



**PARTICIPATION ERASMUS ALUMNI
FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

Final Report

ERASMUS+ AND THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

Sevilla – 3-5 April, 2024



Erasmus+



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ERASMUS+ AND THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

Author

Paul Blokker

This report was written in the context of the **TCA Participation Erasmus Alumni for Civic Engagement (PEACE)**, coordinated by INDIRE/Erasmus Agency Italy, and more in particular, in relation to the International seminar of PEACE, 'Civic participation and EU values. Make Europe shine!', held in Sevilla, 3-5 April, 2024.

Section 1

Introduction

Participation Erasmus Alumni for Civic Engagement (PEACE) is a Long-Term Action with an original mission: exploring the relation between social and civic engagement, political participation, and European citizenship, on one hand, and the Erasmus+ Programme, on the other. In fact, the priorities of the Erasmus+ Programme include the creation of

opportunities for people's participation in democratic life, social and civic engagement through formal or non-formal learning activities. The focus is put on raising awareness of and understanding the European Union context, notably as regards the common EU values, the principles of unity and diversity, as well as their social, cultural and historical heritage (EC 2023: 10).

This report – the third one in the PEACE Action – ties civic and political engagement, in particular of young people, to the European elections, held between 6 and 9 June, 2024. The report provides deeper background knowledge to the International seminar of PEACE, 'Civic participation and EU values. Make Europe shine!', held in Sevilla, 3-5 April, 2024.

The event took place in the run up to the 2024 European elections, and provided a moment to reflect on how to contribute to stimulate young people to vote in these highly important elections. The report also provides some preliminary data from an international youth survey developed in the context of PEACE: 'You(th) and the 2024 European elections', which started in early March, 2024 and was closed on 10 June, right after the elections. The survey for young European citizens sought to understand young people's real interest in European issues and to get to know their needs in depth, with the idea that they might become part of the European political agenda. The short survey addressed young Europeans aged 16 to 35 years old to understand their point of view. Participation was voluntary and completely anonymous. The key points of the questionnaire were youth issues, such as problems with housing, youth unemployment and precarity on the job market, as well as the rising costs of living. In general, the survey wanted to understand better what young people think about the European elections and the European Union. The survey was filled out by 2,297 respondents, in particular from young people in Italy, but also from a range of other European countries, not least Germany, France, Spain, and Poland.

The first part of the report provides an in-depth discussion of the current democratic situation in Europe, in particular in relation to forms of youth engagement with politics. It stresses the importance of the higher turnout, not least of young people, in the 2019 European elections, but it also stresses the importance of existing problems that keep young people from participating and voting. One of such a problem is the structural gap in representation of young people in formal political institutions. In fact, many democratic societies appear as 'gerontocracies', where older people are in charge. The discussion proceeds with an analysis of the attitudes of young people to democracy, highlighting a rather widespread detachment and alienation from formal politics (providing some primary data from our survey to illustrate this). The dimension of youth participation is analysed, showing a more complex picture, in which young people may feel distant from formal politics, but this does not mean that they do not engage. They rather engage in alternative ways. This is subsequently linked to the dimension of international mobility, and its role in stimulating engagement, political awareness, and a critical mindset. Using again data from our survey, it is shown that young people who have experience in international mobility tend to value democracy and its facets more. At the end of the first section, the 2024 European elections, also with the benefit of being able now to discuss some of its results. Where the increase in turnout seems to have lasted also in 2024, this is not necessarily having the political effects some had hoped for. If young people are generally understood as more open to European integration, and to have a more open-minded view, at this point in time, there are some clear indications that in some core EU member states, such as France and Germany, significant amounts of young people (under-24) voted for the radical right. This is clearly a dimension the PEACE project might want to look into further. What role might Erasmus+ play in the future to address this challenge?

The second part reports on the deliberative discussion groups that were held in Sevilla, with small groups of different participants (staff from National Agencies, alumni, ambassadors, teachers, academic experts). The discussion groups focussed on two broad themes, Learning mobility and European elections and Youth and under-representation. Some of the main take-aways from the discussions are:

- The Erasmus+ programme provides an excellent impulse for young people's engagement, but would also need strengthening in terms of a more structured focus on the development of democratic and political skills;
- Inclusion needs to remain a core objective, focussing on different kinds of exclusion and different types of minorities;

- It would need further consideration whether civic and political engagement should become mandatory elements in the programme as such, as a specific, formal objective of participants;
- The underrepresentation of young people is a reality¹; Erasmus+ could help with making young people more aware of this, while also providing the relative skills and competences to attempt to address this. Underrepresentation means less intention to participate. It is hence of great importance that young people mobilise in order to make their voice heard and to demand their legitimate inclusion in formal politics.

¹ In fact, one recent journalistic investigation argues that ‘The generation of the crisis, Erasmus and the Euro, generation rent and the Fridays for Future generation, have no voice in Brussels’, see https://www.europeandatajournalism.eu/cp_data_news/brussels-shuts-the-door-on-diversity-a-european-parliament-without-young-people-and-minorities/.

Section 2

Young people, political engagement, and the European elections

1. Democratic erosion

Democratic societies in Europe seem to be changing rapidly. Various trends are worrisome, such as consistent lower voter turnout and high absenteeism as well as an increase in votes for radical political parties and movements. Political parties seem less and less able to represent citizens and also to form government coalitions.² What is more, authoritarian tendencies are evident in various countries while the influence of external actors with anti-democratic ideas is tangible. That also the European Union is affected by democratic erosion is – amongst others - made clear by several scandals regarding the European Parliament related to extra-European attempts to infiltrate European democracy.³

Democracies are further increasingly characterized by intense forms of conflict, as exemplified by various protest movements of recent years (e.g. the *Gillets Jaune* protests in France or the environmentalist manifestations of civil disobedience of, for instance, *Extinction Rebellion* or *Ultima Generazione*) or the recent farmers' protests in Brussels and various European countries. In relation to the European Union, democratic societies seem increasingly split between pro-European and anti-European opinions and related political forces.

