

GULBENKIAN STUDIES

# The Political Participation of Youth in Portugal

Executive Summary



CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN  
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# The Political Participation of Youth in Portugal

## Executive Summary\*

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\* This document is an English translation of the original written in Portuguese.

## Executive summary

This report offers several points for reflection with regard to a study on the Political Participation of Youth in Portugal for the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, supported by five key components:

1. Secondary data from the European Social Survey from 2002 to 2019;
2. An original survey of the Portuguese population aged 15 and up;
3. Interviews of members of partisan and civic youth organizations;
4. Online ethnography of activist collectives from different parts of the country, focused on different causes and having different political positions;
5. Focus groups with activist youth having a wide range of orientations and causes: nationalism, anti-fascism, environment and climate change, gender equality, LGBTQ+ and student issues.

These discussion points revolve around six issues which are discussed throughout the report. This executive summary aligns the main facts and trends found in the various components of the study which provide a starting point for the discussion.

1. The commonly held notion that we are witnessing an **overall decline in the political participation of youth in Portugal is not supported** by available data.
  - It is true that there are more “conventional” forms of participation geared towards the party system (voting, campaign rallies, participation in other partisan activities) where young people participate systematically less than older people. But this does not hold true for other forms of political participation, as we will discover below.
  - While voter turnout among youth is indeed on the decline – today much lower than the same cohort in most consolidated democracies in Western Europe – the largest decline in this participation in Portugal was not even among these young people in recent years.
  - Although there are several forms of participation in which Portuguese youth were less involved than their European counterparts, this hardly constitutes a specific trait of Portuguese youth, but rather of the Portuguese in general.
2. However, there is more: a longitudinal perspective suggests that **some forms of non-electoral political participation of the Portuguese in general – and youth in particular – have been on the rise**, especially in the last

decade, lessening or even neutralizing differences vis-à-vis the European average. More specifically, in terms of what could be called “civic participation” – donating money or fundraising for a social, civic or political activity, buying or boycotting certain products on political grounds or to help the environment, or signing petitions – there are signs that **youth have been the leading protagonists in this upsurge of non-electoral social political mobilization.**

3. The domain in which **youth play a particularly noteworthy and distinctive role in terms of political participation is the one we simply call “online participation”** – participating in Internet discussion groups or forums and posting, commenting on or sharing political content in social networks. Even when controlling for income, education and other variables, it is young people aged 15-24 who most often use these forms of political participation.
4. Compared to their older fellow citizens, **youth also exhibit higher levels of “political self-efficacy” and “external political efficacy”**. This means that two individual beliefs – that i) one can influence political processes, and ii) the political system is willing to listen to people’s demands and opinions – are more prevalent among youth (aged 15-24) compared to other age groups. Conversely, **there seems to be no relationship between respondents’ age and the sharing of populist stances**, defined as those who envisage society as being divided between two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the “corrupt elite” and the “virtuous people.”
5. The relatively low levels of “conventional” political participation among youth are echoed by the prevailing representations, even among the tiny minority of those who engage in partisan activism. Among these, there is a frequently held belief that **the parties themselves have inadequate communication and mobilization strategies** for young people, as well as a **predominantly instrumental vision** of juvenile structures. The inability to give young people prominent positions in internal structures is seen as a sign of incapacity or unwillingness to include their viewpoints, and the attribution of eligible positions is seen as dependent on mechanisms which are far from institutionalized.
6. That said, there are hardly any differences between youth-related issues promoted in partisan political agendas and the issues of greatest importance to partisan youth members: education, training and employment. Civic associations, on the other hand, give greater emphasis on the issues of citizenship and equality.
7. In contrast to partisan activism, civic participation – channelled through associations – is seen as a more direct and immediate way of getting results, with greater social and territorial proximity, giving more voice to participants, and are seen as less hierarchical, despite the more ephemeral nature of their activities. Despite highlighting the convenience of synergies between political parties and associations, young people involved in associations point to the risks of such cooperation, whether for reasons of reputation (“the negative image of parties”), or because these synergies can limit associations’ freedom to act.

