



# **Political Participation and EU Citizenship: Perceptions and Behaviours of Young People**

**Evidence from  
Eurobarometer surveys**

Report produced by the Education,  
Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency  
(EACEA)

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## Introduction

Young people's political participation has long been a concern. Loss of community ties, little interest in and knowledge of political processes, low levels of trust in politicians and growing cynicism of democratic institutions are often seen as indicators of the younger generations' weakened sense of citizenship and political engagement (Pirie and Worcester, 1998; Haste and Hogan, 2006; Dalton, 2008; Stoker, 2006; YCC, 2009 in Mycock and Tonge, 2011). This view is usually supported by making reference to low and declining levels of participation in traditional modes of political engagement such as voting and joining political parties.

Yet, recent studies conclude that it is misleading to think that young people are not interested in politics. On the contrary, they are the ones most concerned about political issues (Harris, Wyn and Younes, 2010; O'Toole, Marsh and Jones, 2003; Sloam, 2013). On the basis of interviews, focus groups and surveys conducted with young people in seven European countries, a recent study concludes that 'young people articulate preferences and interests, and some of them are even more active than a majority of adults. Moreover, a clear majority of young people ask for more – not less – opportunity to have a say in the way their political systems are governed' (EACEA 2013a, p. 6).

However, young people tend to choose new forms of political participation. These political actions might not only be regarded as 'new' because they did not exist before the last decades (like for example participation via the Internet). Researchers argue that some traditional forms of expression (e.g. demonstrations, protests, signing petitions, boycotts etc.) can be viewed as 'new' because young people attach new meanings to them and redefine their role (Furlong and Cartmel, 2011). The nature of political actions has changed significantly: they have become more individualised, ad-hoc, issue-specific and less linked to traditional societal cleavages. Through new forms of political participation, young people can feel that they influence political decisions more directly and effectively (Dalton, 2008; Sloam, 2013). These changes in modes of political engagement are linked to new perceptions of citizenship. The patterns of socialisation of today's young people are considerably different from their parents' generation, having been affected by the processes of globalisation, individualisation (Bauman, 2001), and by consumption and competition (Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2009).

This report examines recent Eurobarometer surveys<sup>1</sup> in light of the changes in young people's modes of participation and perceptions of citizenship. All the surveys analysed took place in 2012, at a time when the economic crisis had already hit European societies. Young people have been affected disproportionately, with rising youth unemployment or cuts in education budgets. This is reflected in mass demonstrations by students and by the 'outraged young' (Hessel, 2011 in Sloam, 2013) as seen in several European countries. Therefore, it is useful to examine how a sample of young people is engaged in political participation under such circumstances.

However, it is also necessary to bear in mind that not all 'young people' behave and think the same way. First of all, the diversity of European countries in their democratic history and traditions can translate into differences in the political thinking and behaviour of their population. Furthermore, even within the same country, differences among young people exist based on gender or socio-economic status. Men are often regarded as being more active than women (see e.g. Burns, Schlozman and Verba, 2001). Concerning the socio-economic background of young people, Sloam (2013) for example

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<sup>1</sup> The analysed surveys are the following: the *European Citizenship* section of the Standard Eurobarometer 77 and 78 (see European Commission, 2012a and 2012b); the Flash Eurobarometer 365 on *European Union citizenship* (see European Commission, 2013a); the Flash Eurobarometer 373 on *Europeans' engagement in participatory democracy* (see European Commission, 2013b); and the European Parliament Eurobarometer 77.4 on *Two years to go to the 2014 European elections* (see European Parliament, 2012).

reveals differences in voting behaviour among young people based on educational background and income. On the other hand, such differences are less pronounced in the case of new forms of participation (Sloam, 2013). Similarly, inequalities or feelings of exclusion on various grounds are also crucial factors in influencing political behaviour (EACEA, 2013b; O'Toole, Marsh and Jones, 2003). Nevertheless, since the relatively small sample size of Eurobarometer surveys does not allow for breakdown by country, gender or socio-economic status within the youth cohort, this report limits the discussion to important general trends affecting the political behaviour of young people.

The youth cohort defined by Eurobarometer surveys is young people aged 15-24. This age group includes young people who do not (yet) have the right to vote or to participate in some forms of political actions (e.g. age requirements might apply to signing petitions in some countries). This can certainly influence the attitudes and patterns of participation of this cohort, which can be reflected in survey results.

The structure of the report is the following. Section 1 provides a conceptual overview explaining the changes in young people's political participation and perceptions of citizenship. Section 2 then looks at different forms of political participation among young Europeans: what they judge as effective forms of influencing decision-making at different levels and how they participate in diverse forms of political action. Section 3 then turns to the features of citizenship among young people, linked most importantly to European integration. The final section presents the conclusions.

## 1. Changing patterns of political engagement and new citizenship perceptions: conceptual overview

Today's young people have been growing up in a world which is significantly different from that of their parents'. This certainly influences how they define their identity, citizenship and the ways in which they choose to participate in democratic life.

Firstly, the **development of supranational structures** alters the meaning of citizenship and participation (Bauböck, 2007b; Hall, 1995 in Bosniak, 2000). Processes of political and economic integration – at European as well as at global level – have put into question the limiting of participation to within national borders (Soysal, 1997 in Ibid.; Bauböck, 2007a). In parallel, economic processes and social developments increasingly span across countries, regions and continents, aggregating the number of issues and reasons for engagement which extend beyond the traditional boundaries of countries. Young people increasingly live long periods in countries other than their country of birth, and therefore can nurture attachments to different places. This process of globalisation has also contributed to the general crisis of political parties and elections. National politicians are less and less able to address problems and influence policies in the national context due to internationalisation, European integration and the increasing reliance on expert bodies (Harris, Wyn and Younes, 2010; Sloam, 2013). As a result, and also due to the increasing 'mediatisation'<sup>2</sup> of party politics, parties' traditional role of intermediating between different interests has weakened significantly, and they function more as mere 'election machinery' (Hoikkala, 2009). These processes have led to political parties' loss of legitimacy in the eyes of citizens of all age groups. However, older generations had already taken up the voting 'habit' before their (potential) disillusionment occurred and so it is reflected to a lesser extent in their voting behaviour (Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2009).

Secondly, a large proportion of today's young people in Western democracies grew up in relative wealth, where **consumption and competition** are dominant ideologies (Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2009). The underlying principles of consumption and competition – most importantly 'choice' – are also getting integrated into political participation (Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2009). In parallel, a 'generational shift' is taking place from 'materialist' to '**post-materialist**' values that influence political preferences and interests (Inglehart, 1990). This generally means that young people tend to be more focused on 'quality of life' issues such as environmental protection or human rights (Harris, Wyn and Younes, 2010). These changes favour more issue-specific, ad hoc and campaign-like political action.