In relation to democratic politics, it has often been argued that young people seem particularly disengaged and alienated from politics. In fact, many have argued that young people seem disproportionately disaffected, and little engaged with public and political processes. Some facts seem to demonstrate this. For instance, in the Dutch elections mentioned earlier (footnote 2), the turnout of young people was

² In Europe, a pertinent example is the Netherlands, where after the general elections in November 2023, the new government was formed only in July 2024, after long and interrupted deliberations.

³ A recent example regards Russian attempts to infiltrate European democracy and spread Russian propaganda. In a call to counter foreign interference, the European Parliament has adopted a resolution against the corruption of MEPs in relation to Russian propaganda, see <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20240419IPR20542/meps-call-for-a-firm-response-to-counter-russian-interference>.

lower than the preceding national elections (a drop from ca. 80 to 73 percent).⁴ Moreover, some observers indicate tendencies of youth voting for more extreme political parties, with potential anti-democratic implications (see also below). Such trends may clearly be relevant for the European level too, as projections for the 2024 European elections indicated the probability of right-wing and radical right-wing parties (not infrequently with anti-EU and anti-democratic stances) gaining significantly (see Cunningham et al. 2024), which in fact happened.

In contrast, however, it equally needs to be recognized that in some instances the opposite is true (and hence, that a rather significant volatility in voting behaviour should not be excluded). For instance, in the 2019 European elections, trends of democratic erosion and disengagement seemed to be contrasted not least by a relatively higher turn-out of young people. According to a post-election Eurobarometer survey, an increase in turnout of 14 percent of young people up to 25 years of age, and a 12 percent increase of those between 25 to 39 years old importantly affected the overall turnout for the European Parliamentary elections (EPRS 2019: 2) (see table 1).

Table 1 – Turnout in European elections 2019

Q European Parliament elections were held on the (DATE ACCORDING TO COUNTRY).
For one reason or another, some people in (OUR COUNTRY) did not vote in these elections.
Did you yourself vote in the recent European Parliament elections (% - EU)

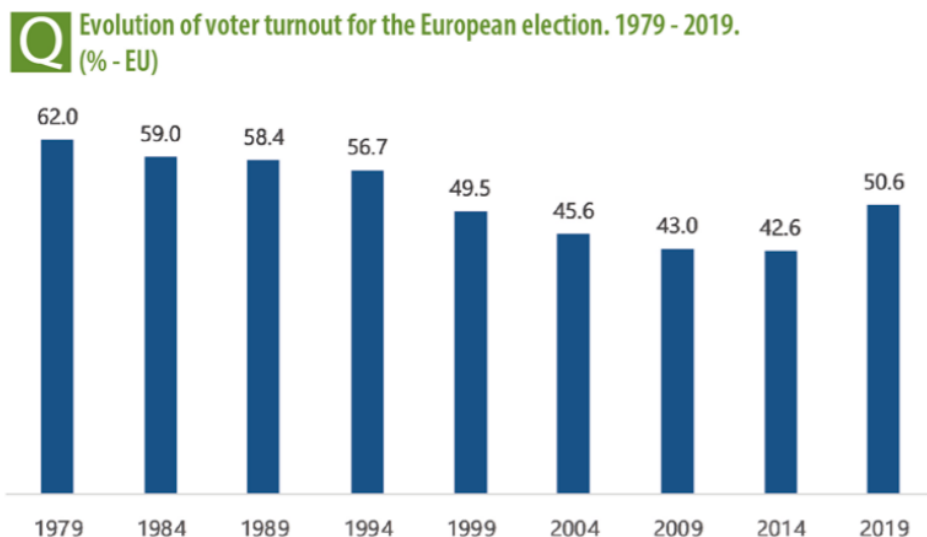
	Voted 2014	Voted 2019	Diff. '19-'14
EU28	43	51	8
 Gender			
Man	45	52	7
Woman	41	49	8
 Age			
16/18-24	28	42	14
25-39	35	47	12
40-54	45	52	7
55 +	51	54	3

Source: EPRS/Eurobarometer 2019 (91.5), QG1.

⁴ See <https://nos.nl/op3/artikel/2498984-minder-jongeren-naar-de-stembus-dit-is-hoe-zij-stemden>.

Young people contributed to an increase in the overall turn-out, which was 50.6 percent in 2019, the highest since 1994 (see table 2).⁵ This clearly interrupted a trend of decline since the 1989 elections.

Table 2 – Turnout in European elections 1979-2019



Source: EPRS/Eurobarometer 2019 (91.5).

In terms of political preferences, in the 2019 elections, younger people (18-28 years of age) voted more frequently for the Greens, the Centre-Left, and the Centre-right conservative European People's Party (the predominant preference of voters above 58 years of age).⁶ Also the Polish general elections in October 2023 showed a high turnout of young voters which decidedly changed the political outcome, against the incumbent populist, conservative government.⁷

The views of young people are significant also because research on political socialisation indicates that most people form their basic political views between the ages of 12 and 25, while these basic views remain rather stable afterwards (Rekker and van der Brug 2022). In this regard, it is equally important to note that research demonstrates that young people tend to be generally more in support for European unification than older generations (Rekker and van der Brug 2022). An analysis of generational differences in the Netherlands found that citizens who came of age after 1992 tend to support EU integration on the basis of socio-

⁵ It should however also be noticed that there remains a gap in voter turnout between those under and those above 40 years of age (EPRS 2019: 22).

⁶ See <https://europeelects.eu/2019/06/03/how-different-generations-voted-in-the-eu-election/>.

⁷ See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/21/young-voters-who-shaped-poland-election-result>.

cultural attitudes to issues such as migration, stressing the importance of the EU as a cultural and political, and not just an economic, project (Rekker and van der Brug 2022: 457-58).

2. Gaps in representation

An important factor that makes young people estranged from formal, institutional politics is their extensive under-representation in parliaments and governments. In this regard, parliaments in most democratic countries tend to be made up of the more affluent, are more male-based, and have more middle-aged and more white-collar professionals as members (Stockemer and Sundstrom 2022: 1). In fact, young people as well as other groups tend to be starkly underrepresented, and experts claim that several of the larger democracies are 'real gerontocracies' (Stockemer and Sundstrom 2022: 2).

