

International Workshop on the Political Participation of Young People

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Workshop Report

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International Workshop on the Political Participation of Young People was organized as part of Network: Youth and Participation Project that has been implemented by Istanbul Bilgi University. Main aim of the workshop was to bring together academics working on youth political participation with a special emphasis upon young people's attitudes towards parliamentary politics and party politics and create a platform to discuss the current trends in youth political participation and elaborate on strategies to empower young people in politics.

First session of the workshop focused on "*Do young people differ in their interest in electoral politics than the elderly? Is there a generational difference in the participation rates in elections, membership rates of political parties etc.? If yes, why?*" Ali Çarkoğlu from Koç University presented a paper titled "Electoral Participation and Preferences among the Young Generations in Turkey. In his presentation, Çarkoğlu argued that contemporary social science research on young people's political participation generally suggests that young people tend not to take part in "orthodox forms of participation". By orthodox forms of participation, Çarkoğlu referred mainly to voting and political party membership. For Çarkoğlu, young people tend to participate more in "unorthodox forms of participation," which he defined as political activities such as legal and illegal protests, boycotts and sit-ins. However, Çarkoğlu noted that survey method is generally weak in capturing unorthodox forms of participation.

Çarkoğlu presented his analysis of voting turnout panel data in Turkey for years 2002, 2007 and 2011 general elections. On the basis of the analysis of the data, Çarkoğlu suggested that the higher

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the literacy, the lower the turnout. Çarkoğlu suggested that people tend to vote if they expect to benefit from the election results and declared so in public opinion surveys.

Çarkoğlu reported that general elections in 2002 witnessed the lowest turnout of young people in Turkey. Finally, Çarkoğlu argued that self-declared religiosity among young people has been increasing in Turkey. Therefore, he suggested, young people involved in Gezi protests might constitute a minority within the younger generation.

Following Çarkoğlu's speech, Reingard Spannring from the University of Innsbruck made a presentation titled "Youth and Participation." In her presentation, Spannring discussed the results of the three waves of European Values Survey between 1980 and 1999 with a special focus on the political participation of young people in Western European countries. In contrast to the common argument in the literature that suggests the rate of young people's participation in formal political organizations decreased over time, Spannring suggested that her analysis of European Values Survey indicated that change in the membership rates have been largely negligible. In this regard, Spannring argued that the direction of changes in the political participation of young people in different European countries might vary. For instance, she added that youth political participation increased in Germany, while it decreased in the United Kingdom.

Spannring, who worked as part of the research project titled Political Participation of Young People in Europe – Development of Indicators for Comparative Research in the European Union (EUYOUPART), suggested that the results of EUYOUPART indicated that young people generally feel powerless vis-à-vis the economy. In addition, Spannring suggested that contemporary young generation lacks political and social ideals. While politicians perceive young people as problem-ridden and deficient, young people perceive politicians as unreachable and hypocrite.

In the Q & A part of the first session, a participant asked the question on whether educational attainment is negatively correlated with turnout in Turkey. In response, Çarkoğlu argued that there is no such correlation between turnout and educational

attainment in the Turkish case. Another participant asked Çarkoğlu about how he substantiates his argument about increasing religiosity among younger people in Turkey. In response, Çarkoğlu maintained that higher economic uncertainty that younger people face and the impact of military coup d'état on Turkish politics might pave the way to the increase in self-declared religiosity among young people. Another participant raised the issue of how Çarkoğlu defines conservatism and what kind of conservatism he thinks increasing among young people. Çarkoğlu suggested that he mainly implied social conservatism that includes intolerance towards minorities and negative attitudes towards women's employment, rather than economic conservatism. Following this, a participant asked Spannring about whether issue-based organization of young people could be captured in research that Spannring had been part of. In answer to this question, Spannring suggested that survey method is not well suited for gathering data on young people's participation in issue-specific political activities. Another participant asked Spannring to comment more on her result that political participation of young people in formal political organizations did not decrease. In response, Spannring maintained that political frustration is articulated in different ways in different European countries. Therefore, for Spannring, young people do not always stay away from formal politics as a result of political frustration they feel. For instance, Spannring suggested, increasing participation of young people in formal politics in Austria might as well be interpreted as young people's response to political frustration. In addition, Spannring argued that variables such as political competences, educational attainment and political culture also do matter in shaping young people's involvement with formal politics in different countries. Following this, a participant asked whether there is a difference between young people's turnout in European Parliament elections and national elections. Spannring responded to this question by evidencing that youth turnout is lower in European Parliament elections. Last but not the least, Spannring noted that young people who are active in political parties, are generally also active in other forms of participation as well. Therefore, one should not treat those active in political parties and in other forms of political participation as mutually exclusive youth groups.