Thirdly, the generational shift also reflects in young people's increasing **non-linear transition to adulthood** (Hoikkala, 2009). Unlike previous generations, young people experience fragmented routes to financial and social independence. Entry to the labour market takes longer and is often interspersed with gaps in employment due to scarcity of jobs and/or further education and training (Colley et al. 2005, in Ibid. p.12). Similarly, financial independence and living independently often alternates with dependence on parental support or house sharing as necessary. In Bauman's words, societies are becoming increasingly *individualised* not only because people can determine their own place within a social hierarchy, but also because 'the *places* to which the individuals may gain access and in which they may wish to settle are melting fast and can hardly serve as targets for "life projects"' (Bauman 2009, p. 5, emphasis original). The flexibility needed to adjust to this kind of instability, and the resulting loose ties young people may have to essential aspects of their life (work, economic security, home), changes the way young people perceive their citizenship and political participation.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'mediatisation' refers to the phenomenon that political institutions, communication and discourse are 'increasingly dependent on and shaped by mass media' (Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999).

As such, the intensity and modes of participation can shift across time, embracing membership of new communities along with changes in their priorities and interests. In other words, political participation is transforming to become more ad hoc, personalised and 'self-expressive' (Harris, Wyn and Younes, 2010).

For all these reasons, young people tend to feel that traditional forms of participation are inadequate to influence policy-making in areas important to them. They neither see that their interests are well represented by elected politicians, nor do they feel that their voice is heard effectively (O'Toole, Marsh and Jones, 2003; Harris, Wyn and Younes, 2010). On the one hand, young people feel excluded from traditional, mainstream ways of influencing political decision-making (O'Toole, Marsh and Jones, 2003); party membership is becoming increasingly older and traditional political fora provide barriers to youth participation. On the other hand, young people are the ones opting for new forms of participation that offer them more personally meaningful, informal, and non-institutionalised channels of action (Harris, Wyn and Younes, 2010; Sloam, 2013).

Nevertheless, this does not mean that young people do not trust parties and electoral politics or do not believe in democratic participation in the traditional sense. Kestilä-Kekkonen (2009, p. 156) shows that 18-30 year olds have, in fact, a higher trust in parties and in the effectiveness of elections than older age groups, despite their lower electoral participation. However, due to the changing perceptions of citizenship(s), they no longer perceive voting at national elections as a 'duty' (Dalton, 2008). Instead, their notion of citizenship and political participation changes: it becomes geographically dispersed (they feel that they can belong to and participate in various communities at once, combining local, national, and supranational identities), and more individualistic and efficacy-driven than based on emotional and normative considerations (in an unstable environment where traditional certainties no longer exist, they are motivated to participate in a community only as long as their interests are safeguarded).<sup>3</sup> As a result, young people regard voting as one option among many, and they show their political engagement in many different, issue-specific ways that can potentially influence policies more directly (Dalton, 2008; Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2009).

Thus, new ways of perceiving citizenship transform political participation. Traditional channels which intermediate between different interests and traditional fora that allow individuals to express their political opinions might not be regarded by young people as appropriate or effective in a globalised, Europeanised and at the same time fragmented reality. Young people's political participation must therefore be analysed and evaluated from this perspective.

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<sup>3</sup> The sense of citizenship stems from the interrelation between three main dimensions: the feeling of belonging to a political entity, acknowledgment of its rules and formal procedures, and trust in the efficiency and effectiveness of that entity to bring about concrete benefits (Schaar, 1984; Katz and Wessels, 1999; Beetham and Lord, 2001; Walker, 2001). In other words, one believes oneself to be a citizen when one: attaches emotional importance to being a member of a polity (for historical, cultural, and personal reasons); accepts the related rights and duties as legitimate; and believes there are concrete gains resulting from its membership (i.e. the polity is the most effective and efficient way to secure the individual and common good).

## 2. Young people and political participation

It is a well-known fact that young people vote less than older generations. According to the European Social Survey, in 2010, 61% of young respondents aged 22-29 stated that they voted in the last national elections, as opposed to the 78.1% of over 30-year-olds<sup>4</sup>. However, as underlined above, young people's political participation is not in *decline* – it is in *transformation*. Though elections have a pivotal role in democratic societies, it is not only voting that needs to be taken into account when evaluating political participation – there are many other ways of trying to influence political decision-makers and policies. Young people may vote less than older generations, but at the same time, they are over-represented in alternative, so-called 'new' forms of political participation.

Based on Eurobarometer surveys conducted in 2012, this section looks at young people's perceptions on different forms of political participation (subsection 3.1) as well as how they actually choose to express their opinion on publicly important issues (subsection 3.2). Throughout the analysis, young people's perceptions and behaviour are contrasted with that of older age groups.

### 2.1. Effective ways of influencing decision-making: perceptions of young people

One question that Eurobarometer surveys investigate from different perspectives is what forms of political participation are regarded as effective in influencing decision-making or making one's voice heard. Related questions do not map actual political participation, but rather examine respondents' perceptions and beliefs. The surveys compare similar political actions at different levels (local, national and European), as well as how respondents judge different forms of political participation.

Voting and electoral participation certainly has a special place in the surveys. In line with the findings of Kestilä-Kekkonen (2009), the Eurobarometer surveys also reveal that in the European Union on average, comparatively more young people (aged 15-24) believe that voting is an effective way of influencing decision-making (at local, national or European levels) than do older generations. This confirms previous assumptions that despite their low electoral turnout, young people still trust electoral politics.

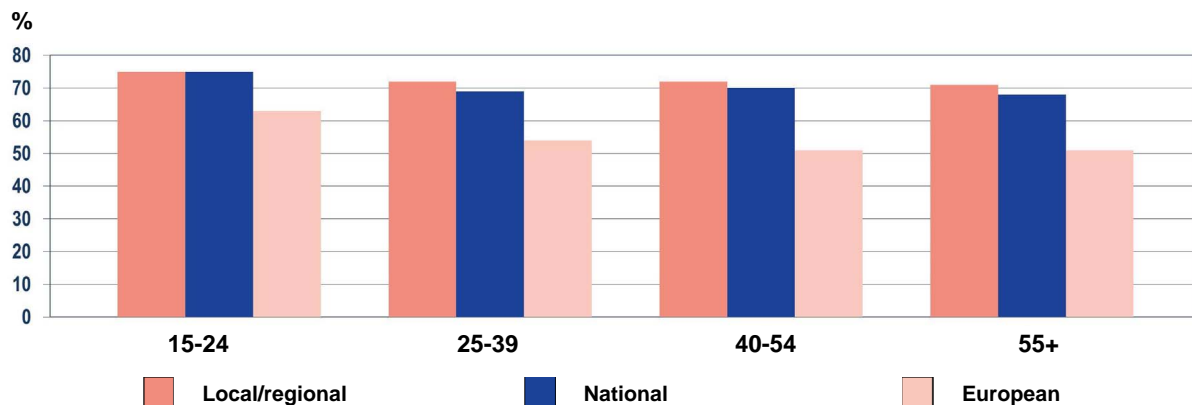
As Figure 1 shows, in all age groups, voting was seen as most effective in influencing decision-making at local/regional level, somewhat less effective at national level, and considerably less so at European level. However, at all levels, young respondents aged 15-24 showed more trust in voting to some extent than other age groups.

The biggest difference between the youngest (15-24) and the oldest (55+) age groups in the perception of the effectiveness of voting is seen at the European level. While for the local/regional level the difference between the two population groups was only 4 percentage points (75% vs. 71%), it was 12 percentage points (63% vs. 51%) for the European level. As Section 3 will show, this reflects a stronger sense of European identity amongst young people.