In this, young people are generally disadvantaged politically (Dezelan, Bacalso, Lodeserto 2023: 9). They are not equally represented in formal political institutions and are hence importantly under-represented in processes of policy-making and democratic representation. Young people can be understood as an 'excluded majority', even if roughly half of the world's population is currently under the age of 35 (Stockemer and Sundstrom 2022: 1). A rather extreme case is the United States, where politics is dominated by white, senior, male politicians. Young people are hence under-represented and the political representation of their age group and main concerns is defective. In terms of 'descriptive representation, parliaments and other political fora does not have sufficient young people 'present' to represent the larger younger generations. This could lead to a 'vicious cycle of political alienation', seeing young people increasingly distanced from formal politics (this in part also explains the turn to non-conventional political action, as with environmental protests, which in various European countries are however criminalized by the formal political and legal institutions). It may further involve 'declining political sophistication of the young, their waning (conventional) participation, and their insufficient representation in political office' (Stockemer and Sundstrom 2022: 4).

In Europe, young people make up circa 15 to 20 percent of the entire population, but less than 3 percent of national parliaments have members that are under the age of 30, with young women being around 1 % (Dezelan, Bacalso, Lodeserto 2023: 8). In fact, in the current European Parliament, only 37 members are under 35, which corresponds to ca. 5 %. The average age is ca. 50 years old.

3. Youth attitudes to democracy

Various surveys and research projects indicate that young people are relatively less satisfied with democracy than older generations, and youth satisfaction with democracy appears globally on the decline. This indicates also a growing interest of young people in populist and autocratic political positions (Foa et al. 2020: 2). Important differences between regions – for instance, between Western and Eastern Europe – have been pointed out. While older generations in Western Europe appear to become more satisfied with democracy, younger generations are increasingly less so, with millennials being least satisfied. In Eastern Europe, in contrast, with various generations becoming somewhat more satisfied with democracy over time (Foa et al. 2020: 15).

In general, young people seem to express similar concerns across the board, that is, they feel distanced from democratic politics, and tend to articulate political concerns in alternative ways, such as protests regarding the climate. Young people seem to generally appreciate democracy in principle but perceive formal politics as providing little benefits for young people and too little oriented towards youth issues (Bristelle et al. 2024: 11). A report from the Foundation of European Progressive Politics (FEPS) found – inter alia - the following policy issues insufficiently addressed by formal politics (Bristelle et al. 2024: 12):

- Youth unemployment
- Job insecurity
- Regional inequality
- Cost of living
- Housing and accommodation crisis

The views of democracy of young people includes (Bristelle et al. 2024: 12-13):

- The feeling not being listened to
- A lack of trust in politicians (seen as too often corrupt and self-interested, and inapproachable)
- A feeling of disconnection from institutions
- Formal politics as too little concerned with issues that affect (young) people in their daily lives (including climate change)
- Institutional communication often not understandable and too technocratic

Some of these concerns are equally articulated in the PEACE survey “You(th) and the 2024 European elections”, where ca. 250 young people out of a total of 2297 respondents indicated that they would not vote in the 2024 European Parliamentary elections and expressed explicit unease in response to the question “Why do you think the European Parliament elections are not important?”:

“

I did not say that. Voting is important but I think my single vote will not have an impact

Because they [the European Parliament] don't have any power or possibility to do anything, the real decisions are taken by European Commission, European Parliament is quite useless

I think they are very important, but as a young Italian person I believe my voice doesn't matter at all

European Parliament is too weak to truly make the difference, national elections are still where real changes are made

The majority of Italian people have a political opinion that goes against democracy, but, since they are the majority of voting people, it's their vote that will be effectively listened

European politicians do not listen to people like me, I'm not convinced by any politician, I've lost trust in the system. Too many promises and then no concrete facts. We are and remain poor

In the last EU election, Ursula von der Leyen was not listed on any voting ballots but was still put into the position of President of the European Commission. That shows that the most influential position of the EU is not given by a democratic vote but rather by politicians' backroom deals

I feel like the people that my country votes into the European Parliament are the ones that are unwanted in the national parliament (because of scandals etc). Additionally, I've read reports from a former member of the European Parliament that decisions are rigged with corruption

The parliament cannot suggest new laws. Therefore, it does not have a lot of power to begin with. Furthermore, the last "president" Ursula von der Leyen was kind of prevoted by other people and is not a good politician. And lobbies have too much power

My agency, as an individual, is limited to my micro local world. I don't have the agency to change all this bullshit such as the militarisation, environmental changes, social disparities, precariat, etc.

In the end global corporations will decide in what way EU politics will go

One vote in 300 million is never important

”

4. Youth participation

In general, young people have been losing trust in political institutions, are less interested in party membership, and are underrepresented in party bodies (-Dezelan, Bacalso, Lodeserto 2023: 8). Since at least two decades, we see a decline in interest of young people in formal politics. Obviously, such decline is not even across different segments of the youth, and is related to socio-economic standing, education, geographical location, and other factors (Dezelan, Bacalso, Lodeserto 2023: 8). Young people with disadvantages face much greater challenges in terms of feeling represented by formal politics and perceiving political opportunities. In particular, the so-called NEET (not in employment, education, or training) category faces structural exclusion from social, political and professional life. For young people experience intersectional forms of exclusion, economic constraints, and the perception of not being represented feeds into profound disillusionment with politics (Bristelle et al. 2024).

A structural trend is that the interest of young people in democratic politics is declining, and young people participate much less in institutional politics than older generations. This is in direct contrast to how young people are affected by politics in terms of socio-economic possibilities, job security, housing, and future outlook. Various recent crises have affected young people disproportionately, such as the Covid-19 pandemic or the economic crises, while future prospects look dim, with the increasing evidence of rising costs of living and deterioration in their quality of life, the evermore evident environmental crisis as well as the tense geopolitical situation.

In contrast to the argument that young people are generally disengaged, various experts claim that young people are rather engaging differently in politics (Lavizzari 2021: 53). In recent years, young people's engagement through individual and collective forms of action in for instance social movements has increased. Forms of unconventional political participation consists in forms of participation that are neither institutional nor electoral (Barta, Boldt, Lavizzari 2021), but rather involve activism and 'do-it-ourselves politics'. Unconventional political participation includes political consumerism, political art or activism, or online forms of activism (Lavizzari 2021: 54), but also forms of civil disobedience, such as in environmental protests. One significant dimension is the increased transnational character of youth movements (Lavizzari 2021: 56), such as in Extinction Rebellion or Fridays for Future. It would be interesting to explore whether and to what extent such a transnational tendency maybe related to forms of cross-border mobility.

