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Grasso, Maria; Giugni, Marco

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Special Issue Introduction

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Youth doing politics in times of increasing inequalities

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Maria Grasso
Queen Mary University of London, UK

Marco Giugni
University of Geneva, Switzerland

Abstract

Particularly in the current context of rapid political change, it is crucial to understand the political participation of young people and what underpins their political engagement patterns as well the as the inequalities that may lie beneath them. While there is a rich literature on youth participation, to date we have lacked the data to carry out detailed subgroup analyses to understand differences in the political participation between different groups of youth cross-nationally. The papers in this Special Issue all examine different aspects of youth participation in the current context. They examine key questions for participation including the inequalities, socialising influences, polarisation, online participation, radical political views, tolerance, life engagement and opportunities for social inclusion. This Special Issue thus provides a contemporary analysis of youth participation in Europe in the current historical juncture.

Keywords

inequalities, political engagement, political participation, protest, youth politics

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Youth political participation has been the subject of much research and debate and there has been much discussion of the decline of youth participation – particularly institutional or 'conventional' political participation (Grasso, 2016). Many such discussions have been framed around the 'youth deficit' model, assuminug that adults need to politically socialise young people (Earl et al., 2017). However, there are examples everywhere around us of young people actively involved in their own political socialisation and in a wide array of political activities of various sorts – most commonly those related to social movements and so-called 'unconventional' or extra-institutional modes of political participation (Giugni and Grasso, 2019a). Moreover, historically, youth have been understood to have

Corresponding author:
Maria Grasso, Queen Mary University of London, London E1 4NS, UK.
Email: m.grasso@qmul.ac.uk

spearheaded protest movements for radical change worldwide such as, for example, the 1968 revolts around the globe or the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 (Bessant and Grasso, 2019; Grasso and Bessant, 2018). While authors focusing on more traditional or formal types of participation linked to voting, political parties and civic engagement in traditional organisations such as those linked to churches, have tended to find that young people are participating in these activities at lower rates than older citizens (Putnam, 2000), scholars looking at protest activism and other new forms of participation such as engagement in social movements, tend to argue that the forms of activism of the young generation are simply different (Dalton, 2009).

Moreover, taking a generational perspective, studies have shown that while the oldest generations coming of age before the radical 1960–1970s are the most engaged with parties and electoral politics, the 'protest generation' of the baby-boomers is very active in protest activism - so that some of the younger generations are not engaged in these to the same level (Grasso, 2014, 2016). At the population level, protest activism has risen as more and more people have come of age that engage in protest more than the oldest generations being replaced. However, it is not guaranteed that each new generation will be more radical than the next (Grasso, 2014). The current context may lead to more or less progressive cohorts than previous periods; this remains an empirical question for investigation. According to post-materialist theory (Inglehart, 1977), it is the affluence of the post-war period that has contributed to the rising liberalism of younger generations (see also Grasso et al., 2018). However, the context of economic crisis of recent years may nonetheless be seen to be politicising younger generations into political action (Grasso et al., 2019a). Whether this is above all through leftist movements and progressive politics, as has traditionally been the case for youth, or whether instead more right-wing organisations espousing exclusionary politics are also playing a role for the politicisation of youth in the current historical juncture, remains the subject of study.

The current Special Issue looks at young people's political engagement in a juncture marked by the aftermath of the Great Recession and a context of rising inequalities (Giugni and Grasso, 2019b). Young people coming of age in this context have had to face a number of challenges in their formative years (Giugni and Grasso, 2021b). It has been said that in these times we see a 'democratic paradox' in European politics. While young citizens are likely to disengage from institutional politics, they are at the same more likely to have idealist notions about what democratic participation should be like and therefore to be extremely ambitious in terms of what they would like politics to be and how involved they say they want to be (Giugni and Grasso, 2021a). This may lead to a greater gap between their ideals and the reality of politics on the ground. Moreover, this paradox suggests that researchers should be increasingly involved in carrying out more detailed analyses of the participation patterns of young citizens.

