

## Youth in Greece: Political Participation in Crisis?

Historically, research data have shown that young people in Greece have reduced their political interest and participation compared to the young people in the past (Source: [Athens Social Atlas](#)).

In the beginning of social, economic and humanitarian crisis in Greece (2009-2011), new forms of political and social participation emerged (eg. hacktivism, people's self organized assemblies) and other forms such as protests, strikes and demonstrations were reinforced. Part of the change was triggered on 6 December 2008, when Alexandros Grigoropoulos, a 15-year-old student, was killed by two policemen, while one year later the austerity measures brought social unrest to the Greek and the general European community.

At some point it was observed that young people got more active in politics and social movements, while right-wing and left-wing parties gained more space into the political sphere. Almost a decade after the crisis, the case of political participation in Greece seems to have left young citizens uninterested and alienated from political institutions and distanced from the contemporary political discussions.

In this article, **it is argued that young people's non-participation could be part of a legitimate democratic action of a citizen that is not represented by the current political system.** Dissatisfaction and distance from mainstream political means of participation might be, among other things, a result of young people's disappointment over the democratic performance of the state.

### The Survey

Setting off from these thoughts, an online survey was organised in May 2019 about the forms and attitudes of political participation of young people in Greece. Between May and July 2019, 179 responses of young people aged between 17 to 35 years were collected. Among them 72.63% indicated themselves as female, 26.25% as male and 1.12% did not say. The respondents had mostly university experience living in different parts of Greece (see table below).

*Table. Geographical allocation of the responses*

Eastern Macedonia and Thrace	4
Central Macedonia	52
Western Macedonia	1
Epirus	5
Thessaly	6
Ionian Islands	5
Western Greece	1
Central Greece	2
Attica	73
Peloponnese	13
North Aegean	2
South Aegean	4
Crete	5
Abroad	4
N/A	2

It was decided due to statistical reasons to select 122 responses from young people aged between 18 to 24 years for an in depth analysis of their answers (GROUP 1). They were all university students, mainly studying in Athens and Thessaloniki, the two of the largest academic centers in Greece. Among them, 27.86% identified themselves as male, 70.5% as female and 1.64% did not say.

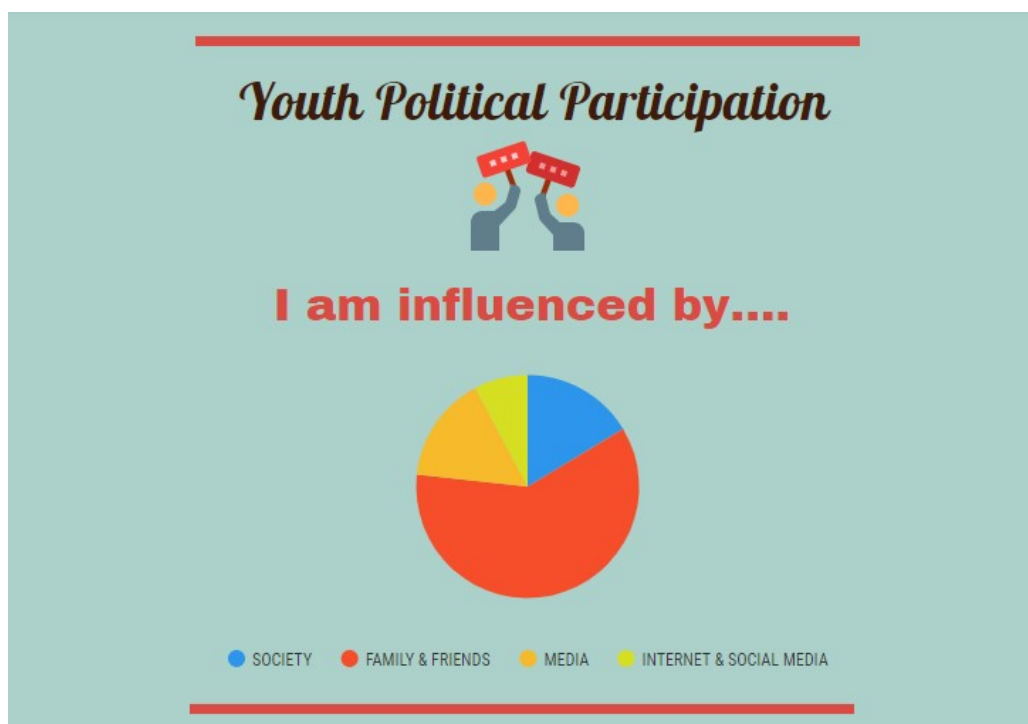
The rest of the responses (GROUP 2) were also used in the survey analysis in order to examine and identify additional forms and attitudes towards political participation.

The respondents were asked to state if they considered themselves to be politically involved. Respondents that considered being actively involved were asked to mention their means of participation. Respondents that considered not being involved were asked to explain why this is the case. In addition to this question, respondents were asked to identify the people and structures that tend to influence their political decisions, as well as their values reflected by their actions. Finally, respondents asked to share their thoughts with regards to the accessibility of young people in civic movements and the civil society in general.

