



YOUTH AND DEMOCRACY

HOW YOUNG PEOPLE FACING DISADVANTAGE VIEW DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE

ABSTRACT

This policy brief provides insight into how young people who experience socioeconomic disadvantage perceive politics and democracy in their country. It explores how this population assesses the benefits, flaws, and ultimately, relevance, of political participation and the policymaking process, and by proxy, the political system itself. It draws on in-depth focus groups with young people in urban and rural areas and interviews with civil society representatives, policymakers, and academics across Ireland, Poland and Spain.

The findings of the research show that young people who have experienced social marginalisation and relative deprivation in all three countries repeatedly claimed that policymakers do not listen to them and respond to their needs. Instead, they contend that, politicians act essentially to preserve their own position and power. The absence of tangible, positive change in their lives that they can directly attribute to political engagement and policy, has influenced their disengagement and scepticism about politics.

That said, young people involved in the research supported democracy in principle. Their dissatisfaction was based on lack of trust in elected representatives to affect positive socioeconomic change in their lives and to take action on urgent issues that are important to them, from housing to community development to the climate emergency. Correspondingly, young people value more active, local, deliberative democracy and direct action.



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Builders of Progress

Builders of Progress is a FEPS-led series of research outputs that explore the key concerns and aspirations of young Europeans. It examines their opinions on a wide range of social issues, including (in)equality, climate change, political participation and the European Union. In the tradition of FEPS's previous Millennial Dialogue project, a major study is published every four years in which European youth are surveyed across many European countries. You can find the 2022 Builders of Progress survey here: <https://feps-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Builders-of-Progress-Europes-Next-Gen.pdf>.

Between these major outputs, we address important aspects highlighted in the surveys that deserve more attention and a more nuanced, often qualitative, analysis. This present publication is part of such a deep dive, investigating the relationship of disadvantaged young people with democracy in five countries, namely, Ireland, Hungary, France, Poland and Spain.

The research findings of the Builders of Progress series stimulate debate and provide sound advice on how to shape a progressive future with and for young people.

More information on Builders of Progress can be found here: <https://feps-europe.eu/theme/youth-participation/>.



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Introduction

This policy brief is based on in-depth qualitative research between the summers of 2022 and 2023 intended to complement repeated surveys showing disillusionment amongst young people about democracy and declining trust in politics and politicians.¹ Echoing the results of these surveys, the research² found that younger generations of EU citizens are questioning political institutions and their representatives.³ Focusing in particular, on young persons between 18 and 29 years of age and experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage⁴ across Poland, Spain, and Ireland, participants in the focus groups contended that politics and policymaking have little effect on their lives, that it does not matter if they participate or not. In Ireland, for example, a youth worker contacted to help organise a focus group explained that the young people accessing their services did not understand why they would discuss politics, it had little relevance for them. This disengagement was also consistent in two further case studies, France and Hungary, chosen for their divergent national political trends and strength of democratic institutions and processes. The disengagement underpins distancing from formal democratic processes like voting or involvement in civil society to protect rights and ensure government accountability. Inversely, the potential of politics to affect tangible, local change appealed to research participants, indicating how policymakers should respond to their alienation from politics.

Below we provide a brief overview of the economic and political context faced by young people in disadvantaged socioeconomic situations in Europe, before presenting the key findings and recommendations that emerged from our qualitative research.

Economic context

Being a young adult in the EU, especially from a low-income household and ethnic minority, may mean delay in accessing employment, housing, and more general opportunities that would enable leading a fulfilling life. Young adults aged 18-24 years old in the EU are at higher risk of poverty (26.5% in 2022) than any cohort, including under 18s, at 24.7%, and over 65s, at 20.2%. Young women in this cohort are at higher risk of poverty than men, as are young people with lower education levels compared to those with a university degree.⁵ The cost of housing is a significant barrier across the countries, but is worse in Ireland, Spain and Poland. In Spain, only 16% of young people live independently and similarly, in Ireland, 68% of 25–29-year-olds are still living with their parents.