We have seen for example that while there is disengagement from conventional politics, young people have also engaged in great numbers in what are in fact high-cost types of political participation which require a range of resources, time and sustained effort such as those linked to their involvement in anti-austerity movements (Grasso and Giugni, 2016). Occupy and the *Indignados* are examples of movements that have emerged during the economic crisis and have been especially popular among the young. They have challenged the current democratic deficit and contested the message that there is no alternative to austerity and neoliberalism. Across Europe, we know that youth face many problems today that in many ways make their living situation more precarious than that of older generations: the recent pandemic, economic and political crises occurring during

their formative years, high levels of youth unemployment particularly in Southern Europe, lower chances of inter-generational mobility, the closing off of borders, less freedom of movement, more divided societies, rising extremism and declining tolerance, psychologically stressful and uncertain times during youth, less old age support with the loss of pensions and contractions of the welfare state, and so forth. Given all this, and more, it is therefore perhaps not all that surprising that recent years have seen many youth protests and mobilisations, including the various Occupy and May-15 or *Indignados* movements, and many others such as the recent students' Climate Strikes around the globe.

Young people have been the driving forces of political participation that aims to change societies and political systems throughout history. Therefore, it is more likely that rather than their withdrawal from formal politics being explained by their being depoliticised, that young people in different national contexts are unsatisfied with many of the features of contemporary politics, including its lack of real choices and the absence of democratic debate on their issues of preference, and the widespread challenges to enacting meaningful policy changes (Giugni and Grasso, 2018). In turn, these patterns may be giving rise to young people's engagement in alternative politics and thus their participation in politics through channels which are alternatives to the traditional modes of parties and elections – such as in youth organisations, through unconventional modes of participation, social media and various forms of democratic innovation and experimentation (Giugni and Grasso, 2019c). Today, political participation that goes beyond traditional modes such as voting and joining political parties, involves a large number of potential actions such as demonstrating, petitioning, consumer politics, participating in issue-based organisations, claims-making and opinion - shaping through the media. Moreover, the rise of lifestyle politics and also of new online media and social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, etc has meant that young people have been able to engage in more expressive ways. In this optic, the expression of identity and the construction of one's own sense of community through the Internet, often based around identity politics and campaigning around issues surrounding the politics of recognition, takes primary focus. On the other hand, online participation may have at the same time further exacerbated inequalities in political action between young haves and have nots (see Grasso and Giugni, 2021 in this Special Issue).

For all these reasons and more, scholars agree that studying youth political participation is important for a variety of reasons. One of them is that understanding the political behaviour of youth provides the key to understanding the future (Grasso, 2016). Particularly in the current context of rapid political change, it is vital to understand the political participation of young people and what underpins their political engagement patterns as well as the inequalities that may lay beneath them. While there is a rich literature on youth participation (e.g. Bessant, 2021; Earl et al., 2017; Giugni and Grasso, 2021a; Pickard, 2019; Sloam and Henn, 2019), to date we have lacked the data to carry out detailed subgroup analyses to understand differences in the political participation between different groups of youth. The papers in this Special Issue all examine different aspects of youth participation in the current context. They examine key questions for participation including the role of inequalities, socialising influences, polarisation, online participation, radical political views, tolerance, life engagement and opportunities for social inclusion.

In this way, this Special Issue provides a detailed analysis of youth participation in Europe in the current historical juncture. Results presented in the articles in this Special Issue have been obtained by analysing data collected within the project "Reinventing Democracy in Europe: Youth Doing Politics in Times of Increasing Inequalities"

(EURYKA). This project was funded by the European Commission under H2020 (grant agreement no. 727025). The Swiss part of the project was supported by the Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) under contract number 16.0103. The CAWI survey was run through Qualtrics with the scientific supervision of Maria Grasso and collected data in nine European countries: Germany, Greece, France, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK on the general population (N ~ 9000) as well as oversamples (N ~ 18,000) of young people using quotas for age, gender, region and education. The project team developed the survey questionnaire to address our research questions of interest on youth politics. The Special Issue therefore examines youth participation in times of increasing inequalities by analysing a novel source of data thus providing new insights on a variety of important questions for understanding youth inequalities in participation across the nine European countries covered by the project.