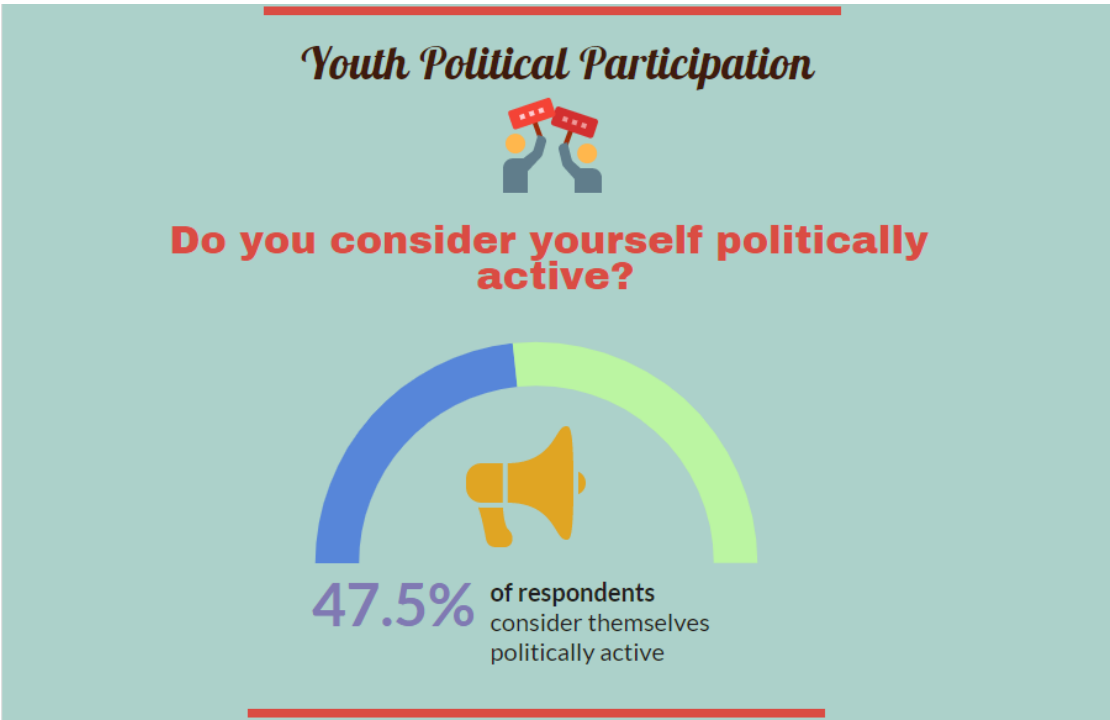
The survey included open questions that allowed survey participants to express their ideas more thoroughly. The responses of GROUP 1 were clustered into different categories for the purpose of the data analysis.

## Results

GROUP's 1 data were used to export a few descriptive statistics. Before going into the results about young people's political participation, respondents were asked to mention those who tend to influence their political decisions the most. Among the respondents of GROUP 1, 70% refer to their family and friends, 19% mention the society and everything that comes with it, 18% mention the media in general and 9% refer specifically on the internet and the social media. These results were expected since it is normal to be affected more by those who are closer to us, in this case, friends and family.



According to the survey results 47.5% of the respondents of GROUP 1 (58 respondents, 14 male, 49 female, 1 n/a) stated that they consider themselves active participants in politics. The rest 52.5% of the respondents of GROUP 1 (64 respondents, 20 male, 37 female, 1 n/a) do not consider themselves politically active.



Based on the answers of GROUP 1 and those who consider themselves active, 9 different means of political participation were identified and clustered into the following categories:

- ELECTIONS; 33 respondents mention participation in the elections
- GET INFORMATION; 19 respondents mention that they get informed about the political developments
- PROTESTS; 6 respondents participate in protests and demonstrations
- DISCUSSIONS; 5 respondents follow offline and online political discussions
- VOLUNTEERING ACTIVITIES; 6 respondents are volunteering participating in activities with social, environmental and cultural character
- ASSEMBLIES; 4 respondents take part in university assemblies and local councils
- SYNDICALISM; 2 respondents are syndicalists
- POLITICAL PARTIES; 2 respondents are members of political parties
- BLOGGING; 2 respondents use social media and the internet in general to promote ideas and thoughts by blogging



By far, the most common way chosen to participate in politics is through voting and by getting informed on political, as well as social issues. The next more common means include participation in protests and demonstrations, volunteerism and participation in thematic activities that promote, for example, human rights, environmental sustainability, and animal rights. Respondents also take part in formal and informal political discussions and presentations, as well as organised forms of political participation such as the school, university,

and local municipal councils. However, the respondents consider their participation in unions and the youth political parties as loss of time due to the existing hierarchies, the corruption and the culture of “promoting those who you know best”. Young people also participate in online activism by commenting on social media, blogging and networking.