The most telling statistic concerns NEETs, or young people not in education, employment, or training. Experience of being NEET can have long-lasting detrimental consequences for a young person, that include a negative effect on their future employment outcomes and earnings; on their physical and mental health, on the likelihood of difficulties maintaining relationships and on drug and substance abuse, involvement in criminal activities and social exclusion.⁶

Ireland has the lowest percentage of NEETs amongst 15-34 year olds, or 10.3% in 2022, with Poland's rate at 11.7% and Spain's at 13.9%.⁷ These figures are a warning sign, and young people in this group need public support to have a chance of a better life. There is also a clear gendered dimension emerging from data on NEET. In 2022, the gender age gap for NEETS increased in relation to age. For 25–29-year-olds, the NEET rate is consistently higher for women in all EU member states except Finland and Luxembourg.⁸ Nearly one in four NEETs

in Poland are unemployed. The majority are women, most of whom will be taking care of children or relatives. Men become NEETs mostly due to illness, disability or unemployment.⁹

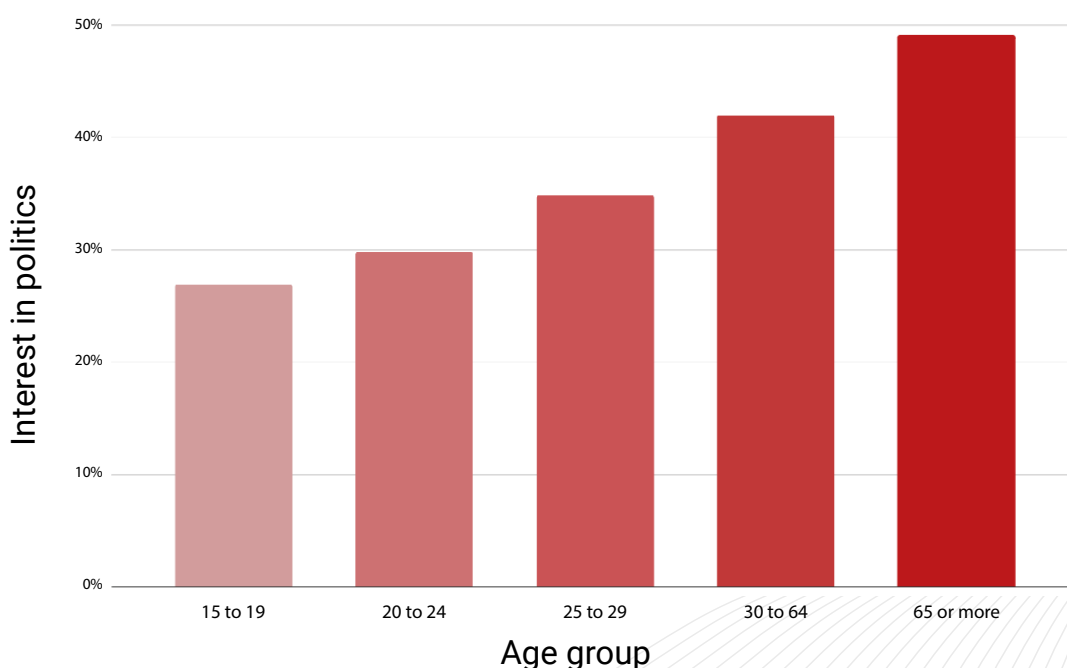
Political context

The political disillusionment among young Europeans is significant, transcending political differences, even in countries as distinct politically, economically, socially, and geographically as Ireland, Poland, and Spain. Despite the varied strength of their democracies – for example, Ireland as an ‘open democracy,’ and Poland a ‘semi-consolidated’ democracy with varying global freedom scores—discontent with politics is similarly high.¹⁰ Economic constraints and the belief that politicians cannot significantly improve young lives have fuelled this sentiment.

