

The Political Consequences of Low Youth Participation in Contemporary Democracies

by

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Abstract

Previous studies on political participation have provided unambiguous evidence that citizen involvement in established democracies is unequal. Non-voters are found to be mainly the poor, those coming from minority groups, the less educated, and younger members of the electorate (Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1978, 1995; Gallego, 2007). If the structure of active participants is systematically biased towards certain political groups, the allocation of power can also be biased. Unequal participation can lead to unequal influences. This dissertation provides an empirical test of this proposition and asks whether inequalities in political representation follow from inequalities in political participation?

To answer this question I have focused on the group of citizens whose rates of participation are evidently unequal, but whose relationship to politics has not only spurred academic attention, but has also received a central spot on the political and media agendas in the majority of established democracies: young people. The study of the consequences of young people's unequal participation in the decision-making process is a perfect litmus test of the status of political equality in contemporary democracies. In addition, following the normative accounts of political representation, I focus on two components of representation and analyze the impact of young peoples participatory inequalities on their policy preference and interest representation.

The empirical analysis points to several important findings. In the light of the growing concern over young people's politics, the most important finding of this dissertation is that

age bias in turnout does not have negative consequences on the policy and interest representation of age groups. In fact, young people are on average closer to their representatives than adults, and the parties they support represent their views as much as the views of other age groups. In other words, young people's disengagement from politics does not have immediate consequences for their political representation.

I argue that it is possible that the effects of youth turnout bias on policy representation are not present, partly because unequal non-electoral participation works in favor of the policy representation of the young and partly because parties try to respond to inequalities in turnout by increasing their policy appeal to the young. However, while we should not be concerned about young people's policy representation, their interest representation is evidently unequal, and further studies are necessary to ascertain what kinds of factors create such inequalities in political outcomes.

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