

EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



PIDOP – Processes Influencing Democratic Ownership and Participation

An EU-funded research project investigating the processes which influence political and civic participation by young people, women, minorities and migrants in Belgium, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Sweden, Turkey and the UK

PIDOP Policy Briefing Paper No. 7: How can young people's levels of civic and political participation be enhanced?

June 2012

INTRODUCTION

Forms of participation

People can participate in the societies in which they live in a variety of different ways. For example, they can participate civically by helping other people in their own community, by joining community organisations, religious institutions or leisure clubs, by undertaking organised voluntary work, by giving money to charities, etc. In addition, they can participate in politics either through conventional political means (e.g., by voting, by joining a political party, by running for election, by campaigning on behalf of a political party, etc.) or through non-conventional means (e.g., by participating in protests and demonstrations, by signing petitions, by writing letters or emails to politicians and public officials, by writing articles or blogs with a political content for the media, etc.).

Different people display different patterns of civic and political participation. For example, some people are active both civically and politically, some are active in the civic sphere but only ever engage with the political sphere through non-conventional means, others engage in voting as their only act of participation, while still others are not active in either the civic or the political sphere.

Factors influencing participation

People's patterns of participation are influenced by many factors. For example, these patterns vary depending on the historical, economic, religious and cultural traditions of a country. Similarly, the political institutions in a country (e.g., whether they have a centralised or decentralised structure, whether or not they are open and responsive to citizens' views, etc.) and features of the electoral system (e.g., whether voting takes place on a rest day or on a working day, whether or not it uses proportional representation, whether voting is

voluntary or compulsory, etc.) affect patterns of participation.

There are also many social factors that impact on participation. These include family discussions and practices concerning participation, teachers' practices in schools and whether young people receive civic education at school, experience of democratic processes in the workplace, and experiences of participation in leisure organisations and other associations. Finally, patterns of participation are influenced by a wide range of psychological factors, including motivations, perceptions of barriers to participation, political knowledge and beliefs, and attitudes and identities.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

Are high levels of citizen participation always essential in a democracy?

Low levels of participation are not necessarily harmful to a democracy. In a country in which there is an effectively functioning government and high levels of trust in political institutions, many citizens may be inactive between elections. As long as such 'standby' citizens remain interested in and informed about politics, they may in fact be an asset to democracy due to their particular combination of political interest, trust and inclination to participate politically should the need arise.

However, low levels of participation are of concern if citizens are so disengaged that they even lack the inclination to vote at elections. Widespread political apathy, disengagement from formal democratic processes, distrust of, and lack of confidence in, political institutions, and low voter turnout all pose a threat to the perceived legitimacy of democratic governance. In countries and communities where such phenomena are extensive, steps can be taken by a wide range of actors to enhance citizen engagement with political and civic processes.

Enhancing levels of participation

However, in order to identify effective ways of enhancing participation, it is important to understand how the various factors that impact on patterns of participation (at the political-institutional level, the social level and the psychological level) are interconnected, and how these numerous factors interact, in driving participation. Through understanding how these factors operate, suitable interventions can then be devised in order to remove obstacles and to optimise conditions for the development of participatory behaviours.

Some key findings from the PIDOP project

The PIDOP project examined the factors that influence political and civic participation in 16- to 26-year-old youth in 9 European countries, with youth from three different ethnic groups being studied within each of these countries. The project underscored some of the difficulties in designing effective interventions. For example, the project found that:

- within particular demographic subgroups, the factors that influence participation vary according to the specific form of participation that is involved
- different factors are operative in different demographic

subgroups for the same form of participation

- different factors are operative in countries that are characterised by different political-institutional structures, with the contribution of these factors varying according to the particular form of participation that is involved
- political-institutional, demographic, social and psychological factors interact in complex ways to drive patterns of participation

Nevertheless, the PIDOP project also found some common patterns which applied across many different countries and across many different demographic subgroups. These common patterns enabled the project to identify actions which can be taken to enhance young people's levels of participation.

