



Is it protest or policy? What are young people saying that mainstream parties refuse to hear?

European View

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Abstract

Youth participation in democratic elections is at a historic low. Moreover, growing numbers of young voters, particularly from Generation Z and Millennials, are supporting far-right parties. This shift is striking given that today's youth are among the most educated generations. For mainstream European parties, this trend signals a pressing need to understand the causes of both youth abstention and extremist support. Are these votes acts of protest, or symptoms of deeper political dissatisfaction? To retain relevance and counter the rise of extremism, centrist parties must engage directly with young people, listen to their concerns and respond meaningfully. This article examines how ideology, gender and policies influence the younger generations' motivation for participating in elections. Scholars have proposed various explanations, but urgent action is needed to reconnect with this critical demographic.

Keywords

Youth, Europe, Elections, Mainstream, Democracy, Far right, Gender

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Introduction

Youth political participation across Europe is undergoing a significant transformation. Although Millennials and Generation Z¹ are among the most highly educated generations in history, they are also increasingly disengaged from traditional democratic processes. Voter turnout among young people in the 2024 European Parliament elections declined notably, reversing the encouraging rise seen in 2019 (European Parliament 2024). At the same time, a growing number of young voters are supporting far-right populist parties, particularly in countries such as Germany, France and Spain. This raises an urgent question: are these voting patterns driven by ideology, or are they acts of protest against political systems that young people feel no longer represent them?

This article aims to explore the reasons behind both the declining electoral participation of young people in the EU and their increasing support for extremist political movements. The article investigates the factors influencing young voters' decisions to abstain or to support far-right parties, with a particular focus on three key dimensions: ideology, gender and public policy. While, historically, young people have supported extreme left movements, this article focuses specifically on the increasing trend of young voters supporting far-right parties in European democracies. Drawing on recent data from surveys and studies, the article examines how and why political behaviour among younger generations is shifting.

First, the article outlines current trends in youth voting behaviour across EU member states, identifying key generational disparities and their socio-economic context. Second, it examines the motivations behind youth support for far-right parties, with special attention to gender differences and the appeal of populist political messaging. Third, it assesses the influence of policy issues—such as education, economic insecurity, climate change and housing—on young people's political preferences. Finally, the article reflects on the implications of these patterns for the future of mainstream centrist parties in Europe and the necessity for renewed engagement with young voters.

By exploring whether youth support for populist and far-right movements is fundamentally ideological or primarily a form of protest, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the political change among the younger generations. It argues that unless mainstream parties make a concerted effort to respond to the specific concerns of young people, they risk further alienating a crucial segment of the electorate—and leaving space for radical alternatives to fill the void.

Young people's voting behaviour in national and European elections

Age continues to be a significant determinant of electoral participation within the EU. Data from the 2024 post-electoral Eurobarometer survey reveal that older citizens are consistently more likely to vote than their younger² counterparts. In the 2024 European Parliament elections, voter turnout was 58% among those aged 55 and over, compared to

51% for those aged 40–54, 46% for the 25–39 age group, and just 36% among 15–24-year-olds, where eligible. This marks a notable reversal of the upward trend seen in 2019, when youth turnout had increased by 14 percentage points compared to 2014; the 2024 figures show a 6-point decline among young voters (European Parliament 2024).

This age-based participation gap is also reflected in voting habits. Studies indicate that older voters are more likely to regard voting as a civic duty (45% vs. 38%) and to maintain long-term party loyalties—53% report always voting for the same party, compared to only 25% of under-25s (European Parliament 2024). Youth voting is further characterised by fluidity and issue-based decision-making. Younger voters, particularly students and the unemployed, are more inclined to decide their vote at the last minute and are less committed to traditional party affiliations, indicating that political engagement is increasingly shaped by short-term factors rather than enduring partisan alignment (European Parliament 2024). These findings highlight that the contemporary younger generations exhibit lower levels of party loyalty compared to older generations, but they are more prone to vote because of specific issues that concern them and can easily change their mind when going to vote.