Existing research indicates that younger generations show weak support for dominant political parties and exhibit lower political participation, including voting and involvement in political organisations.¹⁰ For example, union membership, a traditional bastion against economic disadvantage, is declining, particularly among younger demographics.¹¹

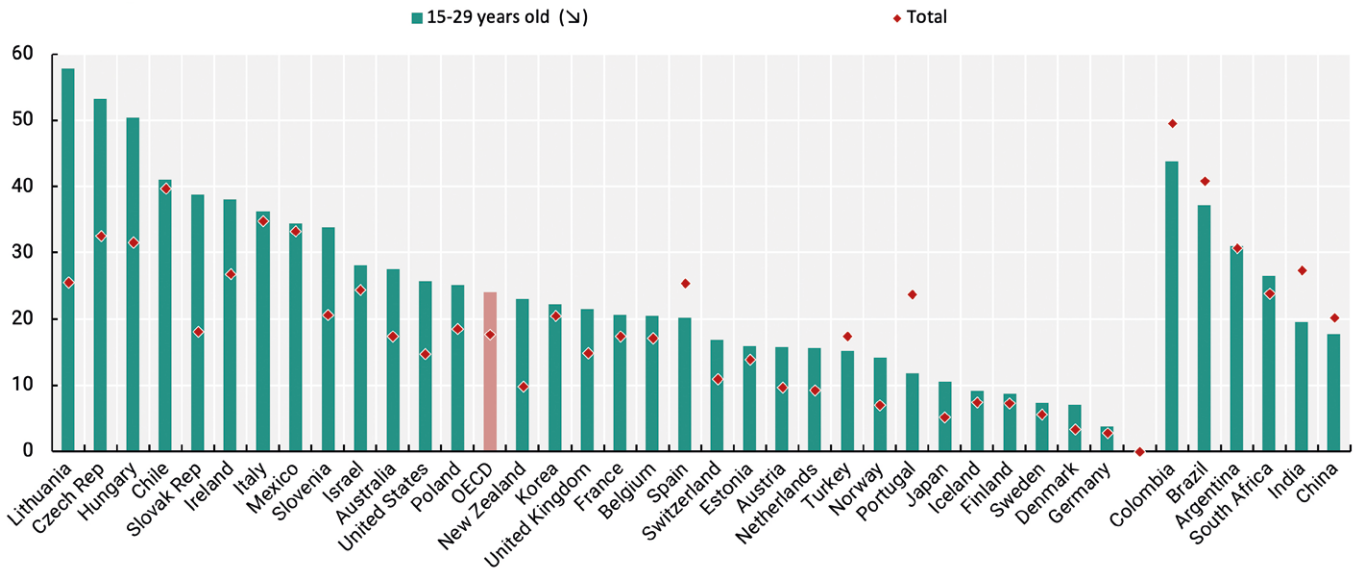
However, the evidence on political interest is somewhat more ambiguous. On the one hand, data reveals that disinterest in politics is common among young Europeans, with significant percentages reporting no interest in various countries (see Figures 1 and 2). A 2023 Polish survey showed that 70% of young respondents prefer avoiding political or social engagement, indicating a lack of perceived personal or collective benefit from politics.¹³ Despite this, the 2023 Polish elections saw record youth turnout, suggesting a distinction between interest in supporting democracy as a system and dissatisfaction with its functioning.

Figure 1. Interest in politics by age group in Europe.



Source: Own elaboration based on data from the ESS and Simón et al.

Figure 2. Percentage of people reporting to be not at all interested in politics, by age group, 2016 or last year available.



Source: European Social Survey ESS8 - 2016, ESS7-2014 and World Values Survey Wave 6: 2010-2014. <https://doi.org/10.1787/888933939788>

Recent studies also show higher levels of discontent among the young than previous generations at similar life stages, partly due to the growing intergenerational divide in life opportunities, and greater dissatisfaction with democracy.¹⁴ At the same time, European Social Survey data from 2018 or pre-Covid shows a relatively small gap between levels of satisfaction with democracy among adults and young people.¹⁵ This suggests that further comparative longitudinal analyses on this topic may be necessary to arrive at more conclusive results.

