were more often mentioned by members of immigrant groups.

Members of immigrant groups also tended to compare the political systems of the host country and their country of origin. This suggests that the experience of migration may favour a more critical vision of democracy and participation in both contexts.

The data showed that young people have diverse experiences in participation, such as involvement with environmental groups, voluntary work, signing petitions, demonstrating, recycling. Trade unions and political parties were mentioned less often and participation tended to be more significant for the 20- to 26-year-olds than for the younger group. Although there were some complaints of tokenism, there was a recognition of the personal benefits and (sometimes) the effectiveness of participation, especially at the local level.

The young people's discourses tended to refer to the local level. The European level and even the national level of engagement and participation were seldom mentioned. European policies regarding immigration were also not mentioned by the immigrants.

Young people seemed to receive their information about political and societal issues from the family, school, peers, youth workers and media. These were also recognised by young people themselves as the most significant sources of influence

on their attitudes and behaviours in this area.

Interviews with individuals who fell into these categories of influence revealed that there was an agreement that active participation was both desirable and beneficial for young people, but there was also an acknowledgment that there were many young people who did not actively participate in politics or in other social activities.

Interestingly, there was some evidence that these individuals held different expectations towards national majority vs. immigrant individuals. Although young people from the majority groups were expected to be fully engaged in a variety of areas, the expectation was that young people from immigrant groups would be less engaged as they did not have the same levels of knowledge of the political system in the host country and had fewer opportunities to participate.

Interviewees also identified a number of different obstacles that hindered young people's participation including: the perception of a lack of efficacy, distrust in politicians, lack of information, and general negative societal attitudes towards the young.

Overall, the findings show that different ethnic groups often have different conceptions of what good citizenship is, and that there are variations in societal attitudes towards the young and towards immigrants in different national contexts.

**Key messages for  
policy-makers,  
businesses,  
trade unions and  
civil society actors**

This research has implications for all those who have an interest in empowering young people to become active citizens and to participate in political processes, both of which are vital ingredients to ensure the healthy functioning of democratic systems.

On the basis of these findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. There should be better communication between politicians at all levels (local, national and European) and young people, so that young people can feel that their voices are heard and that the systems are responsive.
2. There should be better education about political matters and how to become involved in politics and other voluntary spheres of social life. This could be provided not only in schools but also in leisure and other organisations to which young people belong.

3. Such organisations should also provide opportunities for young people to experience active participation, as this is an important factor in promoting future engagement.
4. Because of young immigrants' frequent lack of knowledge about majority group laws, conventions and regulations pertaining to social and political participation, more information directed specifically at immigrant groups should be disseminated through governmental institutions and NGOs working with immigrant communities.
5. There should be a facilitation of positive participation experiences for young people through school projects that are embedded in the community. Such projects may serve to enhance the self-efficacy of young people by demonstrating to them the potential they possess at an individual and group level to change the social and political status quo.
6. Young immigrants often perceive themselves as excluded from the political process and feel resentful and disenchanting about being denied fundamental forms of civic participation (such as voting) because they do not possess the citizenship of the country in which they are living. EU countries should re-examine the legal framework surrounding the granting of citizenship with the view to making citizenship as inclusive as possible.
7. There should be a facilitation of more balanced and impartial media portrayals of young people's participation. Instead of focusing primarily on the negative, disruptive or anti-social incidences that occur at young people's participation events such as demonstrations, there should be a greater emphasis on the overall positive and well-intentioned character of demonstrations and other social and political participatory efforts.
8. To address the disinterest towards political themes exhibited by young people, there should be an incorporation of more engrossing political television productions into the programme scheduling of major national broadcasting networks, which would function to enhance the appeal of the political domain in the perceptions of young people.
9. There should be a more systematic and consistent implementation of EU anti-discrimination laws, which would help to counter the development of feelings of exclusion and alienation among immigrant communities as a consequence of the prejudice and inequity which they experience.

<b>Coordinator</b>	Professor Martyn Barrett, University of Surrey, UK
<b>Consortium</b>	University of Surrey, UK; University of Liège, Belgium; Masaryk University, Czech Republic; University of Jena, Germany; University of Bologna, Italy; University of Porto, Portugal; Örebro University, Sweden; Ankara University, Turkey; Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland.
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<b>For more information</b>	Professor Martyn Barrett <a href="mailto:M.Barrett@surrey.c.uk">M.Barrett@surrey.c.uk</a>