With regards to the reasons of non-participation, we clustered the answers received from the GROUP 1 of respondents in 7 categories:

- LACK OF INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE; 15 identified responses mention that they are not well informed and they do not know how they can participate in politics
- NON-REPRESENTATION; 13 identified responses mention that the current political system and people do not represent them
- INDIFFERENCE; 8 identified responses state that they do not care about politics
- DISAPPOINTMENT; 5 identified responses refer to disappointment
- CORRUPTION; 4 identified responses mention that the system and the people are corrupted
- DOGMATISM; 3 identified responses state that there is too much dogmatism into the political parties
- TIME LIMITATION; 2 identified responses have to do with time limitations and overload of other activities that are more important than politics



By going through the answers of the young people aged between 25 to 35 years old (GROUP 2), they seem to be more critical and frustrated by the system referring mainly to disappointment, corruption and fanaticism in the political parties. Comparing the two groups, GROUP 1 seems to be more confused and undecided, while GROUP 2 looks more indifferent and indignant.

By taking some individual responses, it is mentioned that education is not enough and that the mainstream means for political engagement are too limiting, making the system non-democratic. Interestingly, there are respondents stating that they do not know how to participate, that they are not capable enough to participate and maybe they are too young for “this stuff”. In fact, there are respondents that wish to be more active but for different reasons as introduced above, they cannot do it.

There is an idea that if you do not show off how much politically involved you are, you are not really participating and you are indifferent. However, what is reflected in the respondents’ answers, no matter if they consider themselves particularly politically active or not, is that most of them want to be part of the political developments in their community and country. They want their opinion to matter but, at the same time, they want to stay away from the current political reality where nothing ever changes and their voice is not actually considered.

This can be supported by their responses (GROUP 1 & GROUP 2) to the open question with regards to their values and the important aspects that define themselves and their actions. Some key points from their answers include: better future, equality, consciousness, meritocracy, honesty, awakening, opportunities, freedom, education, family, community, common good, participation, human rights, environment, employment, economy, recognition, glory, everyday life and self-determination. These are things that form and transform a community, building relationships and structures of cooperation. In a sense, it is politics.

### **Civil society and social movements**

Understanding the need for alternative means of participation, it was attempted to have a brief overview of respondents’ perspectives (GROUP 1 & GROUP 2) about the civil society and the social movements with the final question of the questionnaire. Some respondents were talking about the “close”, “corrupted” and “fake” system of political youth parties, transferring a sense of a political dead end and loss of hope. Others mentioned that usually young people are asked to say their opinions and participate but eventually their views are not considered because they are young and they “do not agree with the system”.

A few individual answers reflected mistrust in civil society and social movements for being hierarchical and dogmatic, with no real responsibilities given to the young people and no actual effect or change.

And finally, there were respondents that recognise the existence and possibilities of such movements which can always be further developed in numbers and strength. However, some respondents claim that misinformation and lack of information, together with the emotional disappointment and confusion, may immobilize the young people.

### **Conclusion**

Although there was a massive increase in civic movements between 2008 and 2012 in Greece, the upcoming years’ participation in such movements became more modest and quiet. Economy and employability became a priority for the young people and their families.

This study attempted to identify potentialities in the political participation of young people in Greece. Understanding the limitations of the data, the study attempted to also explain the distress and disappointment of a selective part of young people in Greece, i.e. the university students mainly living at the big university centers in Greece. It is suggested to further examine the attitudes and needs of young people with no explicit university background towards political participation, who are also living in more marginalized areas of Greece.

Regardless, the study indicated that there is a need of the young people responded the questions to actually participate in the political developments of the country; to be present; to be informed; to find ways for a better future and life prospects.

Efforts should be made by the family, the school, the university, the civil society and the state to allow space for young people to express with, create and engage in democratic processes. This could be achieved by starting within the family sphere, the school and the work environment that seem to be closer to our everyday lives, by taking responsibilities and take collective decisions on the issues that matter.

At the same time, it should be understood that politics is part of people's everyday life, no matter if you are "young" or "old". Political participation is not a privilege of the few or the "more mature". Politics influence our family, friends, relations, school, work, while citizens, no matter how young are, can influence politics with their everyday actions, not just once every four or five years through elections.

Participatory and democratic education can play an essential role in engaging young people into politics with the sense of community participation, public affairs analysis and decision making. There are many different ways to achieve this. This refers to the traditional ones, such as reinforcing the participation in school, municipal, and university councils which require knowledge on the processes of participation in such forms. But it also refers to alternative means of participation by engaging young people into activities that interact and benefit the community. Such activities may have environmental, artistic, athletic, cultural and other types of character in line with the interests and strengths of the young people. It goes beyond simple school lessons on volunteerism and civic education. It is about envisioning the school and university community as part of a broader community, interacting and reforming the social structures that bring people from all ages and socio-economic backgrounds together, firstly as a citizen and then as a consumer and worker. And of course, it is in the trust of the young people that there are other ways of participation that have yet to be discovered or created, reflecting rather a bottom-up approach that a top down assignment. The question is if there is a genuine interest to give the floor to the young citizens by preparing them from early schooling or in reality, this seemingly apolitical situation serves other purposes and interests.