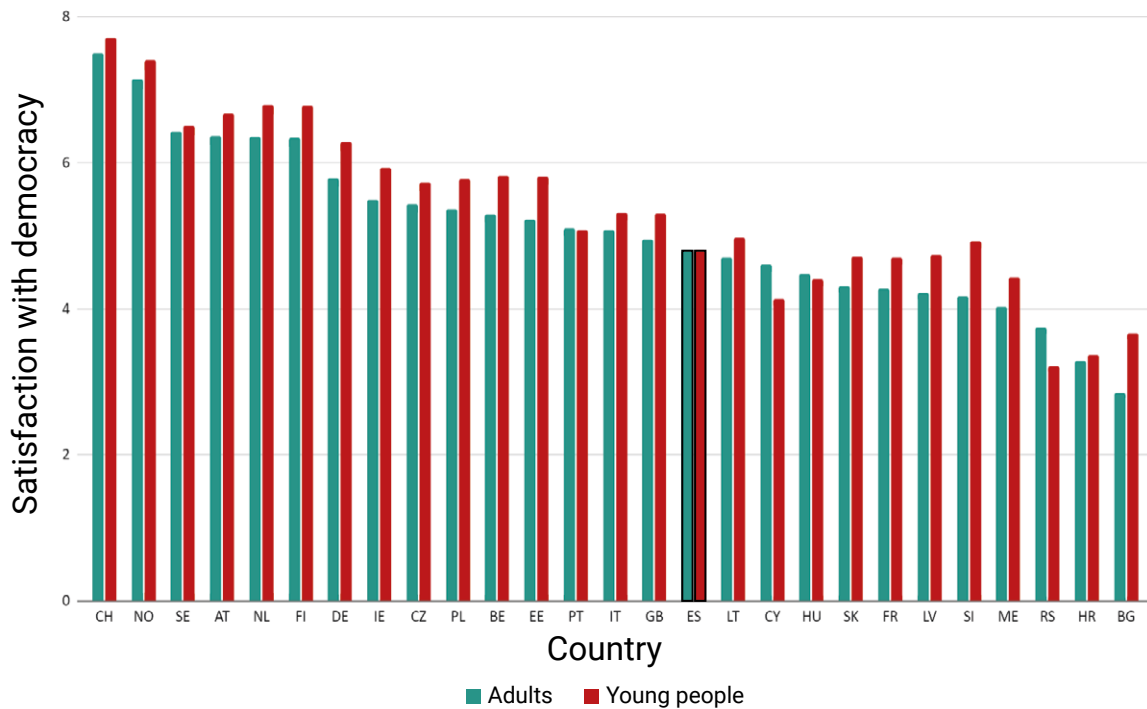
Concerningly, there is a preference among some young people for authoritarian governance styles. Surveys show a significant minority of young adults view non-democratic governance, including military rule, favourably. This trend contrasts sharply with older age groups and indicates a worrying inclination towards autocratic systems. This attitude, driven partly by socioeconomic challenges and

disillusionment with traditional politics, must be taken seriously.¹⁶

Trust in government among young Europeans has also been declining, particularly since Covid, and is lower than their trust in democracy. This mirrors broader trends of distrust in government.¹⁷ One important exception seems to be that trust in local and regional institutions is generally higher than in any other levels of government, showing a potential for engagement.¹⁸

Based on this brief introduction to the data on young people, economic disadvantage and democracy, the qualitative findings emerging from our research suggest that young people's dissatisfaction with democracy has more to do with how it works than with the system itself and is influenced by economic exclusion and social marginalisation. While there is significant disinterest and disillusionment, many young people are still engaged with major issues like

Figure 3. Satisfaction with democracy among adults and young people in Europe in 2018.



Source: Author's own based on European Social Survey data and Simón et al. (2020, p.190).

climate change and local politics.

The following sections summarise the main findings of the research of this report and lay out a range of important recommendations to address them.

Summary of findings

Making politics relevant

Young participants from disadvantaged backgrounds were clear that they need to see politicians focusing on policies relevant to their socioeconomic challenges including:

- Higher than average youth unemployment levels

- Job insecurity and low pay
- Living in areas of the country far from major employment centres
- Caring responsibilities that create barriers to labour market participation
- Mental health issues, which have disproportionately affected younger generations in comparison with other age groups since the COVID-19 crisis.
- A cost-of-living crisis
- Housing and accommodation shortages, which have translated into living with parents and delays in family formation
- Pressures on public health and community-

based support services

- The impact of regional inequalities.