Second session of the workshop addressed the following questions:
How do young people perceive parliamentary politics and political parties?

How do politicians perceive young people? What can we learn from these? How, to what extent and under which conditions do young people work actively in political parties? What are the experiences of young people that are active in political parties or in other institutions of representative democracy? Kemal Kılıç from Sabancı University presented a paper titled “Younger People and Political Parties.” Kılıç started by presenting a review of contemporary research on the state of young people’s participation in politics in Turkey. In this review, he emphasized that the rate of young people’s participation in political parties, labour unions and non-governmental organisations do not exceed 10 per cent in Turkey. For those involved, Kılıç listed the following motivations: family and friends, role models, political ideals and pragmatic expectations. Alternatively, Kılıç stated that the following factors pose obstacles against the participation of young people in politics: family pressure, lack of resources such as time and money and social exclusion. Then Kılıç suggested that politics has to change in order to accommodate more young people. For Kılıç, politics should be less hierarchically organised, issue-based, pluralist and evidence-based. In conclusion, Kılıç argued that it is also important to consider which young people did not take part in Gezi protests in Turkey, which include but not limited to young women who are neither in education and nor in employment. He concluded by noting that this group of women almost constitute forty per cent of young women.

Following Kemal Kılıç’s presentation, Cemil Boyraz made a speech on the experiences of young people who are actively involved with political parties. First of all, Boyraz claimed that political parties could not reach young people living in poor neighbourhoods. In addition, for Boyraz, young people who could be part of political parties could hardly feel respected and influential. In Boyraz’s words, political parties work like Sufi orders. Young people have to suffer first in order to become influential figures within the political party. Finally, Boyraz concluded that political parties absorb rather than boost young people’s energies to change the world they live in.

In the Q & A part of the second session, one of the participants questioned the portrayal of young people in political parties as victims. For him, young people -especially in political parties that have been represented in the Parliament or has been in charge of

municipalities- should be rather seen as active agents that also seek either their own or their families' self-interests. Another participant asked whether there is a gender difference between young people's involvement with party politics. Cemil Boyraz responded that question by noting that despite the lack of reliable data, he had hard time in finding women participants to focus groups he organised with young people involved in party politics. Following this, a participant added that the relative invisibility of young women in party politics might be due to their involvement with domestic work and care responsibilities at home. Another participant contributed to the discussion by raising the issue of organizational capacities of political parties in hiring young people. He suggested that organizational capacities of political parties might be the main dependent variable that influences young people's involvement with party politics.

In the third session, participants discussed the following questions: *What is the situation of young people's participation in political parties, interest in elections and in parliamentary politics in Turkey? Does Turkey conform European trends or is it an outlier?* Begüm Uzun from the University of Toronto made a presentation on the participation of young people in formal politics. Uzun started her talk by emphasizing the variance of young people's engagement in formal politics across countries and in different contexts. In her review of the literature, Uzun suggested that most studies conclude that young people are less likely to vote and tend to be more de-aligned with political parties. Begüm Uzun noted that Turkey generally conforms to this worldwide trend that indicates lower level of youth participation in formal politics. According to her reading of the literature, young people's decreasing interest in formal politics might be mainly due to their dissatisfaction with the way political system works, lower levels of political knowledge and their lack of trust in the efficacy of political organizations. Begüm Uzun summarized the explanations that have been provided to account for low level of youth participation in formal politics. She suggested that mainstream political science's explanations do not pay enough attention to youth specific dynamics that might be behind low level of youth participation in formal politics. Alternatively, new political scientific explanations prioritise the possible influence of generational effect and also the possible change in young people's understanding of the political. Inglehart's emphasis on the shared post-materialist values among younger

