



Protecting Europe's youth during the cost-of-living crisis as key to winning young voters

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Abstract

This article tries to give an overview of the challenges which the European youth faces regarding the rising cost of living and how the centre–right agenda can respond to this problem. The concerns of young people were identified in European surveys both after the 2019 elections and more recently during the European Year of Youth. The article suggests that there is an alignment between these concerns and the political proposals of the European People's Party. In addition, the article explores the potential of young voters to be game changers at the ballot box, underlining how important it is to attract them as voters in the 2024 European Parliament elections. The article concludes by offering suggestions in two main areas: how to reach young citizens and gain their trust and votes, and how communications to them regarding the 2024 elections should be managed.

Keywords

European elections, Cost of living, Young voters, Rising living costs, Turnout

Introduction

Youth is a special period of our lives. The almost unlimited possibilities in front of us, along with the number of different paths we could choose, make it a very significant life stage for most people. Nonetheless, it is also a time of huge uncertainty, as most do not have the financial security that older generations usually have. The possibilities are immense, but the challenges are no less, and that is probably why it is so special. This

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article gives an overview of the challenges the European youth faces regarding the rising cost of living, and in particular rising house prices and their effects across society. It examines how the centre–right agenda can address this problem and how it should communicate around it for the 2024 elections.

The rising cost of living is affecting everyone, especially those on lower incomes as they have to spend more of their income on basic living expenses such as housing, food and utilities. However, the younger generation tends to be more affected than most, because young people usually have less stable jobs, receive lower wages and may struggle to find decent housing solutions. Citizens are demanding answers and the centre–right needs to deliver and show consistency in order to build a winning alliance for the 2024 European elections.

Challenges and risks of 2023

The year 2023 is likely to bring severe challenges. Foremost of these is the war in Europe, which has brought suffering and large economic and social impacts for many, and which, of course, is not yet over. Rising prices, supply chain problems and high energy prices are also taking their toll on the global economy, and the risk of a recession is still hampering confidence in the markets.

As duly noted by the World Bank (Gill and Nagle 2022), Russia and Ukraine are among the largest exporters of several important commodities including gas, oil, coal, fertilisers, wheat, corn and seed oil. The dependence on Russia and Ukraine for wheat imports among the major economies of Europe, Asia and Africa means that there is significant disruption to supplies as well as higher prices for these commodities, resulting in hunger and food insecurity.

As a result, higher interest rates, put in place to curb inflation and likely to remain for some time (World Economic Forum 2023), are also making it harder for younger generations to buy homes or cars. Inequality is increasing which fosters bitterness and anger, and is leading to growing clashes with decision-makers.

In education, for instance, universities are preparing for record numbers of students to drop out as a result of the cost-of-living crisis. Students are in trouble and under pressure from rising prices and many cannot access enough family support as their families are also struggling. Unsurprisingly, many are reassessing their decision to go into higher education. In some cases, higher education institutions are offering innovative solutions in terms of the financial support available, but in many cases this will not be sufficient to prevent young people from dropping out or deciding not to invest further in their education (World Economic Forum 2022).

At the same time, private companies are facing their own challenges as they encounter mounting pressures from the workforce, shareholders and customers to tackle a variety of relevant social duties—from climate change, to diversity and staff well-being.

Sustainability can no longer be part of the strategy, but must be at the centre for businesses to survive. Furthermore, the jobs market is changing, which is directly impacting who is entering employment, while at the same time Europe needs an ambitious agenda to transform and improve the current labour market to ensure a more modern, efficient and well-being-driven future.

To these problems, we must add rising geopolitical tensions and technological wars, as both the conflict in Ukraine and rising tensions with China have reduced confidence. Today we are living in a world in which different types of conflicts occur, leading to the risk of a new kind of cold war. We are also seeing less trust among nations and leaders, and the decline of multilateralism.