Democracy is valued in principle, but the political system isn't working in practice

The participants in this research clearly valued democracy and democratic government in principle. Building on previous FEPS research, they wanted democracy protected and this was one reason that they wanted a better relationship with democratic institutions and practices. As it stands, this relationship is characterised by:

- Feeling that they are not being listened to
- A pervasive lack of trust in political representatives
- Feeling disconnected from democratic institutions and practices, such as voting, as well as other forms of engagement, like joining a labour union or volunteering for a local organisation
- Defining politics as voting in elections, about politicians and political parties, not about the issues that they face in their lives. Even though they may understand the impact of economic and social issues on their lives better than other groups, they do not frame them within a political discourse and policymaking
- Lack of familiarity with national representatives (more likely if living in rural areas)
- Lack of understanding of formal or upper case parliamentary 'Politics' (more likely in rural areas)
- Being more engaged in local, soft or small 'p'

politics (more likely in rural areas)

Features of the current political system that don't work for young people

Young people expressed dissatisfaction with the practice of politics and politicians. Features of the current political system that do not work for them include:

- Politicians are viewed as self-interested, corrupt and unlikely to change
- Politicians focus on the election cycle rather than being available year round
- Politicians don't spend time in their community
- Lack of responsiveness of institutions e.g. bureaucracy, elitism and lack of access to information
- The absence of concrete benefits from policymaking, especially at a local level; even welfare payment increases or other related policies were not accounted for because they wanted more tangible change within their communities
- Too few routes for them to become exposed to politics and to contribute to policymaking
- Too little recognition of their own concerns, such as climate change
- Lack of access to news on social media that they can trust
- Political parties, union executive committees, and other platforms often do not explicitly include them or provide them opportunities to set an agenda, influencing

their interest and the resonance of politics in their everyday lives

- Their precarity, caused by low pay, unstable employment, housing shortages, among other factors, reduces the time and energy they commit to political participation and civic engagement. It also reduces their belief that the formal political system can do anything to ameliorate their circumstances
- They may have limited exposure to how formal politics works due to insufficient education in schools and related activities
- They face linguistic and cultural obstacles to participation (such as overly technocratic language used by some institutions)
- Political parties and civil society organisations such as trade unions or even NGOs involved in areas like climate change are not seen as a preferred place for connecting and socialising with others, as they may have been for older generations
- There is a perceived stigma and negative social consequences from being identified with a political party
- Politics is seen as having a negative effect on their mental health.

What young people from disadvantaged backgrounds ask of their democracies

- More direct and consistent contact with politicians
- Politicians focusing on policies that are relevant to young people (see above)
- Seeing politicians respond to the issues that

are most urgent to them e.g. climate change

- As evidenced from consistent positive association with youth services, greater investment in activities and platforms for engagement at a local level that focus on young people
- Recognition of the values that are important to young people, such as social justice, fairness, freedom of expression and fulfilment of human potential
- More opportunities to contribute to the policymaking process
- More dynamic, flexible and fluid mechanisms of engagement, which reflect their lifestyles and interests, being able to digitally engage, for example, at times that suits their lifestyles, which may involve irregular working hours
- Seeing positive changes in their local areas
- Less polarising social media and inversely, easier access to trusted information.

Recommendations

Below is a summary of the report's key recommendations:

European Union recommendations

1. Mainstream young people's perspectives across all policymaking, establishing a youth-test¹⁹ for all new EU legislation and policy. This is a key demand coming not only from this research but from the 2022 European Year of Youth consultations.
2. Strengthen cooperation between EU umbrella youth organisations and young

representatives of the EU political parties.