8. An analysis of the actions and perceptions of members of youth activist collectives geared towards specific causes (climate, nationalist, anti-fascist, LGBTQ+/feminist), and focused on non-conventional and expressive forms of participation, reveals several common traits which transcend the differences — and, in some cases, the rivalry — between their ideas and causes: the creation of a threat in relation to a shared future and a sense of urgent action, an urgency which the “system” is seen as denying or even hiding; an emphasis on a “performance” aspect of action over words; and the building of an emotional identity which mobilizes resistance in public spaces, both online and offline, without neglecting either one.
9. As in civic associations, participants in these emerging forms of youth activism do not completely overlook the importance of the “conventional” arena, finding meaning and impact in voter turnout, even as a bulwark for democracy. However, voting is usually not the most significant or challenging participatory experience in their individual journeys. It is seen as overly “institutionalized” and limited in its influence: “politics is not in the Parliament” and “democracy cannot and should not end at the ballot box”.

## Introduction

This study, whose main results and ensuing observations are presented in this summary report, was sponsored by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in cooperation with the Aveiro, Lisbon, Minho and Porto universities. Its main goal is to explore political participation of youth in Portugal. Specifically, it aims to analyse comparative trends in youth political participation in recent decades; to give a detailed portrayal of the current (2020) political attitudes and behaviours of young people; to study the relationship between youth and political parties and associations; and, finally, to examine emerging forms of youth activism. For this purpose, this study used primary and secondary data obtained from the following sources:

1. European Social Survey from 2002 to 2019;
2. A survey of the Portuguese population aged 15 and up, with an oversampling of youth (aged 15-24) and “young adults” (aged 25-34), in the last quarter of 2020;
3. Interviews of members of partisan and civic youth organizations;
4. Online ethnography of activist collectives from different parts of the country, focused on different causes and having different political positions;
5. Focus groups with activist youth having a wide range of orientations and causes: nationalism, anti-fascism, environment and climate change, gender equality, LGBTQ+ and student issues.

This report offers several points of reflection with regard to the study, revolving around six of its key issues. The answers reflect the perspectives which emerged from the different methodological approaches employed.

Question one:

**Can one say there has been an overall decline in political participation among youth in Portugal? Or have there been phases or time periods with different trends? If so, what phase are we in?**

The answer to this question, first and foremost, requires some reflection on the existence of different types of political participation. These days, participation is a simultaneously more “liquid” and “broader” phenomenon in its different modes. Although there is a positive correlation in the use of these modes — those who use certain ones more also tend to use other ones more — this relationship is moderate or weak in intensity. In other words, although more participation in a given mode tends to be associated with more participation in another, this relationship is not particularly strong. In a comparative analysis of the findings of the 2020 survey versus those of 2007, we can see that young people (aged 15-24) have higher participation from a **civic standpoint**, including

behaviour such as donating money or fundraising for a social, civic or political activity, buying or boycotting certain products on political grounds or to help the environment, or signing a petition. Conversely, with regard to the aspect of **conventional collective** participation, there is a decline or stagnation compared to the 2007 survey, with less participation in campaign rallies for a party or a candidate.

These data are partially borne out by the European Social Survey, which shows no signs of waning youth participation in terms of signing petitions, participating in demonstrations (partisan or otherwise), contacting politicians, working for parties and civic associations or boycotting products on political grounds. To the contrary: various forms of participation have been on the rise, particularly in the second decade of this century, in line with the general increase among the population. In one case — the signing of petitions — this increase was especially high among youth. That said, there is in fact an important form of political participation where young people (aged 18-34) are relatively alienated, whether compared to their older fellow citizens, or to the rest of the world: voting.

Furthermore, specifically in the 2020 survey, whose fieldwork occurred in the last quarter of the year, the fact that there were parliamentary elections in 2019 (on 6 October) could have caused a rise in certain forms of participation in the past year. Even so, these data were collected during the pandemic, which could be tied to higher levels of constraint, given the fact that the holding of these events was significantly more limited.

In summary, on the one hand, there seems to be what Max Kaase calls a “participatory revolution”: the vitality and visibility of a myriad of collectives (activist groups with various degrees of formalization), but also more sporadic and individualized forms of participation (driven by the Internet), with clear youth mobilization on certain topics (environmental, feminist, anti-racist) - highly marked by the media agenda and, at times, more one-off than sustained. On the other hand, there is little engagement in more formal activities (voting being the most alarming example). It must be acknowledged that many young people are not politically active and that this passivity can be attributed to classic variables (gender, social class, region), including education and the inability to decipher complex political jargon. In other cases, the nature of the organizations themselves can be less suited to current conditions (such as trade unions vis-à-vis the mounting precariousness of labour relations); while in others, there seems to be more interest in participating in less hierarchical structures, with more horizontal power and a greater focus on specific causes (such as activist collectives compared to political parties).

Finally, there are phenomena which are more cyclical in nature: while the 2011 crisis and subsequent years clearly galvanized participation, with legacies still visible today, the pandemic resulted in a regression, at least in the street.