The challenges are not only complex, but in a number that is forcing citizens, organisations and leadership to navigate a constantly changing environment. In 2023, multi-risk management and resilience to shocks are more important than ever.

The European People's Party: addressing citizens' concerns

The first and most important mission of a political party is to address citizens' concerns. This means proposing concrete solutions to people's problems. This is the case whether the party has been given the responsibility of governing or is building a political alternative in opposition. The European People's Party (EPP) and its members are in both situations across Europe. Therefore, the first step in any political strategy that aims to mobilise citizens and meet their expectations must be the rigorous and objective assessment of the reality in which people are living.

There are three major dimensions that must be taken into account when evaluating the decision-making framework, the drivers of public opinion, and the window of opportunity for a party or ideological agenda. First, a transparent diagnosis of people's expectations; second, the political situation; and third, the context in which the proposals are to be made and applied.

First, in terms of people's expectations, we rely on a valuable ally: public opinion studies and polls. As we enter a decisive year, where does public opinion stand? According to the Eurobarometer Parlemeter (Eurobarometer 2023), the European Parliament's autumn 2022 survey, there are five major concerns for European citizens: the rising cost of living (93%), poverty and social exclusion (82%), the potential spread of the war in Ukraine to other countries (81%), the climate change emergency (also 81%) and the risk of a nuclear incident (74%). It is only natural that the corresponding priorities are the fight against poverty and social exclusion (37%), the promotion of public health (34%) and the fight against climate change, in association with concrete support for the economy and the creation of jobs (31%).

Second, the political situation must be considered. Within the 27 EU member states, political frameworks differ significantly. In the European Parliament, the EPP has been

the biggest political group since the first European elections and is the major driver of European integration. Today, the EPP holds 23% of the chamber, with 176 members (European Parliament 2023). In the European Council, the EPP is also the party of the majority of the heads of state and government, with nine leaders, compared to six for Renew Europe, six for the Socialists, and three conservatives and three independents (European Parliament 2022). The Council of the EU is being led by an EPP government, from Sweden, for the first half of the year; the second semester will bring a Spanish presidency that will start with a socialist leader, but could end with an EPP-led government.

Third, there is the context. According to the autumn economic forecast from the Commission (European Commission 2022a), the European economy is facing a difficult situation, although some recent projections and declarations offer a more optimistic perspective. In any case, the inflationary pressure remains on households and companies, affecting people in an unequal way. This is unequal in social terms, as the poorest households are most affected, and territorially unequal, as the reality varies radically from member state to member state (with inflation rates ranging from 5.5% to 25%) (Menyhert 2022). Furthermore, it is economically unequal, as the capacity to respond to the inflationary pressure is strictly linked to national budgetary capacities, and countries have significantly different contexts regarding public debt, deficits, GDP growth and so on.

It is clear, therefore, that the EPP has an increased responsibility to address citizens' concerns. We understand the fears and expectations of European citizens, we are the most representative political party in Europe, and we have concrete proposals to tackle the difficult economic and social context that we are facing.

The centre–right response: from ideology to practical answers

The times we are living in and the new era of political communication often lead us to look at ideology as a secondary dimension of our political intervention, prioritising pragmatic approaches based on the urgent matter of the month, the controversy of the week or the scandal of the day. As the leading force of the centre–right in Europe, the EPP must not only rescue the value of ideology, but also transform such ideology into practical answers to citizen's expectations.

The EPP is the stronghold of Christian Democracy in Europe and history speaks for itself when it comes to evaluating the contributions of our ideas and parties to the peace process after 1945, to European integration, to the fall of the Soviet Union, to the fight against terrorism and to a values-based approach to globalisation. It is now time to deliver on the challenges of the present time. It is true that we have a clear vision for Europe, outlined in our Congress documents (EPP 2017) and electoral manifesto (EPP 2019), but the EU of today exists in a different political reality than that of 2019.