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<sup>4</sup> Weighted averages of participating EU Member States. The 22-29 age group was chosen to ensure that the number of countries where the proportion of non-eligible respondents was over 10% was kept to a minimum. On average among 22-29 year olds, 33.2% did not vote, while 5.8% were not eligible; in the 30+ age group, 19% stated that they did not vote at the last national election.

**Figure 1: Proportion of respondents finding voting an effective way of influencing decision-making, at local/regional, national and European levels, by age group, EU average, 2012**



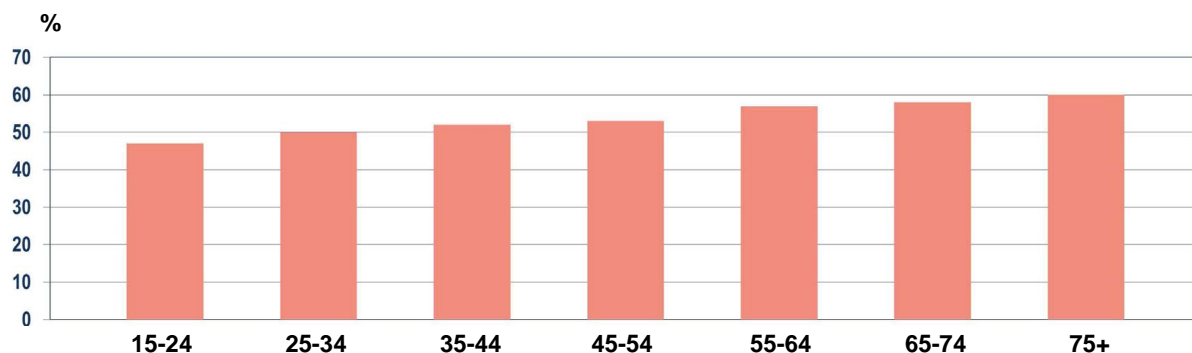
Source: Flash Eurobarometer 373.

Note: The question was: For each of the following actions, please tell me if you think they are effective or ineffective in influencing political decision-making? (Voting in local/regional elections; Voting in national elections; Voting in European elections).

However, the picture becomes a bit more nuanced when it comes to actually *choosing* between different forms of participation on the basis of their effectiveness. In one Eurobarometer survey, respondents were asked to choose *the two best ways* of ensuring that their voice was heard by decision-makers.

When compared to other forms of participation, voting is still most commonly regarded as the ‘best way’ of making one’s voice heard: 47% of young respondents aged 15-24 chose this option, which is significantly higher than the share selecting any other alternative (see Figure 3). However, as Figure 2 shows, young people were still the *least likely* to choose voting among the two best ways of making their voice heard in comparison with older generations. Certainly, as was discussed in the Introduction, the 15-24 age group includes many young people who do not have the right to vote, which might have influenced their choices. Nevertheless, the proportion of people choosing voting is also relatively low for those aged 25-34 (50%). At the other end of the scale, the proportion of people from the oldest age group (75+) making this choice was 60%.

**Figure 2: Proportion of respondents choosing ‘voting in elections’ as one of their two best ways to ensure that their voice is heard by decision-makers, by age group, EU average, 2012**



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 77 (Spring 2012).

Note: The question was: Which two of the following do you think are the best ways of ensuring one’s voice is heard by decision-makers? (Voting in elections).

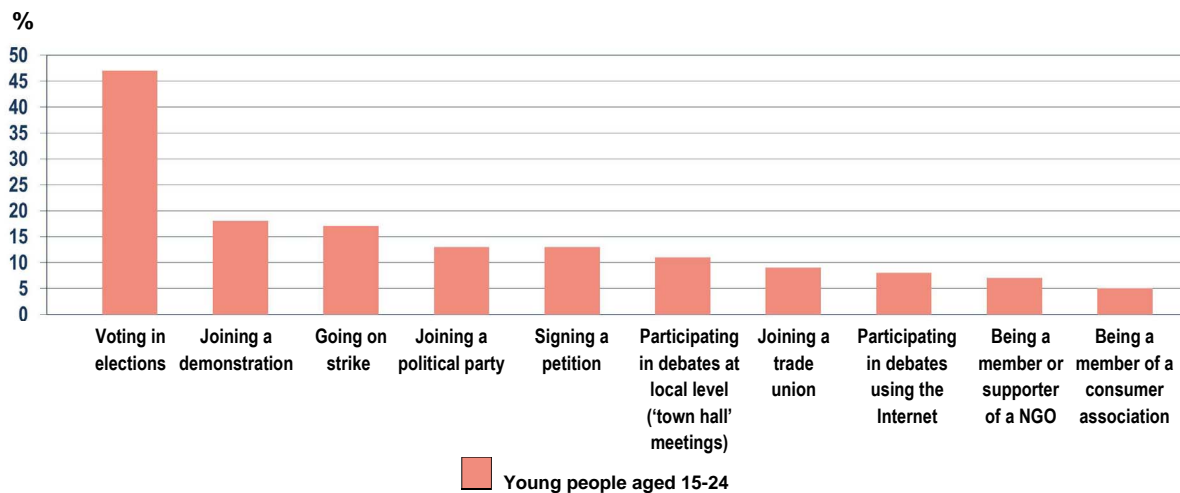


In line with the literature, after voting, most young people tended to choose demonstrations and strikes as the most effective ways of making their voice heard (18% and 17% respectively; see Figure 3). Since both forms of political action may be regarded as 'new' for the reasons mentioned above, it is not surprising that they appeal to young respondents – and are more appealing to them than to respondents from other age groups.

Party membership and signing petitions (both 13%) come next in young people's list of the 'best ways' of making their voice heard. The relatively high response for party membership is interesting, since being a member of a political party is certainly a 'traditional' form of political participation. The decline in party membership is a general trend; but the literature shows that young people are even less attracted to joining political parties than older generations. However, in comparison to other options, a relatively large share of young respondents still regarded party membership as a good way of making their voice heard. Moreover, young people aged 15-24 and 25-34 chose this option in greater proportions to older generations, though differences between age groups were not significant in this case.

Thus, these results again illustrate the existing differences between beliefs and behaviour: while young people still trust political parties and think that decisions can be influenced through party membership, they do not actually join political parties. The reasons for not joining parties are the changing concept of citizenship (e.g. from duty-based citizenship to 'engaged citizenship'; see Dalton, 2008) and the existence of potential barriers to participation. Such barriers can include real and perceived ones: experiences of not being listened to due to one's age in a political meeting can translate into a general feeling of exclusion from mainstream forms of influencing decision-making.

**Figure 3: Respondents' choices of the two best ways to ensure 'that one's voice is heard by decision-makers', by age group, EU average, 2012**



Age groups	Voting in elections	Joining a demonstration	Going on strike	Joining a political party	Signing a petition	Participating in debates at local level ('town hall' meetings)	Joining a trade union	Participating in debates using the Internet	Being a member or supporter of a NGO	Being a member of a consumer association
15-24	47%	18%	17%	13%	13%	11%	9%	8%	7%	5%
25-34	50%	13%	15%	13%	15%	12%	11%	7%	6%	6%
35-44	52%	13%	14%	12%	16%	14%	10%	6%	6%	6%
45-54	53%	12%	14%	12%	15%	14%	9%	5%	6%	7%
55-64	57%	12%	11%	12%	14%	14%	11%	4%	5%	7%
65-74	58%	9%	6%	12%	15%	15%	8%	3%	4%	7%
75+	60%	6%	5%	9%	13%	11%	6%	1%	4%	5%

Source: Standard Eurobarometer 77 (Spring 2012).

