

Inspiration from abroad

To the question of youth political participation during Covid-19 in Finland

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Youth political participation in nutshell

To start with, youth as a specific social group has no one certain definition in scientific literature due to the problem of setting age limits. However, some United Nations entities suggest definite age frames for this social group, for instance, from 15 to 24 years old, from 15 to 32 and others. In this research we use the age limit from 15 years old to 29 as far as Finnish Youth Research Society identify young people in their research projects (Myllyniemi & Kiilakoski, 2019).

The concept of political participation (involvement) in general is quite widely developed. One of the basic definitions of political participation has been offered by Robert Dahl. He introduced this term as an important part of modern democracies as far as it enables citizens to hold their governments accountable (Dahl, 1973). The same time period Verba and Nie defined political participation as “those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take” (Verba & Nie, 1972, p. 2). Thus, political participation primarily means the directed action of an individual in the field of politics. Another broader definition was given by Norris who called political participation as any kind of activity to influence directly the government, indirectly civil society and changes in models of social behavior (Norris, 2002, p. 16).

Theocharis and van Deth (2017) in their book “Political participation in a changing world” suggested special concept to recognize the mode of participation. It includes five modes in total which are based on the following characteristics (van Deth, 2014, p. 350):

- 1) the type of activity,
- 2) voluntary nature (is not identified as forced action),
- 3) reference to people in their role as non-professionals or amateurs,
- 4) concern to government, politics, or the state.

This concept can significantly help to identify the activities of young people as political participation and, what is more important, to verify its form.

In modern societies, the transformation of traditional forms of political participation is observed, especially among young people. In particular, this trend is noted in the research by Barrett and Pachi (2019, pp. 6–7) who explain the decline in using of traditional forms by expanding opportunities through non-conventional forms of youth political participation. However, some researchers who also study this phenomenon (e.g., Dalton, 2008) believe that this judgment can be attributed primarily to Western societies.

Youth political participation in Finland facing Covid-19

The study of Finnish youth political participation is societally very relevant in terms of thinking about the future of the western democracies. Generally, political participation has faced serious problems during pandemic period primarily because of the social distancing and restrictions for personal interaction. In particular, government wasn't prepared for elections due to the absence of e-voting system, so that, for instance, the municipal elections have been postponed in 2021 (Ketola, 2021, p. 13). But despite any challenges and restrictions, political involvement continued during the

pandemic. The ability to use the variety of technological tools provided opportunities to continue the political parties' work, organize protests and strikes, develop social movements, etc.

Although in Finland the youth's interest in politics has increased after a small dip, young people were not often involved in political activity before the coronavirus pandemic – according to the Youth Barometer 2018 only 41% of young people who were deeply interested in politics have taken part in political activities (Myllyniemi & Kiilakoski, 2019, p. 13). Therefore, data for Finnish youth political participation have demonstrated low level of youth political activity during pre-Covid period but in general young people were more politically active than in previously estimated years.

Youth as a social group can be characterized as a socially innovative resource and a subject of social transformations. The opportunity to participate in the decision-making process can benefit both young people and society. Therefore, taking into account low level of political participation of youth in Finland and continuing situation with coronavirus pandemic it is especially important to explore the social group of young people in terms of their political involvement.

However, while youth produce low level of participation in politics, we wonder how the limitations caused by pandemics influenced the political participation of Finnish young people and how has its political behavior changed during the pandemic? In particular, how has self-isolation and temporary exclusion from the society affected young people's involvement in political organizations, participation in elections, and other forms of political participation? If this influence of coronavirus pandemic defined, the further research on the nature and level of these changes should be conducted.

Obviously, the ongoing period coronavirus pandemic has become a completely new phenomenon for modern society and therefore has caused difficulties in determining measures to limit social interaction. We can assume that in certain periods, namely during strict restrictive measures, the almost complete restriction of the social direct interaction of young people and exclusion from public life led to a change in the forms of political participation. In particular, wide opportunities for non-traditional forms of political participation have developed.

Nowadays, in general, there is a tendency to use non-traditional or unconventional forms of political participation, such as signing petitions, participating in political protests and demonstrations, participating in political activities through the Internet, writing political articles or blogging on social networks more actively than conventional or traditional forms of political participation – voting, working for a political party, participating in elections as a candidate, etc. (Lilleker, 2014, p. 151).

One of the forms of non-traditional political participation has become online participation in politics. There are different approaches to this type of political participation and there is no consensus on this yet. For example, Halupka (2014, p. 115) explores the term “clicktivism”, emphasizes its legitimacy and identifies it as a form of political participation that leads to the strengthening of democratic values. On the other hand, Morozov (2011, p. 229) claimed that Internet and social media functioning depends on the country's political system. So, in authoritarian states and in democracies Internet still produce different opportunities for participation. Moreover, it can be the weapon of authoritarian governments.

Online political participation in conditions of coronavirus pandemic has supported young people worldwide and in Finland in particular (Pietilä et al., 2021, p. 11). Social contacting and societal participation through various digital technologies and services should expand limited opportunities for youth involvement in politics during Covid-19. While coping strategies during pandemic are now actively analyzed in scientific literature, the relationships between youth political involvement and digital services seems to have a gap in the research in case of Finland. In particular, further research could be focused on estimation of non-traditional forms of political participation and in particular online ones.

Conclusion

Coronavirus seems to be an incredibly relevant factor in the study of political participation of young people not only in Finland, but also in any country in the world. This is due not only to the accumulation of a large amount of new data and obviously unusual living conditions of individuals and social groups during coronavirus. The pandemic has become a factor that has identified a number of limitations of the usual practices of political participation, but at the same time has proposed new ones (Falanga, 2020, pp. 2–3). In this case, the pandemic can be considered as a catalyst for changes in all spheres of society.

Obviously, coronavirus pandemic has produced the challenges for political involvement for different social groups and in particular for young people as far as this social group regarded as one of the most politically inactive and disengaged, with the lowest levels of turnout in elections and participation in politics in general compared to any other age group (Kitanova, 2020, p. 820).

Nowadays political participation itself and in particular the political involvement of youth is widely developed topic in scientific community. While the topic of political participation is always very actual there are still not so many research projects on it in terms of impact of coronavirus pandemic and in particular for any country-level cases. Although youth political participation in Finland could not be fully estimated during the Covid-19 pandemic, we assume that separate studies involving, for example, schoolchildren and students in several Finnish cities will help to form a general view of political involvement and its forms during the coronavirus period. Further research could be focused on estimating non-traditional forms of political participation and, in particular, online ones in terms of social exclusion during the periods of strict restrictions in the country.

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