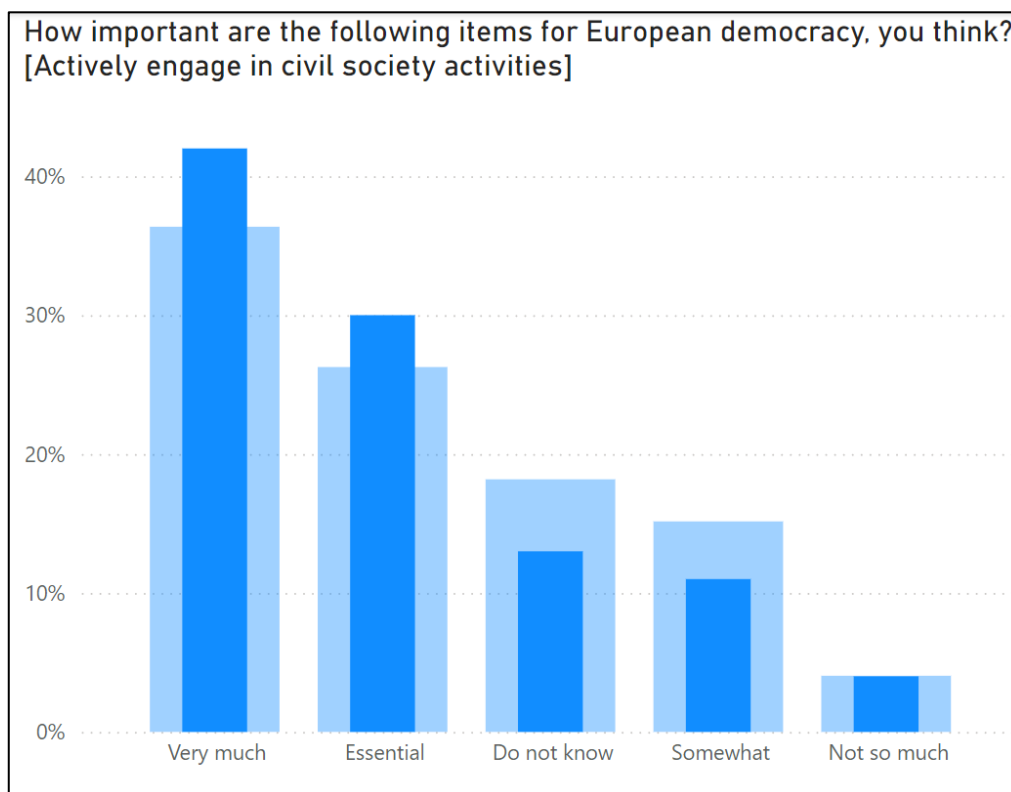
5. Cross-border mobility

It is often presupposed that international educational mobility of young people strengthens feelings of European identity and may increase young people's perception of being European citizens (Mazzoni et al. 2018). Mobility for longer periods (at least a number of months) may enhance linguistic capacities, as well as affect individual autonomy, organizational, communicative, and networking skills, and enhance reflexive and critical thinking. Mobility may further affect attitudes regarding nationality and feelings of belonging and stimulate a more multi-faceted view of Europe and the EU (Mazzoni et al. 2018: 327).

Yet, some scholars point out the limited evidence for a robust relation between intra-European mobility and the development of European citizenship (Siklodi 2020: 155). Intra-European mobility does directly relate to a rather instrumental dimension of EU citizenship, including rights and benefits from EU membership (mobility, Euro, Erasmus). This may mean that feelings and appreciations of EU citizenship remain rather temporary (Siklodi 2020: 158). But there may be dimensions that are more long-lasting and have to do with a specific political identity, such as the appreciation of the EU as protecting rights of sexual minorities. According to Siklodi (drawing on her research based on focus groups with both mobile and non-mobile young people), the weakest link between mobility and EU citizenship is that of participation. To a large extent, European participation seems reduced to voting in the European elections, while abstention of young people remains a significant problem (see below).

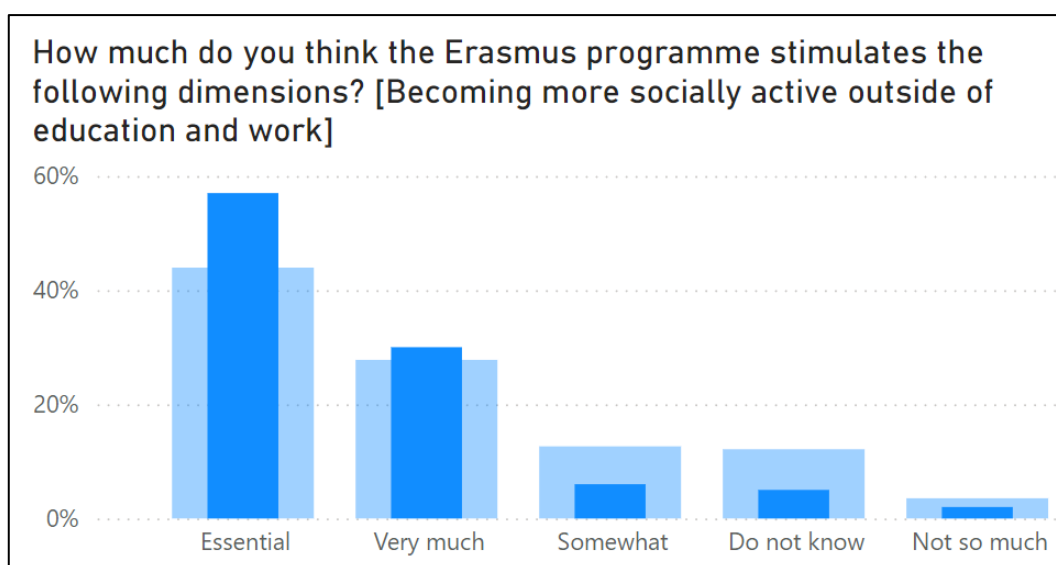
Our 2024 European election survey shows a more optimistic picture. Of the young people who indicated an Erasmus mobility experience, a relatively higher percentage thought actively engaging in civil society activities is important for European democracy (figure 1). Also regarding the importance of mobility stimulating social engagement outside of education and work was more frequently deemed important by young people with a mobility experience (figure 2). For other dimensions, such as intentionality to vote in the European elections, or the importance of civil society in general, there is a large support among young people in general (figures 3 and 4).