Attitudes and behaviour of politicians

For example, the project revealed that young people often feel that they are not taken seriously in political terms by politicians and other older adults. This lack of responsiveness reduces their belief in their own ability to have any influence politically or civically and is experienced as a significant disincentive to engage any further with political issues. Young people also frequently feel that politicians make little or no attempt to communicate with them.

The role of the media

It was further found that, when young people engage in acts of political participation, they often feel that the news media fail to represent their participatory actions with fairness and seriousness of purpose, and this is also experienced as a significant disincentive to engage any further with political issues. Nevertheless, the mass media and new social media are important for young people, and TV, radio and the Internet are among the main sources of influence and points of reference for youth in developing an understanding of other groups within society and for developing opinions on civic and political issues. There is a considerable responsibility on those who produce content for the mass media to represent individuals and groups, civic and political matters, and youth participation, in a fair and just manner.

The role of schools and youth organisations

The project further discovered that young people commonly report that they have relatively little experience of civic and political participation, and those experiences which they have had are often viewed negatively and being of low quality. This is worrying, insofar as we also discovered that the quality of participation is a significant predictor for many types of civic and political participation.

The project also revealed that young people often have a pronounced interest in issues at the local (rather than the national) level (including issues of litter, graffiti, local transport, local amenities, etc.) and in broader environmental, humanitarian and human rights issues at the international or global levels. Their interests in these areas can be harnessed by schools and youth organisations to provide them with high quality participation experiences.

The role of ethnic community organisations

The project found that ethnic minority and migrant youth are often especially engaged with issues concerning or affecting their own ethnic community. They also often have a high level of interest in their country of origin or the country of origin of their parents, even when these youth are themselves citizens of the country in which they are living. These interests can be built upon to provide these youth with high quality participation experiences, to develop their participatory skills, and to raise their awareness about participation and citizenship through volunteering. Ethnic community organisations, in particular, have an important role to play in this regard.

Participation by women

The PIDOP project also revealed that there are many obstacles that hinder the civic and political participation of women. Female youth often perceived biases against women and in favour of men both in the workplace and in the political sphere. In addition, in some countries, and among some ethnic groups, we found that young women's participation was further hindered by the need to undertake paid employment at an early age, early educational dropout and/or early marriage.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS

Variability in the drivers of participation

Policy-makers need to be mindful that the drivers of political and civic participation show considerable variability, with political-institutional, demographic, social and psychological factors interacting in complex ways to influence patterns of participation. For this reason, when devising interventions to increase levels of participation, it is important to take into account that different forms of intervention may be required to enhance different types of participation, in different subgroups of citizens, and in different political-institutional contexts. Interventions need to consider the specific life circumstances and obstacles to participation faced by the particular subgroups of individuals who are being targeted.

Actions which can be taken by politicians

Young people need to be treated more attentively and with greater respect by politicians and other adults. Politicians need to show young people that they listen and pay attention to their views on civic and political matters. There should be better and more concrete responses by politicians and political institutions to specific forms of youth participation – such as public protests or student demonstrations – so that young people can feel that their voices are being heard. Furthermore, politicians and political institutions at all levels (local, national and European) need to engage in better and more effective communication with young people, so that young people can feel that political systems are interested in and concerned with their needs and perspectives on political and civic affairs.

Actions which can be taken by media producers and media organisations

Those who produce content for the mass media should avoid using distorted images and stereotypes of youth, women, ethnic minorities and migrants in their media productions, and should ensure that they

do not contribute to the dissemination and perpetuation of myths about these groups. In particular, the news media should represent the participatory actions of young people – such as participation in protests and demonstrations – with greater fairness, respect and seriousness, so that young people can feel that their arguments and positions are being accurately and impartially represented by the news media.

Actions which can be taken by schools and youth organisations

Schools and youth organisations should provide a greater range of opportunities for young people to obtain practical experience of active civic and political participation, and should facilitate positive high quality participation experiences through school projects and volunteering activities that are embedded in the local community in particular. Schools and youth organisations should also be more active in raising awareness among young people of campaigns and projects involving environmental, humanitarian and human rights issues at the international or global level, and should encourage young people to obtain participatory experiences by joining these campaigns and projects.