Policy preferences also diverge across age groups. Young voters are more likely to prioritise education, gender equality and digitalisation, while older voters tend to focus on defence and security. Although climate change has declined somewhat in prominence compared to previous years, it remains an important concern for younger generations. However, studies have shown that economic issues are a primary concern for young voters across the EU member states. Both Gen Z voters and Millennials identified rising prices and the cost of living as their top priorities (European Parliament 2024).

Studies show that anxiety over socio-economic issues is especially prominent in countries such as Greece and Ireland. Furthermore, unemployment continues to be a significant issue for young voters, particularly in southern European member states such as Italy and Portugal. In Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Denmark, climate change is a significant concern. Education and international politics are also prominent areas for young people, which shows their desire to improve their educational levels and their geopolitical awareness (European Parliament 2024; Lavizzari 2025). It is noteworthy that young people have diverse priorities which also vary across member states.

Although generational cohorts such as Generation Z and Millennials are far from politically homogenous, patterns in electoral behaviour indicate that a significant proportion of young people—particularly young men—are gravitating towards far-right populist movements. This trend was clearly illustrated in the February 2025 German federal election, in which approximately 25% of men aged 18–24 voted for Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD). A similar pattern emerged in the 2024 UK general election, in which 12.9% of young men supported Reform UK, in contrast to only 5.9% of young women (Ipsos 2025). The next section will explore whether young people who vote for far-right parties do so because of their beliefs or just to protest against the current political system.

Is it an ideological or protest vote?

Recent elections have revealed increasing polarisation among young voters. While many continue to back progressive parties, support for far-right groups is also rising. Economic challenges such as the lingering effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, high living costs, inflation and housing shortages, along with mental health concerns, have intensified feelings of insecurity among youth. Additionally, the war in Ukraine has heightened anxiety, especially in Eastern Europe. These overlapping crises are driving some young people towards more radical political options. For instance, far-right parties such as Germany's AfD, France's National Rally (Rassemblement national, RN) and Spain's Vox are gaining popularity among younger voters. This trend reflects broader shifts linked to economic uncertainty, dissatisfaction with mainstream politics and concerns about the socio-economic impacts of climate policies such as the Green Deal (Lavizzari 2025; Azmanova 2024).

This emerging trend is further accentuated by institutional reforms that have extended voting rights to younger age groups. For instance, the voting age has been lowered to 16 in Austria, Germany, Belgium and Malta, and to 17 in Greece. Consequently, the political preferences of these cohorts have become increasingly influential. In Germany in 2024, 16% of young voters supported the AfD, tripling its previous share among this age group and bringing it nearly level with the centre-right alliance between the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands) and the Christian Social Union in Bavaria (Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern) (*Deutsche Welle* 2024; Azmanova 2024).

These developments underscore a growing disconnect between younger voters and traditional political parties. Despite persistent engagement with issues such as climate change and social justice, many young people appear disillusioned with the lack of capacity of the mainstream parties—both centre-left and centre-right—to address their immediate socio-economic concerns (Azmanova 2024). This disillusionment is occurring as a result of declining youth well-being. According to the 2024 *World Happiness Report*, younger generations now report lower levels of overall life satisfaction compared to older cohorts (Helliwell et al. 2024). Data from the 2022 Autumn Eurobarometer also reveal that 93% of Europeans are concerned about the rising cost of living, while 82% express fears regarding poverty and social exclusion (European Parliament 2023).

It is therefore noteworthy that, while far-right parties frequently foreground issues such as immigration and national identity, they have nevertheless managed to attract support from younger voters whose primary concerns are socio-economic. France provides a clear example of how far-right parties are adapting their platforms to attract younger voters. The RN has broadened its appeal by focusing on issues traditionally associated with the left, such as workers' rights, pensions and the quality of life for ordinary citizens (Lynes 2025). This suggests that the appeal of far-right movements may not lie solely in their ideological stance, but also in their ability to capitalise on perceptions of economic insecurity among young voters and the inability of mainstream parties to solve their main

concerns. Research further indicates that while older generations often vote to protect existing socio-economic positions, younger voters are motivated by concerns about their ability to attain such status in the future, which they feel they cannot do despite their educational achievements (Schnetzer et al. 2024; *Deutsche Welle* 2024).