The papers in this Special Issue all look at key areas of study with respect to youth political engagement and are able to do so thanks to the particularly rich data collected in the course of the project. In particular, this allows for zooming in on young people and understanding underlying patterns which have been hitherto hard to glean in comparative perspective given the low samples of young people in mainstream cross-national surveys thus not allowing for sub-group disaggregated analysis. Within this wider framework and intellectual contribution to scholarship on young people's political engagement, the first two papers included in this Special Issue look mainly at inequalities in political participation and engagement. They focus in particular on two aspects which are normally central in the literature on political inequalities in general – class (Evans and Tilley, 2017) and gender (Kittilson, 2016). While these two aspects have always been important areas of study for political inequality, given the unique data on youth, a critical innovation of the current papers is that with the youth oversamples across countries they allow for a detailed analysis of inequalities within the age group of young people in particular. This allows for analysing the current state of play among this new generation and not simply among the general population where past and current trends in political inequality may be confounded as the patterns for older generations are more likely to have been influenced by past conditions. In this way, these papers allow us to paint a clear, comparative picture of the current state of youth political inequalities in terms of class and gender.

Research has shown inequalities in political participation stem from a variety of socio-demographic factors including class, gender, and also others such as ethnicity and race, particularly with work in the US (Earl et al., 2017). Individuals from lower classes are understood to have lower levels of resources and to have struggled more in the economic crisis (Grasso et al., 2019b) and also to possess lower levels of skills to participate politically (Verba et al., 1995). Henn and Foard (2014) have shown for Britain how social class and educational history, ethnicity, and to a lesser extent, gender, differentiate youth in their political disengagement. The papers in this Special Issue look at youth across Europe comparatively and show important inequalities by class but less so by gender.

Gender differences, as with class, have been documented for a long time, although in many ways ongoing societal processes lead us to think that these should be decreasing over time owing to women's greater participation in the public sphere. Research has shown how young women are particularly penalised through the deficit model (Taft, 2014) since activist identities often devalue their girl identity making the process of fitting these together more challenging (Keller, 2012; Taft, 2010). Girls are more likely to define politics more narrowly which then results in their not realising their interests as 'political' even when in fact they are (Taft, 2006). Parents are also more likely to oppose girls' activism (McAdam, 1986) and girls may also face sexism in organisations (Gordon, 2008).

The paper on 'Intra-generational inequalities in young people's political participation in Europe: The impact of social class on youth political engagement', by Grasso and Giugni (2021), in this Special Issue, has as its key aim that of examining the role of social class – historically one of the major sources of political inequality in democracies. The paper breaks new ground in examining the role of inequalities by class for political engagement and participation among youth itself. Looking at participation in a wide variety of political activities, including community and online forms of political participation, as well as at political efficacy and democratic attitudes, the results clearly show major class inequalities. This paper therefore shows that, even among young people, class background still plays an important role for the extent to which young people coming from different social groups with different levels of political resources have political say. Already from youth, young people from lower class backgrounds are less politically engaged than their middle-class contemporaries. This finding shows that class inequalities even in democracies have profound roots and therefore they will be particularly challenging to eradicate without major social change. This translates into saying that political inequality itself is unlikely to be reduced in the near future in the absence of concerted political action.

As noted, historically, another important form of inequality for political participation has been by gender. The paper on 'Gender inequalities in political participation and political engagement among young people in Europe: Are young women less politically engaged than young men?' by Grasso and Smith (2021), in this Special Issue, examines gender inequalities in participation in various modes of conventional and unconventional activism as well as related attitudes and key determinants. Results show that the extent of gender inequalities is less marked than one might expect. Gender gaps in political participation, and particularly in those activities such as confrontational protest, are small or absent; young women are actually more active relative to young men in petitioning, boycotting and volunteering in the community. Young men are more active relative to young women with respect to more institutional forms of participation linked to organisations and parties, online political participation, and wider political engagement measures such as political efficacy and consumption of political news. These patterns suggest that political inequalities between men and women may well be shrinking into the future.