3. Ensure financial support is directed to young people with experience of socioeconomic disadvantage to increase their participation in European politics.
4. Expand participatory and consultative mechanisms for young people, ensuring outcomes are followed up and considered during EU decision-making.
5. Strengthen the EU portfolio for young people by raising the profile of the EU Youth Coordinator, expanding her powers and resources, and allowing for increased youth-mainstreaming across EU institutions. For the same reason, introduce a European Commissioner for Future Generations. This must include providing more opportunities for young people to contribute to policymaking through different EU platforms, as they need to see their generation(s) represented in decision-making.
6. Adapt and improve accessibility, signposting and outreach related to providing information on youth-related policies, programmes and opportunities for engagement to young people with experience of socioeconomic disadvantage.
7. Support member states to gather and analyse data on the use of services such as the EU online youth portal, to identify whether the information it contains is reaching young people with experience of socioeconomic disadvantage.
8. Support member states by building and improving on existing practices of inclusion and diversity assessments of European Union programming related to youth and focusing funding schemes on people with

fewer opportunities.

9. Increase awareness and strengthen protections on social media to support civil and youth organisations whose activities may conflict with government priorities and to counter misinformation and polarising and discriminatory behaviour.
10. Support member states in funding transparent and accessible research on youth policies, collecting gender and age disaggregated data.

Member state recommendations

1. Increase investment in line with the priorities of young people with experience of disadvantage at a national level; with policies that tackle socioeconomic barriers for political participation.
2. Invest in and strengthen youth services, including providing appropriate youth work resources to support participation from immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds.
3. Invest in citizenship and political education throughout the education system.
4. Improve participation of young people facing socioeconomic disadvantage in national politics through better representation on national youth councils, youth branches of political parties, trade unions and non-governmental organisations.
5. To promote the representation of underrepresented groups in political institutions, provide financial support to enable young people with experience of socioeconomic disadvantage to run for election and participate in democratic

processes at a local, regional and national level.

6. Implement direct and deliberative democratic mechanisms. Co-design more flexible/fluid mechanisms of engagement that better involve young people in decision-making.
7. Develop voting systems so that they appeal to young voters. (e.g. simplifying voter registration, using systems that provide a range of options and that are devolved.)
8. Protect the civil and political rights of young people, including their right to participate in a trade union.
9. Encourage political parties to engage better with young people, get them interested in politics and include issues relevant to them in their programmes.
10. Improve cooperation between representative student organisations and unions.
11. Provide multi-annual funding for civil society organisations working with young people developing participation and providing them with political information.
12. Develop digital democracy including addressing digital exclusion; improving digital infrastructure and developing democratic digital tools that are safe, easily accessible, unrestricted and user friendly.

other mechanisms which enhance youth ownership.

2. Improve communication between young people and local politicians.
3. Improve citizenship and political education throughout the education system.
4. Ensure schools are democratic organisations.
5. Build capacity of local community organisations that can play a significant role in education and promote an understanding of democratic values, including investing in youth services.

Country-specific recommendations are provided at the end of the main report.

Local and regional-level recommendations

1. Build participation of young people in the local community, particularly in rural areas and in local politics e.g. in some countries, this would include making greater use of participatory budgeting and

Endnotes

1 See for example, European Social Survey ESS8 - 2016, ESS7-2014 and World Values Survey Wave 6: 2010-2014. <https://doi.org/10.1787/888933939788>; Open Society Barometer (2023) Can Democracy Deliver? <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/e6cd5a09-cd19-4587-aa06-368d3fc78917/open-society-barometer-can-democracy-deliver-20230911.pdf> and Foa, R.S., Klassen, A., Wenger, D., Rand, A. and M. Slade. 2020. "Youth and Satisfaction with Democracy: Reversing the Democratic Disconnect?" Cambridge, United Kingdom: Centre for the Future of Democracy.

2 In the research, a 'young' person was defined as between 18-29 years old. This age limit allowed for the legal right to vote and finishing secondary education. The research focused on young people who have not necessarily pursued third level education and are from rural and urban areas of high deprivation. The focus groups aimed to include ethnic minorities and a gender balance.

3 Mounk, Y., Foa, R.S. (2016) The danger of deconsolidation: The democratic disconnect. *Journal of democracy*, 27:3, pp. 5-17. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-danger-of-deconsolidation-the-democratic-disconnect/>.