Figure 1 – Importance of civil society for European democracy



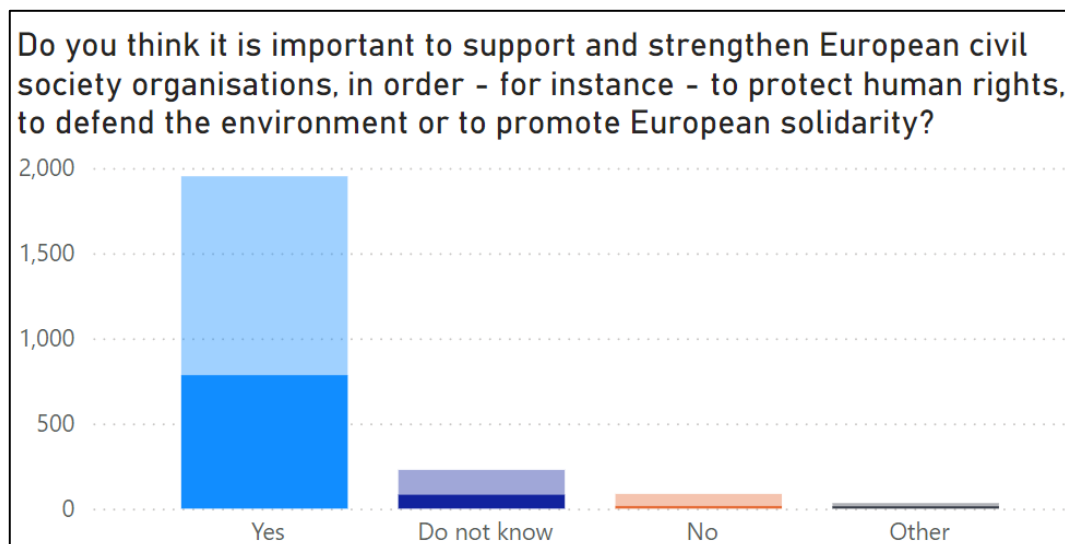
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Figure 2 – Importance of Erasmus+ for social engagement



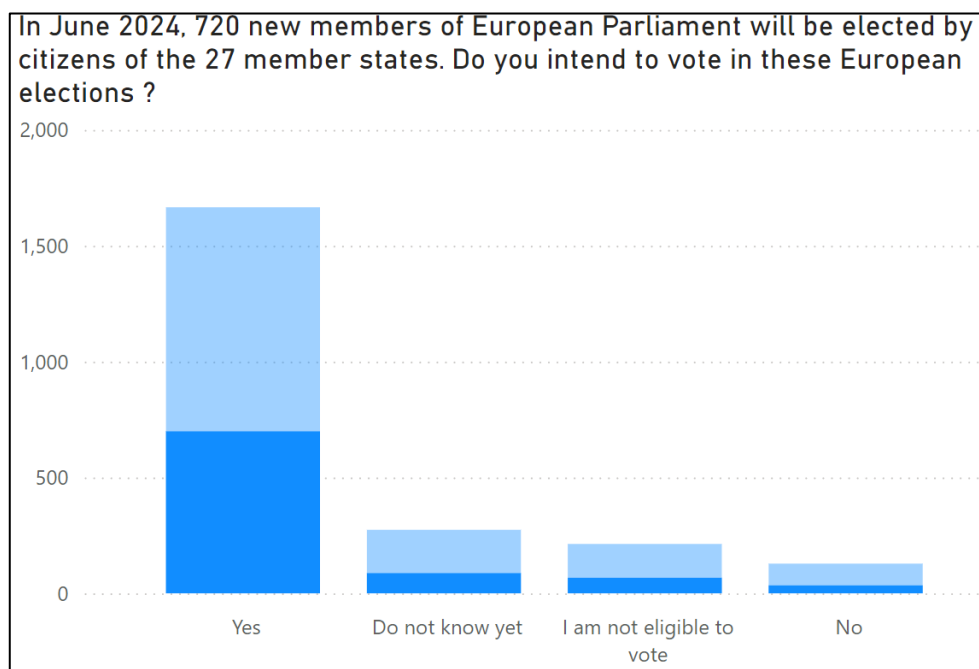
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Figure 3 – Importance of civil society organisations



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Figure 4 – Intention to vote in 2024 European elections



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6. Youth and the 2024 European elections

The European elections of 2019 have been widely seen as a major change in terms of participation, in particular by young people. As stated in the European Parliament's *2019 Post-Electoral Survey*, the 'overall turnout at the recent European Parliament elections [in 2019] was 50.6%. This is the highest turnout since the 1994 elections and is a striking increase from 2014 (when the turnout was 42.6%)' (EP 2019: 7). A good part of this higher turnout was due to young people coming out to vote: 'Although the turnout in 2019 was higher among all groups of the population, the increase was led by the younger generation, with large increases among people aged under 25 (+14 pp) and aged 25–39 (+12 pp)' (EP 2019: 7).

As mentioned above, a frequently expressed assumption, also corroborated in surveys,⁸ is that young people tend to vote in a more pro-European way. In 2019, they clearly also supported environmental issues disproportionately. As stated in the presentation of the survey, the 'study specifically shows the impact younger voters had on turnout, topics and results: +14 pp among those aged under 25 and +12 pp among 25 to 39 year olds. A sense of civic duty, mentioned by 52% of respondents, has become more ingrained in Europeans when they think about European Parliament elections, while increasingly favourable views of the EU have also impacted on voter turnout'.⁹

However, as observed in the context of the 2024 European elections, while young people generally take a positive view of the European Union, they are nevertheless less motivated to vote than older generations.¹⁰ Moreover, as is emerging from the analysis of the results of the 2024 European elections - where turnout was roughly the same as in 2019 - a higher turnout among young people can also lead to a larger portion of votes for the radical, Eurosceptic right. This is particularly clear in Germany, where the voting age was lowered to 16 years in 2024, while in the age group 16-24 a not negligible portion of voters (16%; a number similar to that of older generations) voted for the radical right. Ironically, lowering the voting age had been pushed for in particular by the Greens, while centre-right and radical right were against. The Greens however lost most in the 2024 elections. Also in

⁸ See <https://eupinions.eu/de/blog/the-youth-vote>.

