Book Review

Philippa Collin (2015) Young Citizens and Political Participation in a Digital Society. Addressing the Democratic Disconnect. New York; Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan. 189 pages.

During the last decades, turnout rates in national and local elections have been steadily decreasing in many western democracies. The especially low participation of young people within the framework of traditional forms of political participation – voting, party membership etc. – raises the question whether this indicates a certain disconnection or even political apathy among the youngest cohorts. In consequence, governmental as well as non-governmental institutions and organizations have responded through enhancing policies to foster participation of young people. In her book, Philippa Collin aims to investigate these policies as well as the efforts undertaken by NGOs in order to bring young citizens back into the process of developing, determining and deciding on issues and problems of interest. She even takes a step forward and includes young people's views and ideas about participation, the political sphere and their experiences in online and – above all – offline forms of engagement. While the low participation of the youngest cohort is often explained by a lack of political interest, scepticism or yet apathy (cf. Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Sloam, 2007; Wattenberg, 2015; Wring et al., 1999), other studies have discussed the differences in participation behaviour between older and younger citizens as generational or life-cycle phenomena (i.e. Highton and Wolfinger, 2001; Hooghe and Stolle, 2003) or as a shift in the comprehension of the concept of participation, away from traditional forms of political engagement to a broader understanding that includes various on- and offline activities (cf. Kim, 2006; Norris, 2002; 2004; Zukin et al., 2006). However, most of those studies analysed the participative behaviour of young people in a quantitative way, without discussing the concepts of participation or young citizens in a more detailed way or even including the views of young people on political engagement. Collin also starts with the question how the decline of traditional political engagement among the youngest cohort is to be explained. In contrast to previous studies, her study's focus is on how the comprehension and the relationship between policies, political identity and engagement can be interpreted in the context of continuously internationalized and digital environment. The book addresses four main research concerns: (1) the reasons behind youth participation in a digital society, (2) the question how youth participation policies shape the political identity of young people, (3) the implications of the shift in comprehension and practices of participation in advanced representative democracies such as Australia or the United Kingdom (UK), (4) possible solutions how governments or other political stakeholders could react to a youth-centred understanding of participation so as to include young people as citizens.

Before examining these relationships, the book starts with some considerations about the concepts of youth and citizenship as well as the problems that emerge when youth participation is explored. In respect of the latter, Collin stresses that young

people are mostly perceived as inactive or politically disconnected instead of including young people's views on political involvement in order to discern whether the youngest citizens actually do not care about politics or whether their approach – compared to older citizens – is just another one, i.e. through online facilities, which are increasingly significant in everyday life as well as in political and social processes. With regard to the importance of the internet and digital media, she refers to two different approaches. The first is of a normative nature where the internet is recognized as a feature to foster citizenship and participation as well as democracy in general. The second, in contrast, questions the traditional understanding of politics insofar as digital media and the internet in general are perceived as part of political participation itself and as a public space where opinions are exchanged, networks are built and developed and activities are planned and performed. For the rest of the study, the second approach is primarily addressed. As mentioned, the study draws on a qualitative comparison of Australia and the UK where youth participation, governmental and non-governmental youth participation policies as well as interviews with NGO staff (N=18) and young people (N=52) in both countries are analysed. The first part of the book provides an overview of the current state of research regarding the concepts of citizenship, youth participation and the role of policies and digital media as well as the underlying theoretical approaches. Special attention is paid to Coleman's (2008) approach that distinguishes between three means how citizenship can be promoted through policies: Managed citizenship, differenced-centred citizenship as well as autonomous citizenship. Here the first understands young people as citizens-to-be, the second as legitimate citizens that are to be included in political processes to a certain degree, and the third regards young people as independent political actors (p. 37). In the following section Collin addresses different policies and their contexts, both in Australia and the UK, concluding that these strategies frame the understanding of youth, citizenship and youth participation to a high degree. In contrast to governmental policies on youth participation, non-governmental organizations offer a much broader view of young people's role as citizens and political as well as social actors. On the basis of ten case studies of British and Australian NGOs, Collin analyses how these organizations support young people in their interests and requests to engage in different activities. As compared to governmental efforts regarding youth participation, NGOs treat young people as equivalent citizens and include them in most activities and decisions. In order to complete the picture, young people were asked about their comprehension of participation, involvement in participative processes as well as the role of internet and digital media regarding their engagement. Drawing on her results, Collin concludes that young people are anything but apathetic or disinterested, however, they do use a different repertoire and other channels than traditional forms of participation to bring their interests to bear. Moreover, they regard democracy and traditional politics as important, but many interviewed young people are mostly sceptical about governmental attempts to foster youth participation.

While the findings as well as the approach draw new light on research into youth participation, there remain some critical remarks and questions. Although the concept of participation is discussed in the first part of the book, it remains somewhat unclear how the term is used in the rest of the book, above all, whether youth

participation and political youth participation are interchangeable concepts. This leads to the second question, namely whether all engagement of young people in the examined NGOs can be regarded as political engagement or whether social and political participation can or should be distinguished. Similarly to the use of the idea of participation, the differences between 'internet' and 'digital media' are sometimes not very well articulated, especially since these terms are not defined despite their important roles within the study. Although Collin presents a broad picture of the work and involvement of young people in different organizations as well as the activities undertaken within these NGOs, it remains mostly unclear whether and how these efforts have actually affected political decisions and processes, and could therefore be seen as anything more than tokenistic intentions. Due to the qualitative study design, the aim of the book was certainly not to present a generalizable picture of young people's participatory behaviour; nevertheless the author often speaks of 'the youth' or 'the young people'. Regarding the small number of interviewed young persons, these terms should be used with caution. In combination with the emphasis on already active adolescents, it raises the question whether and how the presented perceptions and engagement can be interpreted as an illustration how the youngest generation thinks and acts. It would have been interesting to learn also about the perceptions of democracy and participation of those young people that are not already involved in NGO activities, i.e. to find out if they are engaged in any other way and if not, what keeps them from being active.

Apart from these remarks, the book examines important and mostly disregarded questions and relationships between youth policies, youth participation, and the role of the internet. Other than most of the previous literature on the political engagement of the youngest cohorts, the study includes not only the governmental and organizational views, but the even more important the perspective of the adolescents themselves. This approach permits a much detailed and deeper understanding of the concept and provides advice for further policies that aim to foster participation of young people regarding political processes and decision-making. Particularly, the emphasis on the internet and digital media as important space and opportunity structures to reach and involve young persons in different forms of engagement, is a crucial step forward to better understand the mechanisms behind young people's inclusion in political as well as social processes as well as an oppotunity to support those.

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