4 Defined as young people who have a relatively low household income, have grown up in an area of high deprivation, have not attended university (except under special access programmes aimed at young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, as was the case in Ireland) and, if not in education or training, are not in employment or work in low-paid and precarious jobs.

5 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_-_poverty_and_social_exclusion&oldid=584082#Key_findings

6 Scottish Government (2015) "Consequences, risk factors, and geography of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET)", 26 October. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/consequences-risk-factors-geography-young-people-education-employment-training-neet/>

7 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_young_people_neither_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training#The_NEET_rate_within_the_EU_and_its_Member_States_in_2022

8 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_young_people_neither_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training#The_NEET_rate_within_the_EU_and_its_Member_States_in_2022

9 Komuda (2022).

10 Civicus Monitor is an online tool that allows you to access live updates from civil society around the world, track threats to civil society and learn about the ways in which our right to participate is being realised or challenged. It rates 195 countries on a five point scale from open to closed. It tracks

news and developments in real time related to civic freedoms. See <https://monitor.civicus.org/>. Freedom House is a non-profit organisation based in Washington, D.C. It is best known for political advocacy surrounding issues of democracy, political freedom, and human rights. Since 1973, it has published an annual report, *Freedom in the World*, that assesses the current state of civil liberties and political rights in 195 countries and 15 territories. It uses a two-tiered system consisting of scores and statuses. Total scores across the various categories are based on a 100-point scale and correspond to statuses of Free, Partly Free, and Not Free. See: <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores>.

11 Mair, P. (2013) *Ruling the Void: The hollowing of western democracy*. (London: Verso), p. 42.

12 ETUC Youth Committee (2021) "Recommendations for Engaging Young People in Trade Unions". Guide. European Trade Union Confederation and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung; Vandeale, K. (2000) "Bleak prospects: mapping trade union membership in Europe since 2000". Report. European Trade Union Institute. European Trade Union Confederation.

13 Tilles, D. (2023) "One third of young Poles plan to vote for far right with 80% 'frustrated at political situation'". Notes from Poland, 25 June.

14 Foa, R.S., A. Klassen, D. Wenger, et al. (2020) "Youth and Satisfaction with Democracy: Reversing the Democratic Disconnect?". Report. Bennett Institute for Public Policy, Centre for the Future of Democracy.

15 Simón, P., S. Clavería, G. García-Albacete et al. (2020) "Informe Juventud En España 2020". Report. Injuve Instituto de la Juventud; p.190.

16 Peiris, C. and N. Samarasinghe (2023) "Open Society Barometer: Can Democracy Deliver?". Report. Open Society Foundations; Stanley, L., W. Tanner, J. Treadwell et al. (2022) "The Kids Aren't Alright". Report. Repairing our Social Fabric Programme, Onward Think Tank, p. 19.

17 "Democracy and trust during COVID-19". Eurofound website.

18 Arrighi, J.F., J. Battestini, L. Coatleven et al. (2022) "The scale of trust: Local, regional, national and European Politics in Perspective". Working Paper. Groupe d'études géopolitiques.

19 A Youth Test is an impact assessment tool that ensures that young people are considered when new policies and laws are decided. It would allow the creation of better policies that are long-lasting and impactful, while reducing inequalities and considering the needs of both current and future generations. See European Committee of the Regions (2022) "EU Charter on Youth and Democracy". Charter. European Committee of the Regions and European Youth Forum.

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She studied at Princeton University and at the University of California, Berkeley, where she received a PhD in Sociology. Her PhD analysed the political and social consequences of market reform policies in Morocco for young, educated men and women. Since then, she has continued to conduct research on how economic policies have influenced political and social identity, particularly in relation to collective action and social activism.

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Beyond academic research, Shana has extensive experience working with NGOs and community-based organisations in several countries, including Morocco, the US, the UK, and India. This work has involved project design, management, and evaluation as well as advocacy. She has consulted for the World Bank, the Grameen Bank Foundation, and other private foundations and trusts.

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