

16 YEARS.
**OLD ENOUGH TO DECIDE ON EDUCATION,
LIVING SITUATION AND CAREER. TOO YOUNG
TO CO-DECIDE ABOUT OUR FUTURE.**



FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
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A contribution

by

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INVOLVING MILLENNIALS IN POLITICS

This paper highlights potential responses and discusses respectively:

- 1. Strategies to increase Millennials participation in political parties**
- 2. Strategies to incentivise Millennials turnout**
- 3. The importance of civic education to foster Millennials political engagement**

For more insights on the Millennial generation - FEPS study ["The Future Starts now! 10 cornerstones for a Dialogue between the Progressive Family and the Millennial Generation"](#)

and

FEPS Young Academics Network Call to Europe VI [Millennials and Politics report](#)

This briefing note addresses the question of how to re-engage young people – Millennials (those born between 1980-2000, aged 15-35) – into politics and make progressive political organisations fit for this cognitively distinct demographic.

1. Strategies to increase Millennials participation in political parties

Millennials do not find political parties or partisan life particularly appealing. This statement is backed with the survey results that show consistently that Millennials are profoundly sceptical about traditional, institutional politics and, in particular, that they lack confidence in politicians and political parties (A. Skrzypek, M. Freitas). In fact, across Europe, most politicians and political parties are perceived as removed and distant from real problems, as they are frequently seen as self-serving, corrupt, deceitful and ineffective.

The Millennials deception can be summarised in three issues:

- Millennials feel that their views are being ignored;
- Millennials feel that politicians are more concerned with older people than with younger people;
- Millennials do not feel that they can make themselves heard.

The decline in trust towards political institutions, organisations and political parties is consequential of the turbulent times that we live in – and, this is even more so for Millennials. Entering the labour market is a test for many young people throughout Europe and the process of finding a first job can be lengthy and often without meeting Millennials’ expectations. In the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, it is not just difficult for Millennials to access the labour market but it is equally difficult to remain in the labour market and to have a good quality job. This of course means that today’s youth cannot be independent, cannot make plans for the future and hence becomes quickly disillusioned when governments do not seem able to provide quick and effective solutions to the current state of things.

But there is reason for optimism because despite the gloomy context that surrounded this generation, Millennials are not only happy and positive about their future but also show openness to seek change by listing the conditions that would incentivise them to take part in partisan life. **Formalised party membership, for instance, is in no longer an attractive formula** (A. Skrzypek) **for Millennials** but they provide a way forward to reduce their disaffection with traditional political parties:

For Millennials, political parties need to

- (1) Be more creative and **provide participatory channels where Millennials are team players in the intra-party debates and internal decision-making**. The answer is therefore local - **local party branches should be empowered to have a greater say in the making of internal decisions**; for instance the [EU’s Structured Dialogue on youth](#), whereby Millennials are co-deciders in key decisions across several policy fields is a positive framework that should be replicated elsewhere at different levels (T. Deželan).
- (2) **Propose a ‘new opening’** to broadly engage not only members but also sympathisers and potential groups of interest, for example, by **introducing a ‘trial membership’** for those interested in taking part but that are discouraged by high membership fees (F. Wolkenstein).
- (3) **Enable discussions through online political forums and e-consultations**. This would be an overall way of reducing participatory costs and of embracing the Millennial culture.

Online political forums tend to be organised at the national level by government institutions or media organisations to enable an interactive relationship between politicians and citizens. Despite its merits, this tool falls short in its objective to enhance a constructive debate between these two actors. One, because government representatives tend not to participate since they lack time and secondly because the forum proved to be an outlet for ill-informed opinions, prejudice or abuse (D. Janssen, R. Kies).

Another digital tool that allows online participation of citizens in the political process are **e-consultation forums**. These can take a variety of forms - with(out) identification / moderation; strong / weak public spaces, and can refer to different topics, but generally they have the same objective as online political forums - to raise the voice of citizens. How online political forums and e-consultation forums differ from another is that in the latter, there is a direct implication of citizens in the decision-making process. Then again, this tool faces the same challenge – the active participation of government officials or politicians and the extent in which these are actually deliberative. However, the example of the first UK e-consultation forum on a draft Bill (Commbill.net) proved to have a direct impact in the policy-making process. In fact, the e-consultation was referenced a number of times by both Houses of Parliament, and two of its key policy-recommendations were incorporated into the Bill (D. Janssen, R. Kies).

2. Strategies to incentivise Millennials turnout

Contrary to the common belief, **Millennials are not averse to voting**. In fact, the global results of the Millennial Dialogue show that **this group cohort declares to be ready to vote should elections take place tomorrow**. This striking finding needs to be interpreted in conjunction with the low interest that they have in politics. The conclusion is that it is wrong and unhelpful to pathologise this generation in a negative manner by labelling them as withdrawn, introvert and uninterested (A. Skrzypek, M. Freitas). **Millennials did pull out of the traditional political framework but they are politically aware and ready to speak up for their civic rights** (A. Skrzypek).