⁹ See <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/2019-european-elections-entered-a-new-dimension>.

¹⁰ See <https://eupinions.eu/de/blog/the-youth-vote>.

France, as well as other countries such as Poland, a relatively large number of young people voted for the radical, Eurosceptic right in the 2024 elections.

As argued by some analysts, the youth vote is affected by the constant crises young people have been living through in recent years. The radical right is more prominently present on social media (where most young people get their political information from). Young people in Germany, for instance, seem now less worried about climate change, and more about inflation, housing and living costs, and migration.¹¹ In early 2024, a youth survey in Germany was held which showed that among young people there is a significant “frustration with the government”.¹² Young people indicated dissatisfaction with the three governing parties, while showing more appreciation for centre-right, conservative, and radical right parties (Schnitzer, Hampel and Hurrelmann 2024: 22). From a comparison with a preceding youth study in 2019, it appears that German young people seem to have become more nationalist and increasingly perceive migration as threatening their social status and families.

This overall picture of German youth is in stark contrast to surveys with young people who have had an experience with international mobility. As found in an extensive survey with young people by DAAD, a large majority of respondents claims that their experience abroad has increased their understanding of people with a migration background back home.¹³ While the DAAD survey runs up to 2020, our own PEACE survey, held from early 2024 until the European elections, shows similar results. For instance, the question of whether they thought an Erasmus+ experience had enriched their political identity, beyond local and national identities, those with an experience in international mobility responded slightly more positively than the overall set of respondents (figure 5).

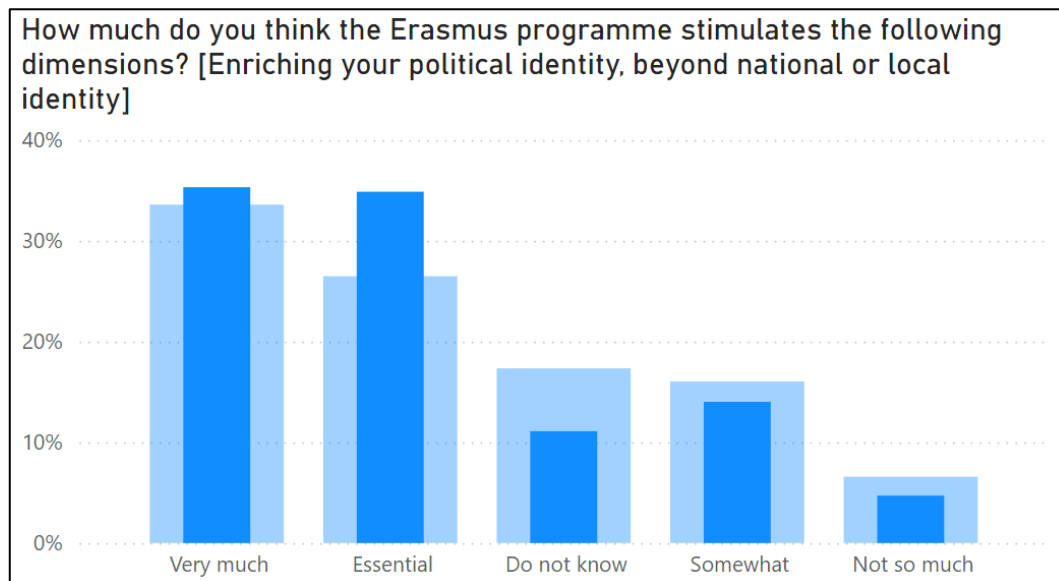
A crucial question is hence how Erasmus+ may reach out to those young persons who feel alienated from, or abandoned by, politics and society, and contribute to the development of a more positive (but critical) engagement with individual and collective projects. While the survey has given highly insightful results, it is likely that there has been a predominance of youth with a positive attitudinal bias towards democracy and European integration. A complex issue is how to speak to and solicit also those who are less positive.

¹¹ See <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/how-far-right-gained-traction-with-europes-youth-2024-06-13/>; <https://www.rnd.de/politik/ergebnisse-der-europawahl-2024-warum-junge-leute-weniger-gruen-waehlen-ZZO54HIJDBFBPGFSN6J4EPHV5E.html>.

¹² See <https://www.rnd.de/politik/ergebnisse-der-europawahl-2024-warum-junge-leute-weniger-gruen-waehlen-ZZO54HIJDBFBPGFSN6J4EPHV5E.html>.

¹³ See https://www.daad-brussels.eu/files/2024/05/E_FollowUp_geschuetzt.pdf. Note that this is for the period 2014-2019.

Figure 5 – Erasmus+ and political identity



N=2297.

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Section 2

Deliberative learning on Erasmus+ and elections

The Sevilla event included a section on deliberative learning in the form of discussion groups, with mixed composition. The discussion groups focussed on two angles around the general theme of the European Parliamentary Elections:

1. Learning mobility and European elections;
2. Youth and under-representation

The main moderator introduced the topic, articulated a number of reflections on the themes, and provided some key “trade-offs” for discussion. The participants then – in the form of small groups of ca. 10 persons – discussed the main two contrasting positions, by choosing one of the two positions and justifying their position. Facilitators stimulated the discussion with the aid of the further questions and information provided. The discussion per theme lasted ca. 30/45 minutes.

The key objectives of the discussion groups were:

- To give people a short background and deeper knowledge with regard to civic and political themes in international mobility/Erasmus+ (knowledge), in particular in relation to the elections.
- To help raise awareness of the multiple civic and political dimensions of the Erasmus+ programme (awareness).
- To help develop a critical-constructive view, where participants (alumni, staff, ambassadors) reflect on how they could (also collectively) contribute to further strengthening the civic and political learning effects of international mobility (critical-reflexive mindset) and stimulate engagement.
- To help think how participation and collaboration are about finding harmony and consensus but equally involve agreeing to disagree and dealing with ambiguity (learning to participate).