Voting patterns show that many young people are more concerned with where candidates stand on important issues than with traditional party loyalty or ideology. This highlights their desire for meaningful and authentic representation in politics (Lavizzari 2025). Unlike older generations, who tend to maintain consistent affiliations with parties, or at least with a particular section of the political spectrum, younger voters often exhibit a more fluid and pragmatic approach to political engagement. This reflects a broader transformation of the political landscape, where conventional left/right distinctions have become increasingly blurred. Parties traditionally considered far-right now incorporate elements typically associated with liberal or progressive agendas. For instance, the RN in France, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands and the AfD in Germany advocate policies such as tax relief for young people, gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights. However, these policy positions are frequently framed as efforts to defend 'European values' against perceived threats posed by immigration (Azmanova 2024).

The strategic repositioning of far-right parties has allowed them to appeal to young voters by addressing issues of economic marginalisation and cultural displacement, often using progressive rhetoric to justify exclusionary policies. This fusion of economic populism and cultural nationalism represents a departure from traditional ideological categorisations and further complicates the task of interpreting youth support for these movements (Azmanova 2024).

Social media is an important instrument to reach and inform young voters, making it a key tool for future political campaigns (Lavizzari 2025). Through social media platforms such as TikTok, the far-right has capitalised on youth discontent with the current political situation and has normalised the far-right ideologies among younger people and brought them closer to the far-right parties (Serhan 2024). The RN's increased youth support in France can be partly attributed to its young leader, Jordan Bardella, who effectively engages younger audiences through social media platforms such as TikTok. Bardella's relatable online presence helps the party connect with young voters, but analysts note that broader factors, such as dissatisfaction with the current government and concerns over immigration, play a more significant role. Similar trends are observed across Europe, where far-right parties attract youth by combining anti-EU, anti-immigration and anti-elite messages (Cokelaere 2024).

Finally, the growing appeal of far-right parties among young voters should be viewed as a form of political protest. According to Bergh (2004, 385), 'protest voting is the act of voting for a political party as a means of expressing political distrust. The extent to which supporters of a particular party are protest voters is measured by the effect of political distrust on support for that party'. In that sense, Rooduijn (2018, 356–7) argues that the explanation for why people support radical right parties through protest voting is

less about their agreement with far-right ideology and more about their anti-elite stance, which challenges the established political order. Mainstream centre-left parties have struggled to deliver inclusive social policies in the context of the green transition and global economic volatility, while centre-right parties have not done enough to ensure job security and social mobility. In this context, support for populist movements may reflect a broader crisis of political representation. If traditional parties remain unresponsive to the structural challenges facing younger generations—such as affordable housing, employment and ecological sustainability—the political space may become increasingly vulnerable to exploitation by parties offering simplistic solutions to complex problems (Azmanova 2024).

The gender gap in voting among young Europeans

When we refer to increasing ‘far-right appeal’, electoral results and research have confirmed that we should add ‘among (young) men’. Young men and young women are diametrically opposed in their ideological perspectives and electoral preferences. While 21% of young men supported far-right parties at the European elections, only 14% of women did so, being more inclined to vote for progressive, green and pro-European parties (Katsanidou 2025).

That the gender gap among young Europeans mirrors a global trend is a concerning societal phenomenon. Generally, younger generations (Millennials and Gen Z) are more progressive than their parents and older generations, more open to diversity and progressive social values, and more likely to support climate action, gender equality and EU integration (Kiss et al. 2022). This global trend is in line with the increasingly prevalent establishment of policies on female emancipation and gender equality. The significant increase in the completion of tertiary degrees between 2002 and 2020 among women (25% to 46%) in comparison to men (21% to 35%) (*Economist* 2024) is a significant factor when we attempt to analyse these trends and behaviours.