Question two:

**Is there a general syndrome of political passivity among youth in Portugal?  
Is there a low political engagement overall, also reflected in attitudes of**

### **disillusionment or alienation in relation to politics? Or is there a selective and “specialized” engagement in particular ways of experiencing the political phenomenon?**

This study demonstrates the importance of adopting a wide-ranging definition of political participation which recognizes a collection of participatory acts beyond conventional ones. In fact, politics and political participation are described by most young respondents as multifaceted phenomena with two key components: being part of a community, and working towards progress and the common good.

The results of the 2020 survey show that youth are currently more interested in politics, and search for political information more often, particularly through social networks. In the interviews, they make a distinction between an interest in politics and political engagement. Young people are interested in political issues (in a broad sense), but do not see themselves in conventional political forums. In addition, while admitting passivity and disinterest among some youth, this phenomenon is attributed to disillusionment with political players (the political class’ lack of credibility is mentioned repeatedly) and their inability to motivate and mobilize younger generations. The findings of the 2020 survey bear out these perceptions since, compared to other age groups, there is greater involvement among youth in non-conventional forms of political participation (**civic and online**), but less frequent behaviours of **conventional collective** political participation, such as involvement in a campaign rally for a party or candidate, or handing out pamphlets with political content. As previously suggested, there is a declining trend towards a form of **conventional** (individual) political participation of great importance: voting in elections.

These low levels of “conventional” participation among Portuguese youth are justified in the interviews by a deep rift between young people’s interest and desire for political participation and the opportunities offered by conventional participation channels, especially political parties. In other words, if there is “alienation”, it exists in relation to the “democratic machine” and not democratic principles, contradicting the argument of the depoliticization or apathy of youth. The low level of confidence in political players is reflected by deep concerns about weak public management, together with perceived corruption in the traditional political sphere.

Both this disconnect, as well as a culture of political passivity perhaps still influenced by dictatorship, help to explain some of this “passivity”. However, the crisis of 2011 (and subsequent years) positively influenced the process of civic and political engagement, with major political movements *outside* the normal means of mobilization – one might even say that this created a “love of the street”, which seems to persist to this day, and is especially evident in the speeches of activists.

Even so, as occurs in the adult population, the young people who participate are a minority; according to data from the European Social Survey, the low levels of participation are not characteristic to Portuguese youth alone. In what concerns non-conventional forms of participation, where Portuguese youth indeed participate less than the European average, the same holds true for their older fellow citizens.

From a comparative standpoint, there are also various forms of political participation in which Portuguese youth, in relation to the European average, stand out for having low levels of participation: such is the case with voting, as well as so-called non-conventional forms of participation. However, there are forms of political participation whose upward trend in the past decade has significantly offset the idea that Portuguese youth are “passive”, comparatively speaking. Such is the case with petitions, and even contact with politicians and participation in demonstrations.

In focus groups with activist collectives, participants gave a dual response to this question. On the one hand, they perceive youth participation in general as being lower than desired, but believe it is on the rise, seeing young people as increasingly better informed and engaged civically and politically, particularly in certain causes, such as the environment and feminism. On the other hand, they share the view that the opinions and participation of youth are undervalued, both by society at large and by political parties. This gap in relation to more institutional political players was especially noticeable in activist collectives focused on causes and in emerging forms of participation (e.g. groups tied to climate, anti-fascist or nationalist activism). In relation to these, there were narratives against the system and criticism of authorities and the (political, economic and financial) elite, laying blame and/or accusing the lack of attention to their (different) causes and carelessness with regard to the collective future.

An analysis of the data collected from collectives and activist youth, particularly those focused on causes and emerging forms of participation, demonstrates that they value communication strategies based on visually appealing, concrete and mobilizing images and messages which promote a true identity of empathy and, therefore, a call to action. Also in this regard, there is the central role that building an idea of a threatened collective future – together with other emotional aspects tied to experience and relationships – plays in the ways of approaching and experiencing the politics they pursue.

Question three:

**What image emerges when we extend our analysis to new forms of participation, such as those offered by “online” participation? And to what extent are other forms of participation, which are not as obvious or conventionally “political”, serving as alternative channels for engaging youth?**

Online non-conventional participation is precisely the one that most distinguishes young people. Among others, this includes behaviours such as participating in a political discussion group or forum on the Internet or posting, commenting on or sharing content on political or social issues at websites or on social networks. The withdrawal from conventional participation channels, namely voting, has also been gradually offset by non-conventional forms of participation such as involvement in civil society organizations. The reasons for this change come in three types: initiatives of a more specific nature revolving around specific causes, closer to the everyday lives of young people, and given more meaning; short-term initiatives requiring no commitment of continuity; the perceived value of the contribution of young people as catalysts of change.