The other papers in this Special Issue move on to looking at socialisation both by practicing democracy within educational establishments specifically and also by looking at different spheres and practices as well as their impact on action repertoires. As noted by Earl et al. (2017), one of the early strands of research on youth political participation – particularly from the US – comes from studies on various forms of campus activism, commencing with the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. In particular, the work of McAdam (1986) looked at the 1964 Freedom Summer campaign to register African Americans in Mississippi to vote. The Free Speech Movement at Berkeley-University of California, the anti-Vietnam movement, and women's movement are other important examples. That campuses have traditionally ended up being important laboratories for activism makes sense for a number of reasons. Much like the factory for the Marxist working class, they first provide a locus for students from different backgrounds to come together and to share ideas in a context that encourages an understanding of social problems as common and shared as members of a class and therefore as requiring collective solutions. Moreover, students tend to be relatively time rich and lacking in family or work commitments, meaning that they are particularly biographically available for activism (Beyerlein and Bergstrand, 2013; McAdam, 1986).

Many studies of campus activists showed how social movement participation itself has important biographical consequences (Giugni, 2004; Giugni and Grasso, 2016; McAdam, 1989). Young people more generally are also more likely to be 'biographically available' for political activism as they generally have few commitments and more time (as tends also to be found for unemployed, unmarried, and childless people) (McAdam, 1989). More broadly, starting from the seminal work of Karl Mannheim (1928), the socialisation literature has looked at political development during youth as the critical impressionable, formative years. Experiences during this period are understood to be critical and to distinguish between generations in their behavioural patterns which are understood to crystallise and prolong throughout the life-course (Grasso et al., 2017). Moreover, as argued by Earl et al. (2017), young people take an active part in their political socialisation. While families, schools, service activities and other forms of political involvement may provide 'raw material' such as 'knowledge models and reflective matter', it is youth who make sense of these experiences (Youniss et al., 2002). Families and networks expose youth to political conversations, experiences with the political process and information on how it operates (Ojeda and Hatemi, 2015) and schools often introduce them to issues, means to express their opinions and participation (Kahne et al., 2013). These spheres of socialisation may further play roles by mediating how youth engage (Hensby, 2014; Lee et al., 2013; Nekmat et al., 2015).

In the paper on 'Broadening political participation: The impact of socialising practices on young people's action repertoires', by Holecz et al. (2021), in this Special Issue, the focus is on looking at some of the expectations of the civic voluntarism model proposed by Verba and his collaborators to refine our understanding of the role of socialisation for political engagement. They suggest that embeddedness in certain social spheres and socialising practices – the educational, the civic, and the leisure spheres, that is, in schools, community organisations and social clubs – lead to a broader range of political activities among young people and more so for the civic sphere.

The impact of socialising practices – in this case of democratic practice during the school years – is also examined from a different angle in the paper on 'Learning by doing: The impact of experiencing democracy in education on political trust and participation', by Kiess (2021), in this Special Issue. The article looks at political engagement in school or university – for example, as speaker of class, a member of a student council, and so on – to see if this type of behaviour impacts on political participation and political trust. The paper theorises based on interactionist socialisation theory that this type of engagement in the early years of young adulthood in schools and universities should foster citizenship, experience of democratic decision-making, support for democracy, and, importantly, political participation. Results show that respondents who experienced democracy voted and engaged also in contentious forms of political participation more often than those who did not. Moreover, these experiences were also linked to higher trust in political institutions and this, in turn, increased the likelihood of voting (however, not of engaging in other participatory forms). As such the paper underlines how socialisation experiences linked with democratic practice relate to active participation.