Note: The question was: Which two of the following do you think are the best ways of ensuring one's voice is heard by decision-makers?

The place of signing petitions in the list of different political actions is less surprising, given that this activity can be regarded as a 'new' form of political participation. An interesting detail is, however, that young respondents aged 15-24 were actually the least likely to choose this option. According to the Eurobarometer survey, it was the 35-44 age group that was most likely to regard petitions as an effective way of making one's voice heard (16%).

More than 10% of young respondents chose 'participating in debates at local level ('town hall' meetings)' among the two best ways of making their voice heard. Though this relatively high proportion can be unexpected, young people tended to choose this option less than other age groups: with the exception of the oldest age group, the likelihood of finding town hall meetings effective increased with age. This is in line with the relevant literature: researchers usually conclude that participating in local 'town hall' meetings is unappealing (and also inaccessible) to young people (see also subsection 2.2). Nevertheless, as in the case of party membership, a similar, though less pronounced difference between beliefs and actions is illustrated by these results.

Young respondents were somewhat less likely to select trade union membership among the two potentially best ways of influencing politics and policies (9%). Joining a trade union is again a more traditional political action. The results here do not show a clear age pattern; in this case, the 'peaks' of choosing this option were at the ages 25-34 and 55-64.

The three least favoured political actions – or perceived as least effective – in the eyes of young respondents are all regarded as 'new' forms of political participation. Despite the widespread use of the Internet and social media among young people (see subsection 2.2), only 8% of them thought that 'participating in debates using the Internet' was among the two best ways of making their voice heard. Nevertheless, there was still a greater proportion of younger respondents than older age groups who selected this option. The pattern is similar in the case of NGO membership/support (chosen by 7% of young people). However, the reverse pattern is found when it comes to choosing 'being a member of a consumer association', which was selected by only 5% of young respondents. Nevertheless, older generations were also not very likely to trust this form of political action: on average, only 6% of all respondents thought that being a member of a consumer association was one of the two best ways of making their voice heard.

Thus, the results of the Eurobarometer surveys generally support earlier findings about the perceptions of young people. Firstly, young people trust 'new' forms of actions such as demonstrations and strikes in greater proportions than older generations. Secondly, the results also illustrate well the differences between beliefs and political actions: the non-participation of young people in traditional forms of political engagement does not mean that they do not believe in their effectiveness. Rather, as was discussed above, their absence can be due to different ways of perceiving their citizenship and the real and perceived barriers to participation. Finally, the analysis also confirmed the relatively greater 'pro-Europeanness' of young people that will be described in Section 3. In light of these findings, the next subsection turns to analysing the actual political behaviour of young people: how they choose to express their political opinion in different fora.

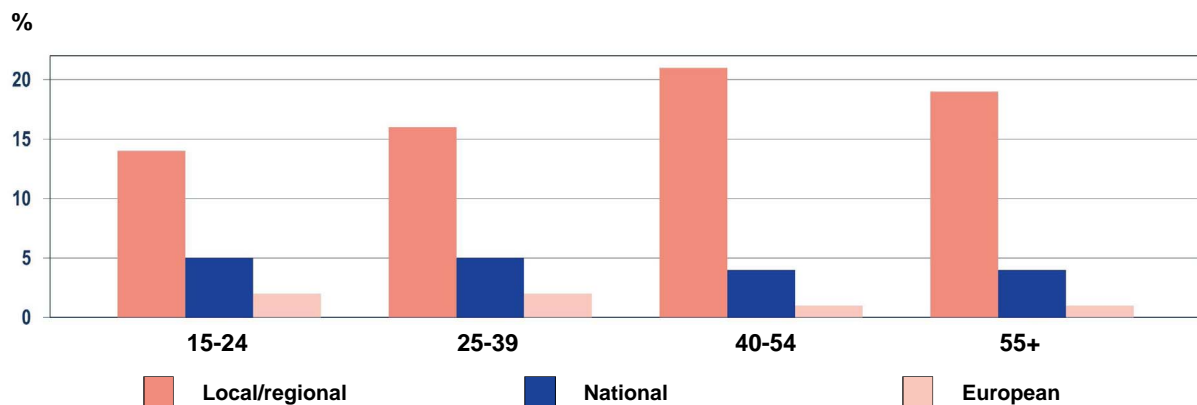
## 2.2. Young people's political participation: traditional and new ways of expressing opinions

The Eurobarometer survey on participative democracy also investigates how respondents had chosen to express their political opinion over the past two years. In this case, the related questions concern actual political behaviour, not perceptions or beliefs.

Again, an important distinction in the survey is between 'traditional', face to face political participation such as taking part in debates or expressing views to elected representatives on the one hand, and 'new' ways of expressing opinions such as on the Internet, in social media or by signing a petition on the other. The following paragraphs contrast these different forms and analyse the ways in which young people tend to express their opinion in political fora.

'Traditional' modes of political communication can take place at different levels: local/regional, national and European. With respect to debates at local level, this survey confirms previous findings in revealing the low participation levels among young people (Figure 4). This means that young respondents do not only perceive such fora as being relatively ineffective in making their voice heard (see previous subsection), but they also do not really participate in them.

**Figure 4: Participation in public debates at local/regional, national and European levels over the past two years, by age group, EU average, 2012**



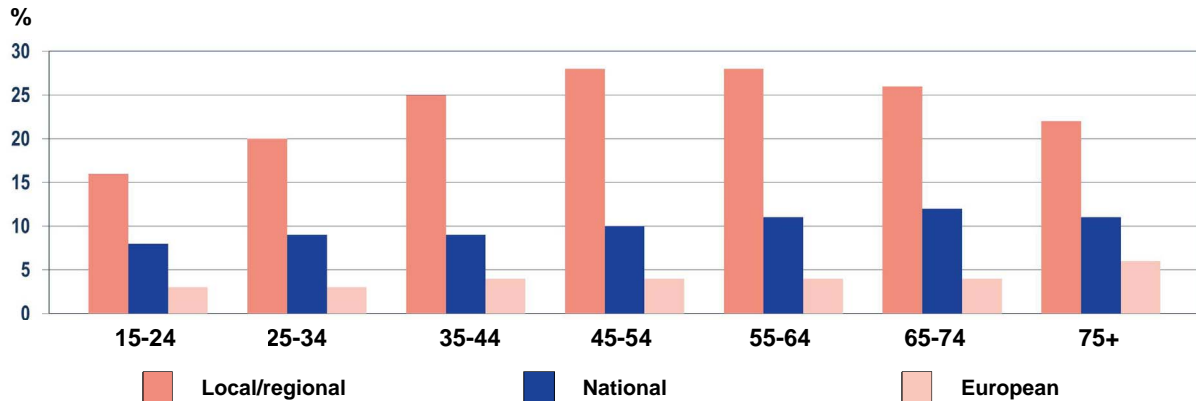
Source: Flash Eurobarometer 373.