The young people who were interviewed stress the need for integrated action between political parties and civil organization societies is underscored for solving modern-day society's biggest problems. This view of society as an aggregate community is a recurring theme in the interviews, rooted in the recognition of the value and role of each player, as well as a combination of efforts between the dual spheres of political parties and associations. An obstacle to this synergy seems to be, once again, the low credibility of political parties and the lack of reputability associated with traditional political players, frequently causing youth organizations to avoid this relationship.

Non-conventional forms of participation are seen as highly important by activists, due to the centrality that their action and mobilization seem to have, as well as their relationship with aspects of the experience of participating, the emotions and the memories they arouse. In the activist groups where emerging forms of participation play a key role, this appears to be pronounced, both in terms of direct action strategies, as well as the use of narratives and images which showcase activists and their experiences and/or appeal to forms of identity and mobilization where emotions are relevant. These activists make use of digital venues and networks, and value forms of online participation, which they see as central to their action and combine with participation in off-line settings. Some activists have identified risks in online political activity and social networks, namely with regard to choosing the information to which each one is exposed and the strengthening of the "bubble" effect, the "Americanization" of certain struggles and causes and, as well, the potential superficiality of the commitment.

The last issue which arose throughout the study, especially when analysing collectives dedicated to emerging forms of participation and causes, was their espousal of intersecting forms of action, the search for cooperation with other causes and broadening these causes, especially in the cases of collectives for climate activism, LGBTQ+/feminism and anti-fascism.

Question four:

**What factors explain the different types of participation among youth? Are there asymmetries which can be explained by gender, income, social class, migrant status, urban/rural divisions or outsiders/insiders in the labour market?**

The absence of participation tends to be explained by variables such as gender, social class and education.

In the European Social Survey and the 2020 survey, the education of participants stands out for being the only significant predictor of all the types of political participation explored, including voting. Higher levels of education are associated with a greater propensity towards participation. Also of note was household income's positive association with civic participation, conventional collective participation and voting.

Participants' perceptions of their personal abilities to influence political processes, defined as political self-efficacy, were also a key determining factor in the different types of participation. In other words, a greater perception of political self-efficacy is associated with higher levels of non-conventional (civic and online) and conventional (individual and collective) participation, but not voting. Of particular note, as well, was the fact that young people (aged 15-24) are more inclined to participate online, and less inclined towards collective conventional participation and voting, after adjusting the comparison for other variables (gender, education, household income, education of parents, ideological self-positioning, political efficacy, populist attitudes, among others).

The data of the European Social Survey show no major ideological asymmetries in participation, although there is a tendency for those leaning to the right to report a higher likelihood to vote, and those leaning to the left a higher likelihood for other forms of participation, especially demonstrations.

Question five:

**What is the relationship between political efficacy and populist stances?  
Are young people more populist?**

According to Cas Mudde, populism can be defined as a political stance in which society is divided into two distinct, antagonistic groups: common people and the "corrupt elite". Associated with this view is the belief that the people should play a central role in political decision-making, and that politicians are incapable of adequately representing citizens.

In the 2020 survey, we used the six indicators of the Populist Attitudes Scale developed by Akkerman and her collaborators. Using the data from the study, we were able to determine that populist attitudes are very diffuse, at least with regard to gender, age and ideological positioning, but not in relation to the education of the individual and their parents, household income or levels of (collective and external) political efficacy. Generally speaking, participants who are less supportive populist ideas have a higher household income, a high perception of responsiveness of the political system in addressing citizens' needs (defined as external political efficacy), a greater perception of a group's ability to influence political processes (defined as collective political efficacy), and parents with higher levels of education.

From another standpoint, we were able to find anti-system narratives among activists, particularly in collectives tied to emerging forms of participation and causes. As previously mentioned above, these narratives are particularly geared towards rejecting institutional political players and figures, together with other elites held accountable for the threats (which differ by collective) to a shared future, and serve as mobilization strategies for participation (which, often times, articulate some conflict). Centrality and the value placed in emotions and the personal experience of participating, as found in activists, may also contribute towards the preference for certain forms of non-conventional participation of a more expressive nature.