When poverty and social exclusion topped the list of citizens' concerns, the EPP Group in the European Parliament presented concrete solutions to the rising cost of living (EPP Group 2022b). When organised crime stole billions of euros from the EU and national budgets and threatened our security, we proposed greater ambition in tackling this (EPP Group 2022c). When the autocratic Russian regime, under Putin's totalitarian leadership, invaded Ukraine in an illegal, immoral, illegitimate, unjustified and brutal way, we stood with our allies and friends on the front line of freedom and democracy (EPP Group 2022a; 2022d).

It is now time to maintain our strong commitment to the proposals we have made, but also to address the challenges arising in such an important year as 2023. The EPP stands for responsibility, accountability and transparency in economic and monetary affairs, so we want to revise EU economic governance accordingly. Not only because we have well-known and historical positions on this, but because we understand the mood of the time and the need to guarantee full respect for the principle of intergenerational solidarity.

The EPP is also the leading force behind the twin transition: green and digital. We have to reform our economies and societies with proportionate and ambitious approaches, but keep the focus on job creation and the promotion of investment opportunities for EU and non-EU companies. Changing the structure of our economies is not only an ideological goal, but a pragmatic and urgent need to safeguard our common future.

The EPP is the most relevant and representative political force in European politics. Our ideology has been forged through decades of dedication to the European cause. Our ideas are well-known and focused on the future. Our mission now is to follow through with our commitments to our parties, our voters and the citizens whose confidence we work every day to win and preserve.

How can the centre-right response impact the 2024 European elections?

As noted above, the 2024 elections will be another test of European democracy, of the relationship between voters and their political representatives. These elections will be marked, as with most recent electoral moments, by another crisis. Europe is suffering from very high inflation rates of above 10% (Eurostat 2023), while seeking to recover from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and has a war at its borders, which has caused an energy crisis.

It is in this context that responses to people's concrete problems must follow two vectors of action:

1. *A comprehensive political response.* This needs to be transversal and to seek a common response to the problems of the population (as opposed to the political

agendas of the European left, which are very focused on solving the problems of small groups). The centre-right needs to promote an integrated, holistic policy, which is always more coherent and effective than a policy that results from the sum of its parts.

2. *An economic growth recovery agenda.* The ageing of the European population and migratory pressures, within an increasingly permanent context of successive economic crises, has promoted more distributive public policies focused on combating social and economic disparities. These policies are more focused on social support measures (here I include health care and concerns about social support), foregoing an economic growth agenda that generates more opportunities. This has contributed to a full generation of political orphans, mostly in the middle class, who feel that politics does not address their concerns.

The younger generation feels that politics is not concerned with its future (Vasques 2022) but fundamentally only with the present, while the digital world is expanding the universe of expectations of younger generations in terms of consumer goods and living standards like never before. Faced with the impossibility of achieving their expectations, in an increasingly complex world that requires ever higher levels of knowledge to navigate due to innovation, the younger generations focus their frustration on the lack of a political response and therefore divorce themselves from their representatives. As a result, they discredit democracy and the democratic system.

Electoral participation of young people

Some data do however give us hope about the political role of young people in European democracy. The 2019 European elections showed a return to the polls, with an overall turnout of 50.6%, the highest since 1994. The results of the Eurobarometer survey (European Parliament 2019) show that this increase in participation was mainly driven by the younger generation across the EU. Specifically, citizens under the age of 25 (+14 percentage points) and the young adult generation between the ages of 25 and 39 (+12 percentage points) participated in greater numbers than previously. These results should be consolidated at the next European elections, so continuing to attract young people to participate politically could result in a very significant political bonus.

According to a study by the European Council on Foreign Relations (Zerka 2019), there are at least three reasons why pro-European parties should appeal to young people in their campaigns:

1. Projections indicate that youth participation could translate into gains of around 10% or more due to youth votes.
2. Young voters are often relatively green and liberal, but this is not always the case. In some countries, a significant number of young people are attracted to far-right

or anti-establishment parties. The centre–right should thus be able to present an agenda that is attractive to younger people.