Note: The question was: Have you done any of the following in the last two years? (Taken part in a public debate at local/regional level)

The survey shows very low participation for all age groups in debates at national and European levels (4% and 1% respectively). According to the survey, it is young people aged 15-24 who have the highest participation rates at these levels (5% at the national and 2% at the European level). However, the differences between generations are so small that they cannot be regarded as significant. Furthermore, national and European-level debates are often specifically organised for young people, which can be reflected in survey results.

Data on expressing views to elected representatives can better reflect the differences between age groups. The survey shows that young people communicate their opinions by turning to their elected representatives less than other age groups. This is true at all levels: local/regional, national and European. Figure 5 again confirms previous findings about the low participation of young people in traditional fora.

**Figure 5: Proportion of respondents who had expressed their opinion on public issues to elected representatives at local/regional, national and European levels over the past two years, by age group, EU average, 2012**

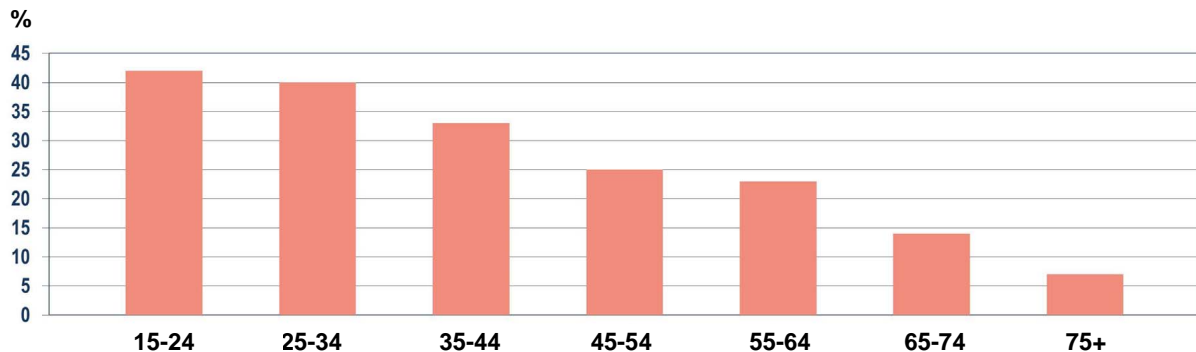


Source: Flash Eurobarometer 373.

Note: The question was: Have you done any of the following in the last two years? (Expressed your views on public issues with your elected representative at local/regional level; Expressed your views on public issues with your elected representative at national level; Expressed your views on public issues with your elected representative at EU level).

On the other hand, young people express their views via the Internet and in social media in larger proportions than older generations. As Figure 6 shows, participation in such fora decreases significantly with age. A quite considerable proportion of young respondents have expressed their opinions on public issues via the Internet or in social media over the last two years, over 40%.

**Figure 6: Proportion of respondents who had expressed their views via the Internet or in social media over the past two years, by age group, EU average, 2012**

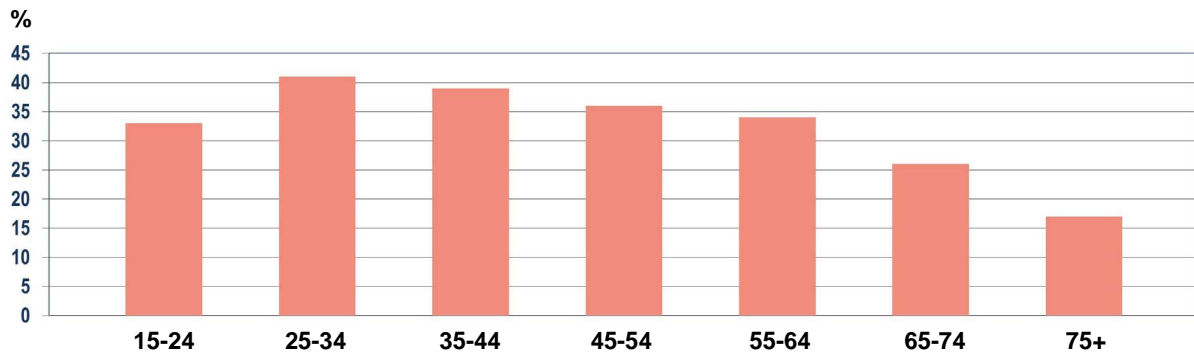


Source: Flash Eurobarometer 373.

Note: The question was: Have you done any of the following in the last two years? (Expressed your views on public issues on the Internet or in social media).

Patterns in the data on the signing of petitions are less straightforward to interpret. As was shown above, there is no clear age pattern when it comes to judging the effectiveness of petitions. As Figure 7 depicts, a relatively low proportion of 15-24 year old respondents had signed a petition in the past two years. However, this could also be due to possible age restrictions that exist in some countries. Signing petitions was most common among the 25-34 age group, who are still counted as being among the younger generation, but are not the youngest age group. Although over the age of 35, signing petitions becomes less common with age, differences are much smaller and thus the trend is less clear than in the case of Internet and social media-usage.

**Figure 7: Proportion of respondents who had signed a petition (on paper or online) over the past two years, by age group, EU average, 2012**



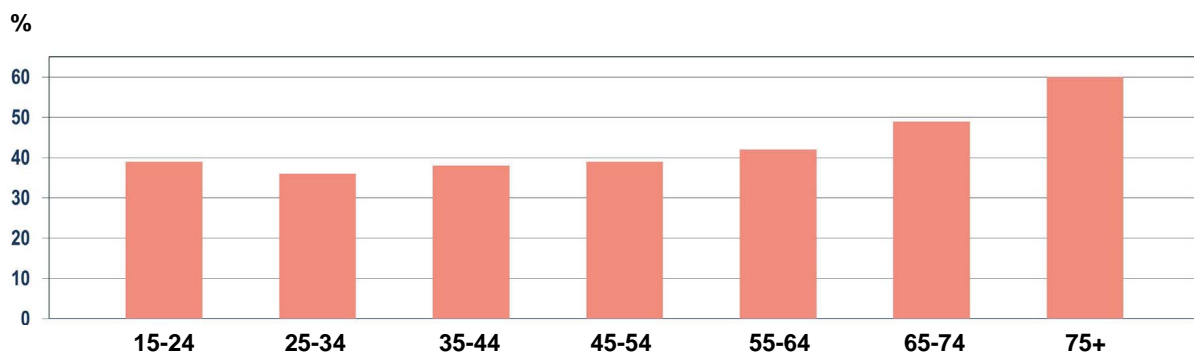
Source: Flash Eurobarometer 373.

Note: The question was: Have you done any of the following in the last two years? (Signed a petition (on paper or online)).

These results more or less confirm earlier findings about the political behaviour of young people. However, comparing the Eurobarometer surveys again reveals interesting differences between attitudes and behaviour. While in the case of voting, trust in its effectiveness was relatively high among young people despite their low electoral participation, the opposite can be observed in the case of Internet and social media-usage. As Figure 3 showed, only 8% of young respondents thought that participating in debates on the Internet was one of the best ways of influencing decision-making, despite the frequent usage of such fora within the youngest age group.