people might exemplify this approach. However, contenders to this approach suggest that these value attributions to young people only explains upper and middle class youth but not others. From Uzun's perspective, sociological approaches put more emphasis upon the changing nature of transitions to adulthood. As uncertainty has become the norm for younger people, these approaches suggest that young people neither have time nor have the motivation to participate in formal politics that requires long-term commitment. Another set of sociological approaches, as exemplified in Demet Lüküslü's studies, argue that young people's narratives demonstrate that young people are actually political. However, as Uzun stated, political engagement of young people is generally outside of the formal political arena and consciously critical of that arena as well. After Begüm Uzun's presentation, Emre Erdoğan from Istanbul Bilgi University presented a paper titled "An Example of «*Reductio ad Absurdum*» Method: Political Participation of Turkish Youth, if They were French...". Erdoğan started by noting that youth turnout has been declining in Turkey between 1999 and 2007. Erdoğan suggested that youth turnout and young people's level of trust in politicians and the Parliament are higher than most European countries. However, the rate of Turkish youth who worked for a political party in the course of an election is significantly lower than the rate of young people in other European countries. In addition, Erdoğan reported, youth in Turkey seems to participate less in unconventional politics. Then Erdoğan presented the findings of a counterfactual analysis he has made with 1999, 2005 and 2008 political participation data from European Social Survey and European Values Survey for young people aged between 15-27. Emre Erdoğan argued that the discrepancies among young people's educational attainment levels in Turkey and in other European countries might explain differences in young people's political participation. Erdoğan proposed that educational attainment is a clear indicator of development. According to his approach, as the educational attainment increases on average, unconventional forms of political participation will also increase and conventional forms of political participation will increase to a point and then it will get stable. His counterfactual analysis indicated that if educational attainment of young people and their fathers were similar to that of France, level of youth political participation would increase significantly.

In the Q & A session, a participant questioned whether it is the political culture or educational attainment matters in determining the form and the level of youth political participation. Another participant also approached the role of educational attainment. He suggested that the meaning of educational attainment has to be contextualized better. This contextualisation has to take both the content of education and its relationship with socio-economic status in different countries.

Fourth session addressed the following question: *How and to what extent do young people differ in their attitudes towards politics according to their socio-economic positions, gender and ethnicity?* Pınar Uyan Semerci from Istanbul Bilgi University started her presentation titled the main question of this session. Pınar Uyan Semerci raised the question of whom we define as young people. From a sociological point of view, Uyan Semerci suggested that there are young people who do not define themselves as young. Therefore, she argued, it might not be sufficient to define young people on the basis of age only. She underlined the fact that diversity among young people is enormous. Therefore, any generalization for young people might imply a false sense of homogeneity. Then Uyan Semerci moved on to discuss the complexity in defining the concept of political participation. She asked whether one would or should include survival strategies of young people as forms of political participation or not. Inspired by Nancy Fraser's discussion on the politics of need interpretation, Uyan Semerci argued that politics is related to how young people define their needs and how they go about fulfilling these self-defined needs. Following this logic, Uyan Semerci suggested that political system has to allow young people to define and voice their needs. However, for her, young people's definition and expression of their needs does not guarantee that these needs would turn into rights and then capabilities of young people. Giving an example of a 22-year-old young women, who is married with a child, Uyan Semerci argued that both the gendered socialization of this young women and the practical responsibilities she has at home make it almost impossible for this women to participate in institutional politics. She added that there are also other groups such as young workers and seasonal workers in agriculture that stay out of institutional politics due to their income and living conditions. Uyan Semerci concluded her presentation by asking the following question: "What are the

possibilities these young people might have to have access to institutional politics?”