1. The deliberative working groups

The first theme regarded learning mobility and the European elections, with a particular focus on how Erasmus+ can contribute to stimulating engagement amongst young people.

Young people generally participate less in domestic and European politics. For instance, abstention of the youngest voters in the European parliamentary elections is particularly high (for 2019, over 60% for the 16-24 age group whereas the general turnout was roughly above 50%).¹⁴ Young people seem less and less inclined to interact with institutional politics, and the gap between the younger and older generation is widening.

With the upcoming European parliamentary elections in June 2024, this is a major concern. The less young people participate, the less they are represented in politics, and the less governments and European institutions have incentives to create policies that explicitly address the youth's concerns. One "fun fact" is that only around 2 % of parliaments have members that are younger than 30 years old, a dynamic that will probably get worse if youth participation continues to decline.

What may be the role of learning mobility and Erasmus+ in stimulating civic and political engagement? Erasmus+ has as one of its four priorities **engagement**. It is, however, not clear what this means in practice. It is not evident for instance how civic, community – often very local - types of engagement actually contribute to active political awareness, political and human rights literacy, and the development of a political sense of European citizenship. Moreover, in Erasmus+, there is no explicit focus on political citizenship, but participants rather 'experience social and cultural elements of citizenship' (2021: 54), and there is a lack of a structural, explicit attention to European citizenship.

Therefore, examining the role of learning mobility programs like Erasmus+ in fostering civic and political engagement becomes really important. However, as we shall see in the following survey findings, understanding the practical implications and effectiveness of such initiatives remains a complex and nuanced endeavour.

¹⁴ For 2024, numbers are not yet available.

Theme 1. Learning mobility and European elections

Contrasting positions	
1. <i>“There is no need to change Erasmus+ as it is. Learning mobility and Erasmus+ currently contribute sufficiently to participants’ political and democratic skills and willingness to engage. And Erasmus+ is currently sufficiently inclusive. Everybody can participate.”</i>	2. <i>“Learning mobility and Erasmus+ need a much more intense focus on participants’ political and democratic skills and willingness to engage, not least by developing new tools and programmes strengthening a European idea politics. Also, Erasmus+ needs to involve more marginalized young people.”</i>

Position-taking by participants	
(participants choose one of the two positions above and justify their position; the facilitator can help, also by referring to the questions below)	
<i>In what ways does Erasmus+ currently explicitly develop skills of engagement and of political awareness?</i> <i>Can you give explicit examples of how an Erasmus+ activity has enhanced political and civic skills of participants?</i>	<i>To what extent does learning mobility stimulate engagement?</i> <i>How does learning mobility make (young) people more aware (explicit examples) European politics (that is different from national politics)?</i> <i>How could Erasmus+ develop more robust engagement tools to favour transnational civic participation (on the European level)?</i>

Below, we discuss some of the results that emerged in the various discussion groups. We divided the discussions in some common themes that emerged as a response to the input provided (see above, Theme 1).

Erasmus+ and (political) participation

In one working group, participants agreed that the Erasmus+ experiences represent a great contribution in developing good communication skills, linguistic skills, soft skills, and issues regarding European citizenship and values. Many Erasmus+ projects also include a focus on civic matters, regarding for instance inclusion and prejudices.



As a whole, however, participants said, the Programme should focus more on the development of political and democratic skills. The development of political and democratic skills might be integrated in the curriculum of students participating in the mobility schemes. Compulsory modules on EU institutions were suggested as an example of possible actions to be integrated.

The working group suggested that, before leaving, the sending institution could organize sessions on the four transversal priorities of the Erasmus+ Programme to help students developing further the “human aspect” of the mobility experience but also entering more into the specific issues addressed by the Programme.

A core issue, which many participants mentioned, and which is not necessarily a problem of Erasmus+ only is that young people seem less interested in politics in general and alienated by formal political processes. One dimension that education and international mobility could develop further is fostering an interest in (European) politics and helping young people to understand why politics is important and relevant for them.

Erasmus+ and equal inclusion

In one working group, there was agreement that students who engage and participate in democratic life and, subsequently, in mobility schemes, are generally the more privileged ones, thus, the disadvantaged groups should be involved more into participation.

Erasmus+ and social embeddedness

The group suggested that the Erasmus+ mobility could include also extra activities (as a way for students to give back to the hosting community). For example, students in mobility, could go to schools to talk about their experience, the European Union, the Erasmus+ Programme etc., thus giving back some added EU value to their mobility. Generally speaking, civic engagement could actively enter the mobility scheme as a kind of mandatory activity. Learning of the hosting country language is also a plus because it helps integrating into the social texture and/or facilitating the civic engagement.



Erasmus+ and different disciplines

A participant mentioned that the Programme should be more appealing for students involved in a science or technical path (i.e. engineer and such) since they often feel distant from the goals of the Programme.

Tutors (before during and after the mobility experience) are considered very useful to help students approaching the experience in a broader and more integrated way (the 4 Erasmus+ priorities for instance) as well as for practical academic issues.

Theme 1

Group discussions – Erasmus+ and participation (in elections)

Some of the key remarks

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More economic inclusion and inclusion of rural areas needed.
However, mindset in rural areas makes Erasmus inclusion harder.

This is more of a social problem not so much an Erasmus problem:
Erasmus is already very inclusive, even to non-EU participants.

There are other initiatives like EP ambassador schools because
Erasmus is not doing enough in this regard.

Not being interested in politics is an active choice.

If young people feel represented, they are happier to vote. There is a
need to skip the curriculum in schools and instead inform pupils on
participation and voting.

[With] Jean Monnet [being] a part of Erasmus+ - it is enough as it is,
the learning mobilities may not be, but with JM [it is] enough.

“

The second theme focussed on youth and the representation of young people in politics. European citizens have the right to vote in the European Parliament elections held every five years. By participating in elections, citizens can choose their representatives (Members of the European Parliament) who will shape EU policies and legislation. Every citizen of the Union has also the right to stand as a candidate in elections to the European Parliament.

