

Those under thirty: who cares and why? Young people's values and political participation

Swedish text. English summary. Swedish title: Dom under trettio, vem bryr sig och varför? Ungdomars värderingar och politiska deltagande

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Printed by Grafikerna Livréna AB, Kungälv 2007

Pages: 278. ISBN: 978-91-628-7053-9

Abstract

It is commonly believed that adolescents have little or no interest in politics: they generally do not want to participate in political activities, and when they do, usually choose political activities unrelated to the formal *representative* political system. This conventional understanding has given rise to concern on the part of political representatives. What will be the future of the parliamentary system when the youth of today grow up and assume political leadership? Such conventional worries could, however, be called into question and replaced by a more positive understanding of the younger generation. The thesis problematizes the conventional view of how young people participate in politics, aiming to contribute to a more balanced description of the political behaviour of the younger generation.

The study uses a cross-sectional design. Its empirical material comes from SOM surveys of 3000 individuals, aged 15–29, living in Western Sweden; the surveys were conducted by the SOM Institute at Göteborg University.

The theoretical framework is based on a discussion of how to judge the effects of various participation patterns found among young people. The discussion takes as its departure point the competitive versus participatory theoretical ideals of democracy. In questioning the conventional view of young people's political behaviour, two explanatory lines of reasoning are proposed, regarding the impact of values and of age. To what extent can individualistic values explain whether and how young people participate? As complementary explanations, a SES model is tested.

The empirical results are discussed in five chapters of the work. Chapters five to seven focus on the dependent variable (i.e., political participation), the independent variables (i.e., values, attitudes, and socioeconomic factors), and the impact of socioeconomic factors on values and attitudes. Testing the explanatory model in chapters eight and nine indicates that individualistic values to some extent explain *how* but not *whether* young people are likely to participate politically. Individuals favouring more traditional values are more likely to participate in *corresponding kinds* of political activities. To understand *whether* young people will participate, socioeconomic factors are almost as important as values. I conclude that the assumed consequences of young people's modes of political participation have been overstated. There is no pattern applicable to the entire younger generation that gives cause for concern in terms of how they will behave politically as adults.

Key words: political participation, youth, values, attitudes, generation, life cycle, local government