Following Uyan Semerci's presentation, Matt Henn from Nottingham Trent University presented a paper that he co-authored with Nick Foard titled “Disconnected Youth? The Impact of Socio-Economic and Educational Factors on Youth Political Engagement in Britain”. Henn started his presentation by presenting the data on youth political participation in Britain. Data indicated that young people have been increasingly disengaged from political process in Britain. In 2005 elections, youth turnout fell down to 37 per cent. Even in 2010 elections within which university tuition fee hikes have been discussed, youth turnout was around 44 per cent and was significantly lower than the adult population. Noting that election turnout is not the only marker of political participation, Henn presented the results of their research with 18 year-olds that had the first opportunity to vote in 2011 referendum. One of the striking results of the research was the fact that young men and full time educated young people proved to be much more interested in politics than others. In addition, he suggested that young women felt much more nervous about their political decisions. Henn added that over half of young people lacked self-assurance. More importantly, Henn suggested that around three-fourth of young people reported that they did not see any meaningful opportunities open to them to influence politics. In line with this result, it is also important to note that more than half of young people stated that election do not change anything, political parties do not listen to young people and there is a big discrepancy between what parties promise and what they actually do. Interestingly, Henn reported that full time educated young people are much less sceptical about the effectiveness of elections. In conclusion, Henn argued that young people have an interest in politics, however they do not believe in the effectiveness of formal politics and consider political parties remote as well as disconnected from young people.

In the Q & A part of the forth session, a participant argued that generational analysis might be helpful in using youth as a category in social scientific analysis. She added, contemporary research indicates that young people might well be having common needs and demands. Uyan Semerci responded that some critical events might make cohort effects, but even these cohort effects might not

be sufficient for academics to make generalizations about young people from different socio-economic backgrounds. Henn agreed with the participant that young people in Britain have actually common needs and demands especially with respect to student debts and education costs. Another participant noted that adults are also not happy with how European democracies work. Therefore, she suggested, we might work more on local politics and how young people can become part of local politics. Uyan Semerci agreed with the participant's comment and maintained that academics should elaborate more on how local politics and national politics can be connected with one another in an effective way. Henn also suggested that once young people are provided with opportunities to participate in local politics, they feel more powerful and are more likely to take action. In response to the question on the mechanisms through which socially excluded youth can voice their demands, Uyan Semerci suggested that those who are not themselves part of the socially excluded youth should take moderator positions in working with this section of young people. Another participant drew the audience's attention to the difference between educated young people's attitude towards formal politics in Turkey and in Britain. Henn maintained that university students in Britain tend to vote more and have more confidence in political institutions, which is the opposite for the Turkish case. In the end of the Q & A part, participants discussed the methodological dilemmas with respect to studying youth political participation. While some participants argued that survey methods fall short of grasping complex reality that shapes young people's attitudes and behaviours, others suggested that the repeated use of same questions in survey research makes it reliable over time.

In the fifth session, the following questions are addressed: *Why is it important to promote young people's participation in conventional politics - and how can this be best achieved? Is there still a value in 'increasing young people's participation in parliamentary politics'? If yes, how can political parties and parliamentary politics become more responsive to young people's demands and create opportunities for young people to actively participate in public decision-making processes?* In this session, Eldin Fahmy from the University of Bristol presented a paper titled "Why is it important to promote young people's participation in conventional politics, and how can this be best achieved?" Eldin Fahmy started his presentation by underlining the fact that young

people have been excluded from political institutions and political elites. However, for Fahmy, youth-specific explanations cannot account for the dynamics of this exclusion. According to Fahmy, youth-specific explanations generally encourage a deficit-based model of youth participation and obscures systemic changes in political participation in general across richer countries. Fahmy introduced an alternative question: “Why are political institutions failing to engage with different publics?” In other words, Fahmy called for the study of the political economy of political participation rather than focusing on young people only. In this regard, Fahmy suggested that political exclusion cannot be appropriately understood without the wider structures of social exclusion in contemporary societies have been studied. In terms of youth political participation, Fahmy argued that the continued exclusion of young people from formal political mechanisms should be seen as a problem for those committed to the pursuit of political equality. For him, young people’s participation in street protests is not effective enough in influencing political decisions. He reminded the audience that young people actually protested against the American-British invasion of Iraq and tuition hikes in British universities in large numbers. However, he noted, this did not prevent both of these decisions to be taken within formal political institutions. Therefore, Fahmy concluded that participation of young people in parliamentary politics is crucial. However, given the systemic crisis in formal political institutions, in conclusion, Fahmy suggested that what is needed is the vision of radical democracy. According to him, radical democracy is only possible with the effective integration between informal forms of political engagement with the formal political institutions of state power.

