Young people are less engaged in both traditional and non-traditional forms of politics than older generations

By Democratic Audit

Declining rates of youth engagement in politics continues to perplex policymakers and seems to defy easy solutions. While some point to young people's apparent propensity to engage with issues in different and more modern ways, such as single issue campaigns and petitions, each generation since the early 20th Century has proven to be less engaged on any measure than the one that went before it, according to ***Maria Grasso.***

Young people in the past were more engaged (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

How can we persuade young people to participate in the political process? That's a question with which regular readers of Democratic Audit will be very familiar, and one that has been posed with renewed urgency in the run-up to May's local and European elections.

But maybe we shouldn't despair about this apparent disengagement. After all, it's often suggested that, although young people are less engaged in formal party politics, in fact they are no less politically active than older generations: what is different is simply the *form* of this activity. Older people tend to participate within a parliamentary context, supporting mainstream parties and voting in elections; for younger people, the focus is on extra-institutional political action such as demonstrations, boycotts, and social movement organisations. Indeed, it's been suggested that what we're seeing now is part of a general pattern in advanced post-industrial democracies in which society as a whole increasingly shuns traditional forms of participation in favour of more fluid, ad hoc types of political action.

But is this conventional assumption true? And how can we be sure whether a person's political behaviour is a consequence of their biological age (and thus likely to change over time), a reflection of general social trends, or a reflection of specific and formative historical influences on their generation?

In order to find out, I applied cutting-edge statistical analyses to data from the European Values Study 1981-2008, which tracked the political activity over time of individuals born in ten advanced Western European countries: Belgium, Denmark, France, West Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden. The political and socioeconomic narratives of these countries are very similar. In each, political parties and the social divisions they represented (especially around class) constituted the fundamental structuring boundaries of

democratic competition at least until the 1960s. All ten – to a greater or lesser extent – experienced a period of economic affluence and heightened radicalism in the late 1960s and 70s, followed by economic crisis and high unemployment in the 1980s, and finally the depoliticisation of public life in the wake of the Cold War, with mainstream parties converging on the ideological centre ground.

The EVS data is so valuable because it provides long-running cross-sectional data. But in analysing that data we have to take account of age, the date of the survey, and generational membership. If not, we can't be sure whether the political behaviour of people born in the same period is an effect of biological ageing, particular influences in a given year of survey, or generational socialisation.

Of course, before we can say anything meaningful about the possible effects of generational influences, we must define what we mean by a generation. Working on the basis that generations are forged from shared cultural and socioeconomic contexts, experienced during a person's formative years (aged 15-25), I identified five cohorts in the EVS data. These were: the pre-World War II generation (comprising those born between 1909 and 1925); the post-WWII generation (1926-45); the 60s-70s generation (1946-57); the 80s generation (1958-68); and the 90s generation (1969-81).

The results of the analysis were sobering. While it's true that in general younger generations are less likely than older groups to engage with traditional political parties, when it comes to participating in social movement organisations, demonstrating, or signing a petition, the 1960s-70s generation is more active than the 1980s generation, which in turn is more active than the 1990s generation. Coming of age in the radical and ideologically polarised period of the late 60s has left its mark on the 1960s-70s generation. But what this means is that older people are not merely more likely to be involved in formal politics, they are also more engaged with informal politics too.

Almost a century ago, the sociologist Karl Mannheim observed: "nothing is more false than the usual assumption uncritically shared by most students of generations, that the younger generation is progressive and the older generation *eo ipso* conservative". The EVS data suggests that Mannheim was right. There's no evidence that younger people today are simply finding different avenues for the same level of political energy as their elders. Nor that there is a steady shift from institutional or "elite-directed" participation to extra-institutional, "elite-challenging" activity.

When it comes to influencing engagement, what matters most seems to be the dynamics and political characteristics of the era in which we come of age. And if that's the case, perhaps the steady creep of disengagement may be about to reverse. Today, with youth unemployment reaching 40 percent in several Western European countries, economies still attempting to claw their way back from the aftermath of the 2007 crisis, the growing curtailment of civil liberties and expansion of surveillance, and an ever-increasing chasm between rich and poor – to name just a few recent concerns – a new generation of activists may yet emerge.

—

Note: this post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our comments policy before posting. The shortened URL for this post is: http://buff.ly/1kTgIeA

—

Maria Grasso is a Lecturer in Politics and Quantitative Methods at the University of Sheffield.