Another interesting finding of the survey is that in general, for the whole sample, expressing opinions in 'new' ways is much more common than via traditional fora. This signals a clear transformation in the way people participate in political activities. On the other hand, 42% of all respondents (and 39% of all young people aged 15-24) had not participated in any of the mentioned activities over the past two years (see Figure 8). Though the options listed in the survey were relatively limited in scope, the results show that a large proportion of the population is quite inactive when it comes to expressing opinions on publicly important issues. Yet, young people are not the most inactive in this sense.

**Figure 8: Proportion of respondents who had not participated in any of the political activities listed over the past two years, by age group, EU average, 2012**



Source: Flash Eurobarometer 373.

Note: The question was: Have you done any of the following in the last two years?

### 3. Young people and their perception of EU citizenship

The transformations in European societies and in the prevailing routes to socialisation which have been described in Section 1 have obviously produced significant changes in the way young people perceive and practice their citizenship, which is at the foundation of political participation. One essential element in such transformation is the development of supranational structures, and most importantly, the European Union.

Indeed, the trends in young people's participation highlighted in the previous section are reflected in the results of several Eurobarometer surveys investigating the level and main elements of their sense of belonging to the European community.

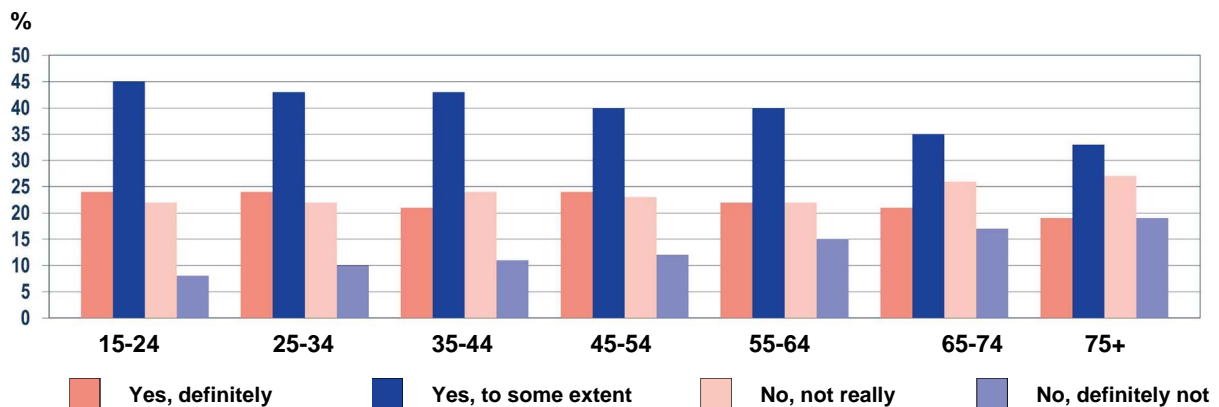
The analysis is developed by comparing the opinions expressed by young respondents with those expressed by older age groups. This perspective is essential in assessing the trends in the attachment to EU integration perceived by young people against the general developments in political trust and identity affecting the entire population.

In fact, when looking comparatively at different age groups, young people are the group that scores the highest in terms of considering themselves citizens of the EU (Figure 9).

Young people in the 15-24 age group reported stronger feelings towards EU citizenship than older age groups. Only one in three off all respondents reported no attachment whatever to EU citizenship. This proportion gradually rises with the increase in age of respondents.

The 'supra-nationalisation' of contemporary politics discussed in Section 1 and the related emergence of multiple 'citizenships' replacing the traditional single national citizenship (Spiro, 1997 in Bosniak, 2000) help to explain the youth population's stronger identification with European citizenship.

**Figure 9: Extent to which different age groups feel they are citizens of the EU (%), EU average, 2012**

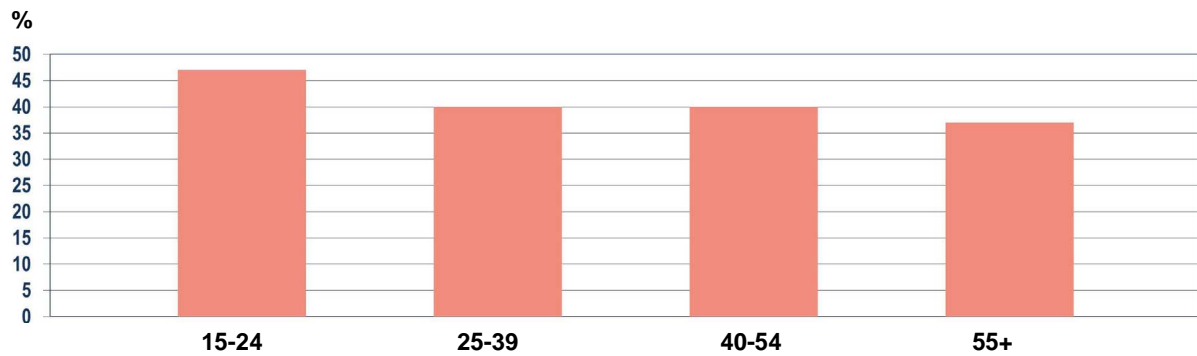


Source: Standard Eurobarometer 78.

Note: The question was: For each of the following statements, please tell me to what extent it corresponds or not to your own opinion: You feel you are a citizen of the EU (No, definitely not; No, not really; Yes, to some extent; Yes, definitely)

This stronger sense of European identity goes in parallel with the higher level of appreciation for the European integration process. Almost 50% of respondents in the 15-24 age group stated that they have a positive image of the EU, while older ones reported lower rates (Figure 10). Although this figure per se can lead to pessimistic conclusions about the support for the European Union amongst the younger generation (half of the sample interviewed does not back the EU integration process), it offers a more encouraging outlook when compared with the lower levels of appreciation demonstrated by older age groups.

**Figure 10: Share of respondents with a positive image of the European Union, by age group, EU average, 2012**

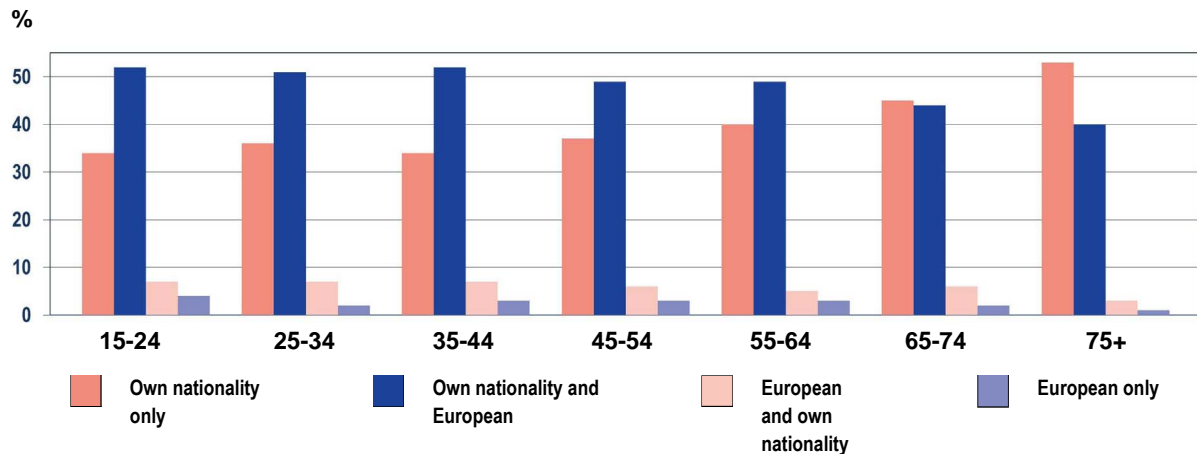


Source: European Parliament Eurobarometer 77.4.