Following Fahmy’s presentation, Pınar Gümüş from the Justus-Liebig-University Giessen made a presentation titled “Young people's creative ways of political participation: theatre as a space for experiencing active subject positions”. Pınar Gümüş started her presentation by referring to Gezi protests. For her, Gezi protests signified a rupture in society’s approach to young people who have long been regarded as apolitical. However, in the course of Gezi protests, Gümüş noted, another discourse emerged and aimed at stigmatizing the organized sections of young people as terrorists, while celebrating the unorganized youth section’s protests as peaceful and creative. However, according to Gümüş, this discourse

had been rooted in a fictive distinction between Gezi protestors. This fictive distinction proved to be ineffective as young people -both organized and unorganized before the protests- collaborated with each other throughout Gezi protests. Then Pınar Gümüş moved on to present the finding of her fieldwork in Zeytinburnu. In her fieldwork, Gümüş worked with a group of young people migrated from the Kurdish region. These young people organized an amateur theatre group, where they talk about politics rooted in their everyday experiences. Gümüş reported that most of these young people were employed either in shopping malls or in the textile workshops. Despite the fact that they were employed, Gümüş emphasized that most young people regularly attended dramatics. Gümüş suggested that the dialogical relationship between this group of young people's everyday experiences and their theatrical performances could shed light on youth political participation. In their theatrical performances, Gümüş reported that these young people told stories about urban regeneration, gender-based domestic violence and Kurdish conflict. In conclusion, Gümüş argued that theatre empowered young people and they felt more confident in talking about political issues. According to Gümüş, three lessons might be drawn from her fieldwork with respect to youth political participation. Firstly, subject positions of young people in their everyday lives have to be the starting point for their politicization. Secondly, we should be aware of the fact that interest in politics does not necessarily correlate with socio-economic positions. Thirdly, if young people think that they have been given an opportunity, they find ways to take part in that opportunity.

In the Q & A part of the fifth session, a participant suggested that it is quite important to offer safe environment for young people to discuss politics. In that regard, she noted that peer education is an effective tool for empowerment, because it is generally not based upon a hierarchical relationship among participants. Another participant argued that the loss of trade union power creates a significant barrier against the representation of working class youth. Finally, participants discussed the merits and possible shortcomings of decentralisation of decision making for the inclusion of young people into formal politics.

Last and sixth session of the workshop focused on the engagement of young people in Gezi Protests in Turkey. In this session, Ayşe

Gül Altınay from Sabancı University organized an interactive session on Gezi protests. First question she directed to the audience was the following: “What is new about Gezi protests? Participants stated that Gezi symbolized the coming together of unlikely groups, immense number of people’s participation in street protests, moving beyond the fear and the re-emergence of home based protests. Secondly, Altınay asked which protests preceding Gezi could have paved the way to Gezi protests. In response, participants listed Labour Day protests, Hrant Dink memorial march, students’ demonstrations, anti-Iraqi war protests, protests against gold mining in Bergama, demonstration against the censorships to the Internet, TEKEL protests and LGBT pride marches.

Following this, Altınay made a brief presentation about how she approaches Gezi protests. For Altınay, Gezi protests symbolized dynamism, non-violent protest culture, the rise of humour and irony as tools of political communication, social media revolution, solidarity, civil disobedience and getting to know each other. Altınay especially noted how the political language used has changed towards being more gender-sensitive with the help of feminists. In addition, Altınay suggested that the participation of Anti-Capitalist Muslims and Revolutionary Muslims to Gezi protests unsettled the age old divide between Kemalists and Political Islamists. She then suggested that Gezi protests demonstrated that new generation has a new way of relating to the authority, as was exemplified in the protestors’ use of humour and irony. She also noted that even though government tried to distance organised and unorganised youth from one another, it did not work. In contrast, Altınay stated that very organised youth groups and unorganised young individuals could work together. In line with Freire’s critical pedagogy, Altınay suggested, Gezi indicated how all forms of power could get to be criticised. Finally, inspired by Cockburn’s idea of transversal politics, Altınay concluded that it was politically quite important that Gezi protestors were rooted in different identities yet they came together with openness to one another. This openness to one another and ability to listen to one another symbolized the novelty of Gezi protests.