Issues involving populism are also seen as a perceived threat, since a number of activists and some collectives see a need to fight populism and the way in which it jeopardizes the collective future, particularly when tied to right-wing extremism, as justification for their action, and the need to mobilize youth.

Question six:

**To what extent are political parties able to channel the political aspirations of youth? To what extent and how have they reshaped themselves to attract these young people?**

In the interviews conducted, the source of youth alienation from politics is mostly identified as being linked to the political supply, particularly in terms of the (lack of) mobilization and motivation among young people. On the one hand, the lack of political parties' efficacy in their communication strategies (which should be more deeply anchored in digital media) and the inadequacy of their propositions are pointed out. On the other hand, the lack of motivation among young voters is considered highly relevant, driven by a lack of political education and knowledge.

Representing the young population and acting on their behalf are closely tied to acknowledging youth as a group with specific needs and characteristics, which ideally should be reflected in policy making and implementation. Among the parties currently holding parliamentary seats, PAN (People–Animals–Nature) has the most measures for youth, followed by the PSD (Social Democratic Party) and the PS (Socialist Party). Even so, it should be noted that only one fifth of the measures proposed in the category of Citizenship and Equality are aimed at promoting political participation among younger generations. In terms of priority intervention areas, both the political parties and the young people interviewed prioritized education, while employment – and job security in particular – ranked higher among young people's concerns. In fact, less than half of the young people interviewed believe that political parties truly represent their interests, with this negative view being more prominent among young members of associations compared to those of partisan structures.

The most frequently used mobilization strategies of political parties, as reported by the young people of these structures, are: i) putting “*youth at the centre of the political agenda*”; ii) the use of social networks; iii) the accountability and empowerment of partisan youth, so that they can carry out the necessary activities and appeal to young people; iv) the assignment of prominent positions, including elected office, as well as positions in partisan management structures; v) having a presence in key youth venues, such as schools and institutions of higher education; vi) proximity to inorganic movements, allowing partisan youth and political parties to be closer to these movements and incorporate some of their issues into their agendas.

Although young activists have identified different strategies used by political parties to mobilize youth, only one in five respondents believes that these parties have been effective in their youth mobilization strategies. Furthermore, from the activists'

perspective, youth participation is undervalued, since they are seen as immature and not very independent, both by society, and by political parties as well.

Partisan youth organizations are considered relevant, while also acknowledging the difficult internal relationship with party leaderships, above all due to the undervaluation of youth, whether in discussing internal policies, or including them in relevant positions, namely eligible positions on electoral candidate lists.

Although a good part of the young respondents believe that the independence of partisan youth organizations has been preserved, they also point out that political parties can make use of strategies which limit the independence of these structures. Here, the existence of financial limitations is particularly relevant, above all the strategy of aligning partisan youth initiatives and proposals vis-à-vis party orientations and priorities. Partisan youth seek to have some clout in internal partisan dynamics and in setting political priorities. They do so primarily through extra-partisan strategies, such as the use of media to put issues in the spotlight, thereby obliging political parties to mobilize given political topics or discuss certain political strategies. As such, the challenges put forward by youth on central partisan structures are potentially lessened or undermined, given the strategies used by parties to limit their independence. This is also why the majority of activist youth believe that the independent structures are “heard”, although with the clear perception of scant participation in defining party strategies – including those aimed specifically at mobilizing youth.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, this study shows that the news of the death of politics among youth has been largely exaggerated. This collection of studies involving youth in different parts of the political system, with different levels of mobilization and different forms of participation, allows us to conclude that there is some vitality in civic and political participation among Portuguese youth – even if this vitality is also marked by disillusionment and by critical disengagement with regard to more conventional forms of participation, with voting being the most alarming example for the quality of a representative democracy such as ours.

This complex interpretation of the political participation of young people is only possible if research keeps pace with the discussion on the diverse forms of participation – social, civic and political – acknowledging that institutional forms of participation (which we have chosen here to describe as conventional) coexist with emerging or non-institutional ones (such as the case of traditional forms of political participation, like demonstrations, or more recent forms such as those which use the Internet).

In addition, in diverse ways, the study also demonstrates the importance of education. First, because education continues to be a predictor of great importance in both participation, and in resistance to populism. Second, because school continues to be asserted by young people as the place of political education for coming generations – while acknowledging some devaluation of this role in compulsory education.

Finally, the study underscores the importance of combining diverse ways of listening to political phenomena – the wealth of findings presented here is not unrelated to the option of combining qualitative and quantitative research methods to obtain a denser and more complex vision of the political participation of Portuguese youth.