Note: The question was: In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image? (Percentages shown here represent the share of respondents choosing "very positive" or "fairly positive").

Younger respondents also reported higher percentages about the projected feeling of EU citizenship that they foresee in the future (Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Projected views of European and national citizenship, by age group, EU average, 2012**



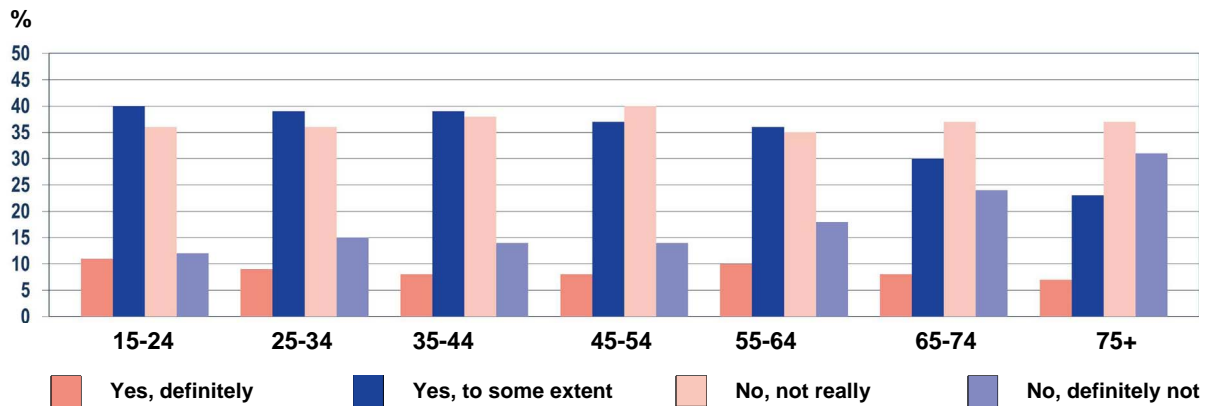
Source: Standard Eurobarometer 77.

Note: The question was: In the near future, do you see yourself as...? (Own nationality only; Own nationality and European; European and own nationality; European only)

The vast majority of respondents believe that being part of the European Union will be an element of their perceived identity. About one third of respondents in the 15-24 age group stated that they will feel that they have only a national identity. Older respondents expected to feel a stronger national identity.

Possibly because of their stronger attachment to the European Union, young people feel more informed and knowledgeable about the rights deriving from EU citizenship, compared to older age groups (Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Knowledge of rights as EU citizen, by age group, EU average, 2012**

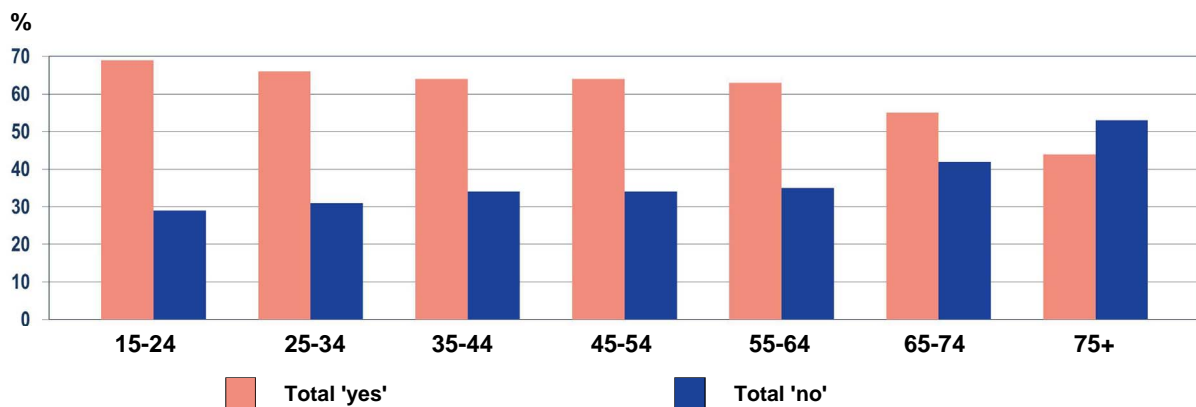


Source: Standard Eurobarometer 78.

Note: The question was: For each of the following statements, please tell me to what extent it corresponds or not to your own opinion: you know what your rights are as a citizen of the EU (No, definitely not; No, not really; Yes, to some extent; Yes, definitely)

On average, half of young respondents stated that they definitely know, or know to some extent their rights as EU citizens. Yet, despite knowing more about EU rights compared to the general population, young people also showed particular interest in gaining additional information (Figure 13). The willingness to seek further knowledge on the rights associated with EU citizenship gradually declines with the increase in age of respondents.

**Figure 13: Willingness to know more about rights of EU citizens, by age group, EU average, 2012**



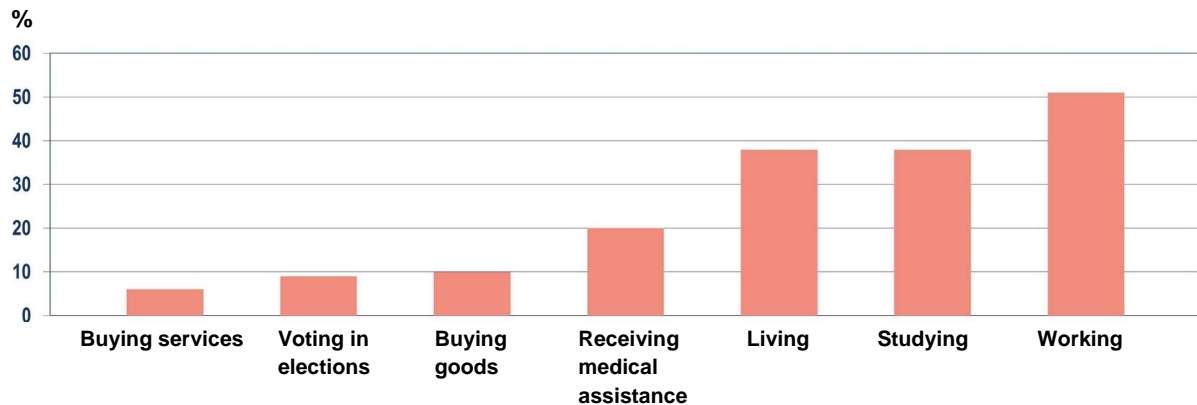
Source: Standard Eurobarometer 78.

Note: The question was: For each of the following statements, please tell me to what extent it corresponds or not to your own opinion: You would like to know more about your rights as a citizen of the EU (No definitely not; No not really; Yes to some extent; Yes definitely)

In this respect, the figures are particularly telling: about two thirds of young participants in the survey indicated that they would like to have more information on their rights as EU citizens. This is in clear opposition to the prevailing image of young people as uninterested and disenchanted. On the contrary, the figures suggest that most young people feel they have a stake in becoming as informed as possible of the opportunities offered by EU membership. To complement this picture, Figure 14 reports data on the topics on which young respondents would like to obtain more insight.