3. Paying attention to young voters is important to rejuvenate Europe’s politics and rebuild confidence in the European project, as well as to build its competitiveness vis-à-vis other geographies.

Capturing the attention of the younger audience is critical to political engagement between the centre–right and its constituents. The vote of younger people is often considered to be more radical, in an assumption that young people are idealistic or politically inactive when young, before becoming more conservative, pragmatic and politically engaged later in life. However, there is a growing consensus among social scientists that people’s political orientations are set early in life and tend to change little as they age, as the study by Zerka (2019) notes. Therefore, there is an electoral bonus that can be exploited by the centre–right, one that could impact the elections in 2024.

What do the data tell us?

The most recent Eurobarometer survey (Eurobarometer 2022) reveals that most young people are active in the societies in which they live (58%) and have participated in the activities of at least one or more youth organisations in the last 12 months. This is a 17 percentage point increase since the last Eurobarometer survey in 2019.

The same study highlighted that young people’s expectations for the 2022 European Year of Youth were that decision-makers listen more to their demands and take action on them. Concerns centred on young people’s need for support, and personal, social and professional development (72%). Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine has reinforced young people’s conviction that preserving peace, strengthening international security and promoting international cooperation should be the EU’s first objective (37%).

These concerns, especially in times of crisis, are deeply linked with the fulfilment of young people’s everyday needs such as access to food, health care and housing, and achieving a foundational income that provides security and convenience and helps to eliminate threats to their basic needs. According to Ojeda (2018), ‘The opportunity cost of participation therefore increases as demands arise and resources are diverted away participation’. These factors are relevant to overcoming the income–participation gap to create a political agenda that attracts young voters.

It is possible for the centre–right to present and deliver a commitment to address the concerns of the younger generations in a way which is aligned with the political agenda of the centre–right. Indeed, the concerns of young people are the concerns of the EPP itself. The findings of the Eurobarometer report on the European Year of Youth (Eurobarometer 2022) are consistent with those of the 2019 European Parliament post-electoral survey in terms of the main concerns for young people and voters:

1. *Jobs*. Increase employment opportunities for young people (33%);
2. *Social justice*. Fight poverty and economic and social inequalities (32%); and
3. *Environment*. Promote environmentally friendly policies and combat climate change (31%).

Conclusion

The centre–right must take into account the EU Youth Strategy and, if possible, go further, with greater ambition in the commitment it makes to younger voters in order to gain their trust. The EU Youth Strategy focuses on three main areas of action, which are expressed in the terms ‘engage’, ‘connect’ and ‘empower’ (European Youth Portal 2023). While the EU is working on joint implementation in all sectors and on the 11 points of this strategy, we should consider that this document offers a path for the formulation of political proposals. These proposals do, however, have to be translated into concrete, tangible and measurable actions.

Another decisive aspect is the communication of these political proposals in view of the protagonists of this transformation: who can young people count on? The move that the European Commission has made in regard to implementing an EU External Action to strengthen engagement with young people worldwide (European Commission 2022b) has interesting intentions. But before we look abroad, the European institutions must improve matters at home.

The centre–right now knows that young people vote, that young people count and that young people can be a key factor for victory in elections. But it needs to capture their attention and speak to them on their level without being patronising, in the spaces where they are, that is, on digital platforms. This strategy for involving young people with the centre–right still lacks a decisive aspect: protagonists. Currently only 1.6% of members of parliament worldwide are in their twenties and less than 12% are in their thirties. Young voters need to identify with someone who can represent them at the centre of the decision-making process. Centre–right policies and proposals need to be consistent with the candidates leading these reforms, candidates with whom young people identify, who they know and in whom they see themselves. This is the most consistent (albeit difficult) way to attract the next generation during the upcoming 2024 elections.

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