What has caused the ‘U-turn’ among young males? While there is still not much research on this topic, there are some societal and behavioural observations that could potentially respond to this question. The changed gender norms and female economic independence and empowerment could be identified as contributing factors. Evidently, the abandonment of the traditional breadwinner/provider role is making young men vulnerable. Alongside the general economic challenges such as housing, precarious employment and dependency on parental support, women pose competition for higher-status jobs (Milosav et al. 2025). In the formative years—the teenage years and young adulthood—the confusion young men experience over their personal identity can drive them to seek ‘refuge’ in far-right movements, which construct their communication strategies around cultivating ideals of masculinity and modern sexism (‘feminism has gone too far’) rather than dealing constructively with the root causes of these young men’s anxiety (Anduiza and Rico 2024).

This divide among young males and females is not concerning solely for electoral purposes. If there are such fundamental differences in the worldviews between men and women, this societal polarisation will influence every aspect of life—relationships, work culture and socialisation—and then, in the long run, it will impact demographic trends (in marriage, having children, etc.) (Milosav 2025).

How can youth be brought to the middle?

The dangers of successes on the far-right front and the threat to liberal democracy and civic freedoms as we know them are multifaceted. It would be foolish to expect a single policy to achieve a miracle and bring (young) voters back to the mainstream parties.

What is urgently needed is for political actors in the centre to stop ignoring the youth and start legitimising their concerns about the future and the challenges to their personal development. It is not the case that young people are just rebellious and want to party carelessly, as others might believe. The younger generations, Gen Z in particular, are recognised as being the most socially aware and engaged generations in Europe (and North America) (Martinez 2024).

Addressing the root causes of their discontent and protest must become a priority for the mainstream parties. The economy is the biggest concern for all voters, but policies to tackle precarious employment or unemployment, housing shortages and the low quality of life for youth need to be concretised. While politics might still be perceived as a job for older people, nominating young candidates for national and European Parliament positions could not only boost engagement but also make youngsters face reality regarding what it actually looks like to contribute to change and decision-making. It is a practice which has succeeded for certain far-right parties. Furthermore, as these generations have been ‘bred’ online and heavily influenced by social media, digital literacy and media education are needed more than ever to fight disinformation. Being able to critically select and recognise the validity of content and information is a crucial skill in this modern online world, as far-right movements have taken advantage of the lack of existing programmes.

Finally, though the list should be longer and much more complex, at the core of everything is education. Well-informed, educated people are less likely to be influenced by xenophobic, racist political messaging, and are less likely to accept and spread hate speech or be prone to manipulation by malign influences. Education policies must be in line with the new societal challenges and technological advancements and be able to prepare the current younger generation for the future that awaits.

Conclusion

A profound transformation in the European democratic landscape is happening as a result of the growing disengagement of young people from mainstream politics and their

increased support for far-right parties. This shift is not merely a reflection of ideological alignment but a complex interplay of protest, socio-economic anxiety and a search for authentic representation. While young people remain deeply concerned with issues such as climate change, education and equality, their immediate priorities—economic insecurity, housing and job prospects—are often overlooked by traditional parties. Far-right movements have taken advantage of this gap, adapting their communication strategies to resonate with the youth.

The gender divide in youth political preferences is another alarming sign that there are deep societal transformations taking place, with potentially enormous consequences. As young men increasingly gravitate towards radical alternatives, and young women lean towards progressive platforms, the risk of societal polarisation grows. To counter this trend, mainstream parties must move beyond symbolic gestures and implement concrete policies that include addressing structural inequalities, promoting inclusive education, ensuring economic opportunities and fostering digital literacy.

Ultimately, the future of European democracy relies heavily on its ability to interact with its youngest citizens—not by dismissing their concerns as fleeting rebellion, but by legitimising their demands and their need for a more inclusive and responsive political system while recognising that they represent the future of the continent.

Notes

1. Generation Z, popularly referred to as Gen Z, is generally defined as people born between 1997 and 2012, whereas Millennials were born between 1981 and 1996.
2. The standard definition of young people used by Eurostat is those between 15 and 29 years old.

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