Finally, the last pair of papers in this Special Issue move on to issues that are particularly prominent today for young people's political participation with the rise of the far right and anti-immigrant groups in many countries – intolerance and radicalism (see also Giugni and Grasso, 2021c; Karampampas et al., 2020; Lahusen and Grasso, 2018; Yoxon et al., 2019), – as well as the increased use of online modes of political engagement. One paper examines the relationship between online engagement and intolerance and the other looks

at radicalism among youth. In recent years, a growing number of studies have examined intolerance and exclusionary views particularly with respect to the rise of radical right parties and the presence of online networks of far-right groups. Social media today are a key method by which young people engage with political issues and activism (Maher and Earl, 2016). Research has also shown how the Internet can influence political socialisation (Boulianne, 2015) and provides participatory opportunities (Xenos et al., 2014).

Janmaat and Keating (2017) have shown for young people in Britain that they may not be more tolerant than older age groups and/or previous generations as is often argued. The authors note how, while young people today are less intolerant towards racial minorities and homosexuality, they are more intolerant of immigrants. Literature on the radical right has shown that socially disconnected individuals from lower socio-economic constituencies (Lubbers and Scheepers, 2007; Mudde, 2007; Norris, 2005) and those who express economic worries (Miller-Idriss, 2018) are more likely to hold radical right attitudes. Women are seen as having political values less conducive to radical-right support (Caughey et al., 2019; Gidengil et al., 2003). Moreover, women may feel uncomfortable in the predominantly male chauvinist radical right milieus (Blee and Linden, 2012; Miller-Idriss and Pilkington, 2017).

In the paper on 'The impact of intolerance on young people's online political participation', Bosi et al. (2021) look specifically at the effect of intolerance on a form of participation that has risen to the fore in the more recent context and that youth are often considered to be particularly involved in. The study finds that intolerance is linked to more online political activities among young people and moreover, that rather than being linked to marginalisation and isolation, it is reinforced by participation in offline unconventional forms of participation and social capital. This suggests new forms of online mobilisation even among more exclusionary groups – a challenge to the usually-accepted version of leftist, universalist youth getting involved in political action for progressive social change such as for example the Fridays for the Future that have become prominent recently. This paper thus reminds us of the multiplicity of youth engagement and of the fact that the recent context has also seen the rise of more exclusionary and right-wing movements and that political action and participation are not merely the preserve of those on the left in the present day.

Finally, the paper on 'Explaining youth radicalism as a positioning of the self at opposite extremes', by Uba and Bosi (2021), in this Special Issue, looks at a question linked to the attitudinal domain with respect to what is often seen as youth's radicalism. In particular, they examine the differences between young people holding radical-right and radical-left attitudes. Both groups of young people appear to have experienced economic difficulties and to have engaged in more contentious modes of political action; they are however differentiated by gender and authoritarianism with leftists being more female and rightists more authoritarian (see also Grasso and Giugni, 2019). As such, this study links back to other studies suggesting that economic challenges may be related to radicalism and contentious participation while noting that radicalisation of political values among youth may follow different paths – a more leftist and libertarian one among women, and a more right-authoritarian one among young males.

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ORCID iDs

Maria Grasso https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6911-2241
Marco Giugni https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7210-339X

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Author biographies

Maria Grasso is Professor at the School of Politics and International Relations at Queen Mary University of London, United Kingdom. She is European Editor of *Mobilization* and author of *Generations, Political Participation and Social Change in Western Europe* (Routledge 2016), *Street Citizens: Protest Politics and Social Movement Activism in the Age of Globalization* (Cambridge University Press 2019, with Marco Giugni), and *Living with Hard Times: Europeans in the Great Recession* (ECPR Press 2021, with Marco Giugni). Her papers have appeared in *British Journal of Political Science, European Journal of Political Research, International Political Science Review, European Political Science Review, Electoral Studies*, and other journals.

Marco Giugni is professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations and director of the Institute of Citizenship Studies (InCite) at the University of Geneva, Switzerland. His research focuses on social movements and political participation. He is European Editor of *Mobilization*.