**Figure 14: Rights of EU citizens when in EU Member States other than the state of origin, about which young people (15-24) would like to know more, EU average, 2012**



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 78.

Note: The question was: About which rights as a citizen of the EU would you like to know more?

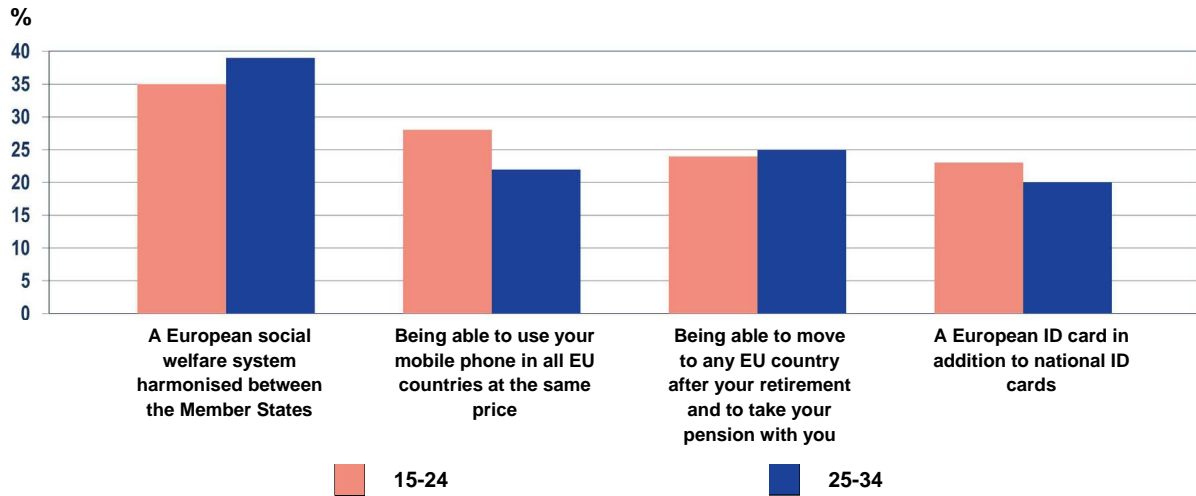
Young people indicated that working, studying, and living in another EU member state are the first three areas of rights deriving from EU citizenship that they wish to know more about. These findings are not surprising: education, employment and starting an independent life are at the core of young people's aspirations. In accordance with the instability produced by the non-linear transitions to adulthood mentioned in Section 1, young people's sense of citizenship increasingly manifests itself as attachments to multiple and only partly overlapping communities that form around shared and concrete interests and objectives. It is influenced by the changeability in their lifestyles rather than by a lifelong identification inspired by a sense of cultural, historical, and emotional belonging.

Indeed, the figures presented here suggest a prevailing perception of EU citizenship as based on tangible benefits coming from European integration. In order to inspire young people's interest, these benefits need to be relevant to the most important issues facing them in their lives: obtaining appropriate qualifications, building their professional career and securing good living conditions. Aspects of citizenship that seem to have a less evident connection with those issues, score significantly worse. For example, voting in another EU country did not interest many respondents (less than 10%). As Section 2 illustrated, voting seems to have lost appeal as a form of political participation amongst young people.

The prevailing 'efficiency' driven concept of citizenship is not limited to young cohorts, but characterises the attitudes of older age groups as well. With the increase in age, the percentage of respondents indicating 'receiving medical assistance' as the right about which they would like to know more increases, while 'studying', 'working', and 'living' in another Member State become less important.

According to most young people, reinforcing the rights connected to delivering concrete benefits (for example, establishing common mobile telephone tariffs across the whole EU) is the best way to strengthen EU citizenship (Figure 15).

**Figure 15: Top 4 elements that would help strengthen EU citizenship, by age group (15-24 and 25-34), EU average, 2012**



Source: Standard Eurobarometer 77.

Note: The question was: Which of the following elements would best strengthen your feeling about being a European citizen? Each respondent was allowed to express a maximum of 4 preferences.

Overall, information from the four Eurobarometer surveys considered in this section reveals that, contrary to what is often assumed, a majority of young people do feel European, demonstrate an attachment to and interest in the EU, consider themselves to be well-informed about the rights deriving from their European citizenship, and express clear opinions on what would strengthen their sense of citizenship, providing an indication of how EU integration may be further developed.

In addition, young people report positive attitudes towards EU membership to a greater extent than older generations. For each of the dimensions investigated in this section, attachment to and recognition of the EU declines with increasing age.

Last but not least, the source of young people's enthusiasm for EU citizenship seems to reside in the appreciation of the concrete advantages provided by European integration. This is an informative message especially in the current climate of economic hardship suffered particularly by young people. Indeed, the support for the European project demonstrated by a majority of young participants in the surveys, despite the worrying figures on youth social exclusion and unemployment brought about by the crisis, reveals the existence of strong expectations for the EU, and significant potential for young people's political participation and engagement.

## 4. Conclusion

Eurobarometer surveys conducted in 2012 confirm previous findings on the transformation of political participation among young people and their perceptions of citizenship in the European Union. Young people do engage in different political activities, favouring alternative, new forms of political participation. In comparison to older generations, young people are not less active, even in times of rising youth unemployment and social exclusion.

The surveys also reveal interesting differences between young people's beliefs and behaviour: young people do not always participate in activities that they believe to be effective. Indeed, despite their low electoral participation, a relatively large proportion of young respondents stated that voting is an effective way of influencing decision-making. In contrast, while many young people express their opinion on the Internet or in social media, the share of those thinking this is one of the best ways of making their voice heard was relatively small.

Eurobarometer surveys also show that young people have a stronger European identity than do older generations. Because they have grown up in times when European integration had been in process for long and its economic and social achievements have become ingrained in everyday life, young generations express stronger attachment to EU citizenship than older ones, and envisage nurturing such feeling of belonging well into their future.

However, the transformation of citizenship perceptions and political participation is not without challenges. Many young people have not developed the voting 'habit', which can pose serious problems in electoral democracies in the future when they potentially reach the 'age of disillusionment' (Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2009). Citizenship education in schools can be a critical tool in facilitating young people's information on and understanding of political processes. The acquisition of civic competences is essential to enable individuals to participate fully in democratic life. Nevertheless, as documented by a recent study, students learn about citizenship not only through formal teachings in the classroom but also through direct participatory activities in the school and local communities (EACEA/Eurydice, 2012). Citizenship education can therefore be more effective if it is supported by a school environment where students are given the opportunity to experience the values and principles of the democratic process in action.

Besides strengthening formal and non-formal learning of civic competences in education, it is also important that society acknowledge and value young people's attitudes towards political participation in order not to lose their potential in bringing about political and social change. Modern expressions of political action and communication such as online fora and social networks are not in contradiction with traditional ones like voting; rather, they can serve as complementary tools facilitating social engagement and political participation. An important challenge for democratic institutions at local, national and European level resides in their ability to adapt to and incorporate the sometimes innovative modes of participation and to prevent young people's precious contribution from being lost.

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