Eligibility criteria for voting in European Parliament elections vary slightly between Member States. In general, EU citizens who are at least 18 years old and reside in an EU Member State have the right to vote in the European Parliament elections. In some Member States it is also possible for non-national EU citizens to vote if they meet certain residency requirements.

One issue with young people and the EP is that only in a few member states allow people under 18 allowed to vote. For the 2024 elections, this age is set at 16 in Austria, Belgium, Germany and Malta, 17 in Greece, while it remains 18 in the remaining Member States.

As mentioned, there is a clear representation gap that regards youth representation. The average age of MEPs is 50 years. Two-out-of-three MEPs are 41 to 60-years old. Currently only 37 MEPs – out of 705 – are under the age of 35, around five percent of all parliamentarians. This shows a large gap with the percentage of under-35s in the entire EU population (ca. 16 %) and means young people's main issues, problems and policy preferences are not well-represented in the European Parliament. More under-35 MEPs would mean more potential spokespersons for the causes of young people. It might also enhance trust in the EP by young people at large.

Despite efforts to enhance youth engagement, the broader representation gap remains glaring. As we analyse the survey data pertaining to voting behaviour and aspirations for candidacy among European youth, we gain valuable insights into the extent of youth involvement in shaping European policies and legislation.

Theme 2. Youth and under-representation

Contrasting positions: Voting age	
1. <i>"The general voting age of 18 years is fine, as this is the age that young people become adults and become politically competent. The 16-years-old are not yet capable of understanding political issues".</i>	2. <i>"The voting age should be lowered everywhere to 16 years of age. This will enhance the engagement and representation of young people".</i>

Position-taking by participants	
(participants choose one of the two positions above and justify their position; the facilitator can help, also by referring to the questions below)	
<i>What are young people lacking in political and voting skills?</i> <i>What are the main differences between adolescents and adults?</i> <i>At what age are the democratic and political values of people (also regarding the EU's fundamental values) being formed?</i>	<i>What can be the contribution of young people under 18 to (European) politics and civic engagement?</i> <i>What may be the positive outcomes of a minimal voting age of 16?</i> <i>How does Erasmus+ contribute to helping young people going through the "transition" from being adolescent to becoming adult?</i>

Contrasting positions: under-representation young people	
1. <i>"Only 37 Members of European Parliament under the age of 35 is not a problem. Older people can represent young people, as they are more experienced and may be parents."</i>	2. <i>"The number of young people in the European Parliament needs to increase importantly, so as to directly represent young people's interests, to allow them to co-shape their future and that of Europe and represent the European ideal".</i>

Position-taking by participants	
(participants choose one of the two positions above and justify their position; the facilitator can help, also by referring to the questions below)	
<i>Is learning mobility through Erasmus+ a process of preparing young people to become full European citizens or political beings? Is it only after they finish their studies or traineeships that they will be prepared sufficiently?</i> <i>Do older generations "know best" because of more experience?</i>	<i>How does Erasmus+ contribute to preparing young people for engaging in political life, also by standing as a young politician, as well as by engaging in (European) civil society?</i> <i>How can young people be included in all kinds of political and social contexts where decisions are being made? How can Erasmus+ help to guide this process developing a stronger transnational European public sphere?</i>

Young people and voting age

A participant in discussion group mentioned that young people have less people to advocate for them. The pandemic was especially hard on them. To lower the voting age to 16 years would show them that they are taken seriously. It helps them to become aware of politics. Also, at 16 years of age they are already informed, and the age limit of 18 years was made up decades ago.

Another group agreed that age is just a number, and it does not necessarily show the maturity for being able to vote (“experience, not the age”). Rather, institutions or schools should spend energy in communicating the importance of voting, the process and mechanisms behind it, the way institutions work, the change people can contribute to, the civic engagement in a word.



The same group put forward that information is the key to raise awareness of the importance of voting. Lots of problems arise because of the lack of information or understanding of how the EU works, the history of voting, what are the results of the voting process, how young people could become a part of the process and the European Parliament (where they are under-represented). It was further argued that often people do not see the result of their participation (“people are involved in discussion, but the result is decided by those in power”). One of the participants presented an example of a woman who is a millionaire and wanted to donate money. Instead of deciding by herself who will benefit from the funding, she gathered an aleatory citizen assembly, which would agree on how to invest that

money for the good of the community.¹⁵ A similar approach could be implemented in political or societal decision-making.

A third group proposed that young people should be involved in various activities connected with voting since the beginning of their education. They should be aware and confident that their opinion will be crucial and taken into account. If we do not develop the habit of taking part in voting among young people, as adults, they will not be interested in participating in elections/voting.

Young people and underrepresentation

One group argued that young people tend to be more radical in their ideas, while older people are more moderate. In this sense, MEPs should have a family, so that they think of the next generation. It was also argued that old people are wiser and can represent young people, as they have experience which the younger generation is lacking.

Another group thought that underrepresentation is linked to the lack of participation. Hence, to increase participation a more solid representation of young people is needed. In fact, also the first group put forward that a younger voting age and having young representatives influence each other. In addition, young people tend to have different ideas/topics of interest from older generations.

A third group acknowledged the lack of political representation for young people, but also thought that there are other dimensions to be considered, for instance in terms of the underrepresentation of disabled people or the lack of access to politics for migrants. Another participant stated that there is a need for young MEPs. Erasmus+ can help by making young people more active. If one goes to another country, one's outlook is changed.



¹⁵ See <https://www.dw.com/en/austria-citizens-group-decides-fate-of-heiress-fortune/a-69396454>

Theme 2

Group discussions – Youth representation

Some of the key remarks

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Voting as such is an issue nowadays, because of the fatigue. Young people are tired of politics, they do not see or understand the results of the process of voting (“only promises, nothing changes”). In the countries that have voting as a mandatory activity for younger people (Belgium for instance introduced it mandatory for the age of 16), lots of protest votes are expected.

This group of young people [[16 years of age] does not have sufficient knowledge concerning the EU, its structures and functioning. The knowledge of this group should be better established. First of all, people who are voting should be convinced for what/for whom they are voting. People under 16 might not have such a conviction.

Voting at the age of 16 age is fine, but a process should be established to get more young people informed and interested in politics – to develop specialized courses.

“

Florence, 5 August, 2024