Actions which can be taken by ethnic community organisations

Ethnic community organisations should encourage young people from ethnic minority and migrant backgrounds to take part as volunteers in projects involving their own ethnic community. Such projects might, for example, focus on heritage and cultural issues, promote the role of their own community in a multicultural environment, challenge ethnic stereotypes, or promote inclusion. Youth from ethnic minority and migrant backgrounds should also be encouraged to become actively involved in environmental, humanitarian, human rights or governance issues in their families' countries of origin.

Greater attention to gender issues is required

Governments should promote and implement equal rights and equal access policies more effectively, with the goal of achieving equal access to education, work and politics for women. Gender equity should be guaranteed in the political and institutional spheres. Furthermore, government institutions should use an approach to the monitoring of political, civic and work issues which is sensitive to the interests, approaches and needs of both women and men.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Objectives

PIDOP is a multinational research project funded by the European Commission under the Seventh Framework Programme. The project is examining the processes which influence political and civic participation in eight European states – Belgium, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Sweden, Turkey and the UK.

The research is examining macro-level contextual factors (including historical, political, electoral, economic and policy factors), proximal social factors (including family, educational and media factors) and psychological factors (including motivational, cognitive, attitudinal and identity factors) which facilitate and/or inhibit political and civic

participation.

A distinctive focus of the project is the psychology of the individual citizen and the psychological processes through which macro-level contextual factors and proximal social factors exert their effects upon citizens' participation. Young people, women, minorities and migrants are being examined as four specific groups at risk of political disengagement. The research is exploring the differences as well as the overlap between civic and political engagement.

The overall aim of the project is to explain how and why different forms of participation develop or are hampered among citizens living in different European countries and contexts.

Methodology

The research has involved three strands, as follows:

- New political and psychological theories of political and civic participation have been developed. These theories concern the nature of political and civic participation, the different types of citizens that can be identified on the basis of their patterns of participation, and the various factors and processes which drive citizen participation.
- Existing data from previous surveys have been analysed using advanced statistical techniques. The surveys which have been used include the European Social Survey, Eurobarometer, International Social Survey Programme, Comparative Study of Electoral Systems and the World Values Survey.
- New data on political and civic participation have been collected from ethnic majority and minority populations. These data were collected using both qualitative and quantitative methods, including focus groups, individual interviews and survey methods. Data have been collected in nine different national locations across Europe. In each location, data were collected from members of the ethnic majority group and from members of two ethnic minority or migrant groups. In total, data have been collected from 27 ethnic groups living across Europe.

PROJECT IDENTITY

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Funding scheme

European Commission, Seventh Framework Programme, Socio-economic Sciences and Humanities (SSH), SSH-2007-5.1.1, Democratic "Ownership" and Participation

Duration

May 2009 – April 2012 (36 months)

Budget

EC contribution: € 1,499,839

Project website

<http://www.fahs.surrey.ac.uk/pidop/>

More information

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Further reading**PIDOP policy briefing papers**

PIDOP Policy Briefing Paper No. 1 (2011). *What can be learnt from the analysis of current policies on participation?*

PIDOP Policy Briefing Paper No. 2 (2011). *What do young people believe and think about citizenship and participation?*

PIDOP Policy Briefing Paper No. 3 (2012). *What do existing survey data tell us about citizen participation?*

PIDOP Policy Briefing Paper No. 4 (2012). *What do psychological theories tell us about citizen participation?*

PIDOP Policy Briefing Paper No. 5 (2012). *How do institutional factors affect citizens' political and civic participation?*

PIDOP Policy Briefing Paper No. 6 (2012). *What does quantitative research tell us about youth political and civic participation?*

All policy briefing papers may be freely downloaded from the PIDOP website.

PIDOP conference papers and publications

A large number of papers from the PIDOP project have been produced since 2010. Many of these may be freely downloaded from the PIDOP website.