In this context it is worthwhile to consider Millennials own proposals of electoral reform:

(1) E-voting and Smart voting

The Internet has allowed for a widespread usage of online campaigning both by political parties and candidates in the run-up to elections. However, much rarer are the tools that allow the electorate to cast **their vote online** (R. Michael Alvarez, T. Hall and A. Trechsel). The Millennial generation embraced the technological progress that was brought about by the ICT revolution and see the new digital world as an opportunity. So it does not come as a surprise when Millennials believe that the electoral process should be reformed and modernised. In this context, **online voting could be a promising way forward as the Estonian case positively attests. Evidence shows that Internet voting increased turnout.**

Online voting lowers significantly the hazards that Millennials are facing when they want to turn out to vote and **is in fact an attractive way of securing Millennials electoral participation.**

Even though younger voters prefer Internet voting it is also important to nuance some challenges of e-participation and outline the circumstances that need to exist to make Internet work.

Challenges of e-participation

Gender

Research shows that e-voting could potentially worsen the gender gap as the 'digital divide' generally includes a divide between a more male access to the internet (A. Trechsel). The same applies for 2005 local online elections in Estonia – Millennials turnout was high but most e-voters were young and male.

Language

E-voting turnout can be hindered in a given country due to language. Again, the Estonian case attests that a large part of Russian-speaking citizens did not vote as the Internet voting platform was only presented in Estonian. Therefore, the natural recommendation would be to have a bilingual or multilingual Internet platform to avoid exclusion or discrimination (R. Michael Alvarez, T. Hall and A. Trechsel).

Preconditions necessary to make Internet Voting work

(R. Michael Alvarez, T. Hall and A. Trechsel)

- Widespread Internet penetration;
- Legal structure that addresses Internet voting issues (possibility of pre-voting, authentication process, ensuring that Internet voters do not cast ballots on the election day, final ballot reconciliation);
- Identification system that allows for digital authentication of the voter (digital signature makes things easier for politics to introduce Internet voting but it is not a pre-requisite);
- Political, public and administrative culture that is supportive of Internet voting (Internet voting was at the heart of intra-governmental activities in Estonia for a long period of time).

Smart voting is another Internet-based tool suggested to enhance political participation. Research shows that the introduction of smart voting during electoral campaigns helps citizens evaluate their political preferences and match them with those of the candidates.

This system has been tested in numerous elections (ex: Swiss elections in 2003, Dutch elections in 2006), but again in most elections men tended to participate much more than women.

In sum, one should be cautious to assign a priori inclusive qualities to ICT innovations to increase electoral participation. The Internet is no magic bullet to incentivise Millennials to take part in politics but it is definitely a starting point to bring politics closer to this electorate – technology can produce a positive change in our democracies.

(2) Ability to vote in more places

Millennials often responded that the technical barriers to voting should be reduced. By this they mean that the time frame to cast your vote should be extended but also that one should be able to vote online, via a secure app or website and/or to be able to vote in more places, like in shopping malls or libraries.

(3) Lowering the voting age

Giving younger Millennials the right to vote is a rational incentive to make them more interested about politics and potentially become politically active (M. Wagner, D. Johann and S. Kritzinger). Millennials aged 16 and 18 who are legally considered old enough to marry, drive a car, own a business, pay tax or die for their country were not even allowed to vote for the EU Referendum in the UK (although a poll conducted by The Student Room showed that 82% of voters in this age group would have voted to remain). At present, Austria, the only European country where the voting age for national elections is 16 show that teenagers do not lack the competence to make informed electoral choices and hence effectively participate in the democratic process. Lowering the voting age does not appear to have a negative impact on input legitimacy and the quality of democratic decisions (M. Wagner, D. Johann and S. Kritzinger), quite the contrary, this institutional reform should be seriously considered because of its potential positive impact.

The EU referendum outcome in the UK confirmed that the British youth was excluded from the political system and its decision-making processes (K. Owen, C. Macfarland). According to a polling organisation YouGov, 75% of 18-24 year olds and 56% of 25-49 year olds voted to remain in Europe but their wishes have been set aside by older generations who arguably have less to lose, or at least less time to endure the consequences. The recent outcome of the US 2016 elections should also be analysed as it heightened the significance of these divides – the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton had a nearly nationwide advantage with Millennials over the Republican nominee and now President of the United States Donald Trump.

The Scottish independence referendum is yet another positive evidence where 16 year-olds showed to be interested in politics and engaged in political conversations. Millennials do take part, especially if they see the impact of their vote.

Instead of declaring an intergenerational warfare (K. Owen, C. Macfarland), these two cases call for a deeper reflection: Millennials are more likely to vote in order to have their opinion heard or because they feel strongly about a certain issue. In light of this, political parties should be wary that younger people are more easily deterred from voting if they don't think that their vote will achieve something. The challenge for Progressives is to prove that their politics are dictated by a clear system of values that would not be retrenched by coalition agreements (FEPS Young Academics).

3. The importance of civic education to foster Millennials political engagement

Millennials are politically well informed but they also believe that it is important to keep the connection between civic education and political literacy as a critical component on how to improve their trust and participation in politics. This would allow young people to manage their expectations towards politics of today and increase their sensibility towards political participation, as lowering the voting age would do.

Research shows that citizens' education needs to go beyond the school curricula and should provide students with practical opportunities to apply citizenship education in their school and community activities. This could be done by helping **set up frameworks of collaboration between schools and youth organisations to run joint citizenship programmes focusing on topical issues such as human rights, immigration, the environment, and intergenerational solidarity** (T. Deželan).

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Notes

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