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Aaron J. Martin, Young People and Politics. Political engagement in the Anglo-American democracies. London-New York: Routledge, 2012, xii+170 pp.

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Book reviews

Aaron J. Martin, *Young People and Politics. Political engagement in the Anglo-American democracies*. London-New York: Routledge, 2012, xii+170 pp.

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Scholars have long debated the salience of age in shaping political engagement. Although there is a dearth of empirical studies providing clear evidence on declining political participation among newer generations, a commonly held view is that the political engagement of young people in the Western democracies is in secular decline.

Young People and Politics addresses this important empirical gap in the contemporary literature. This book shows that voter turnout among the young people is more complicated than the picture presented in the academic literature. A central claim in this work is that electoral politics seems to be losing its primacy and that the participatory inequalities will increase in relation to the changing trend of young people's political engagement.

Specifically, the author provides a systematic and comparative account of the young people's political engagement across four Anglo-American democracies: US, Great Britain, Canada, and Australia. The book is divided into four key sections: 1) voter turnout, 2) political attitudes, 3) political participation beyond voting (electoral engagement, non-electoral participation and Internet use), 4) what can be done, in terms of policy reforms. Methodologically, the author follows the traditional approach in the political behaviour literature, using a diversity of datasets from national election studies (e.g., American National Election Studies, Canadian Election Studies, British Election Studies, Australian Election Studies, etc.) and analyzing survey questions that have been asked over several years.

In the first section, Martin synthesizes current scholarship in the field of voter turnout, and integrates competing theories in an accessible manner. The author uses reported turnout from each national election study to establish turnout levels across several countries over time among different age groups. The analysis points out that the generational effects seem to be at work but not in the way much of the literature assumes. Specifically, the generational effects seem to be creating more volatile voting patterns by which young people turn out in relatively high numbers at some elections and abstain from others. Thus, generational effects seem to be playing out in terms of volatility rather than secular declines in turnout (over the time series, it's evident a larger age gap between the young and old opening up). The author shows that, rather than characterizing young people as non-voters, it would be better to characterize them as "volatile voters."

Additionally, data show volatility among the young is related to wider beliefs about the importance of voting as civic duty, as expressed through the ISSP (International Social Survey Programme) importance of vote question. It seems that young people have not inherited the civic duty of their parents, and the socialization process seems to have broken down.

The second section focuses on two political attitudes: political trust and political interest. About the political trust, there is little support for the argument that generational

replacement has driven changes, because the young people do not deviate significantly from the population average. Rather, political external events and historical forces seem have affected all age groups. However, data show that the lack of trust in government seems not to have affected support for democracy, that remains very high among young and old alike, characterized by the author as “dissatisfied democrats.”

Contrary to what much of the literature suggests, the results of the analysis on political interest point out more volatility in young people’s political interest over time. In particular, data show that young people today are not less interested in politics than young people 40 or 50 years ago, at the beginning of analyzed time series; consequently, Martin argues that socialization effects have been less important than the role of political events to increase political interest of young people, described by author as ‘monitorial citizens’: “when political events stimulate the young to become more interested in politics they do but they seem to switch off during what they perceive as ‘boring’ periods of political activity” [p. 65].

Overall, my impression is that the findings presented in the first and second sections demonstrate that two age-related explanations of political engagement (lifecycle versus generational effects) need to be treated as complementary, rather than self-exclusionary (as done by the author).

The third section is focused on political participation beyond voting. About the electoral engagement, operationally defined in psychological (identifying with a party) and behavioural (joining a political party and contacting a politician) terms, Martin finds evidence of generational effects. Young people have become much less electorally engaged over time: the importance of electoral engagement transmitted from parent to child seems to be declined.

Although electoral engagement is becoming less popular among the young, the third section shows that non-electoral forms of political participation seems to be becoming more widespread. Martin argues that this trend is explainable by the transforming effect of higher education among young people today than 50 years ago. Following the modernization theory, as outlined by Inglehart, the author supports an optimistic conclusion; he stresses that young people are far from being apathetic, but rather they have the ability to monitor the political environment and organize their own political activities without having to rely on elite mobilization. Additionally, Martin also outlines the “dark side” of modernization theory, in realistic way: in the future, this tendency could severely increase the participatory inequalities and underplay the importance of voting. In fact, earlier research shows that those who participate in non-electoral forms of participation tend to be drawn from more advantaged groups; consequently, if electoral forms of participation (more equal) are declining and non-electoral forms (more unequal) are increasing, particularly among young people, in the future the participatory inequalities could be intensified through the process of generational replacement. However, the author’s claims seem to go far beyond the empirical evidence, at a somewhat abstract and theoretical level; in fact, he does not empirically investigate the trend of non-electoral participation over time (analyzing only the ISSP 2004 dataset), and he does not relate non-electoral participation to electoral engagement (lacking to test whether non-electoral participation is serving as a replacement or a supplement to voting).

The last chapter of third section examines how the Internet is engaging young people in politics, in terms of political participation, communication, information and mobilization. The analysis does not clearly show that young people are likely to be engaged in political participation on the Internet (only 16 percent in Australia and 9 percent in USA). However, the available data are inconclusive, and as the author also suggests, it is too early to assess the long term impacts of the Internet. Additionally, I think the author should have analyzed the “replacement hypothesis” more clearly; for example, through the ISSP 2004, it is possible to investigate the political use of the Internet compared to one of the traditional media (newspaper, television, radio).

In the last and probably the most interesting section, the author suggests a number of reforms to better engage the young in the political process. He examines four policy reforms: civic education reforms, elite mobilization, easing registration requirements and changing the electoral system. Many of the reforms would equalize participation by improving access to vote, that Martin considers still the most important form of political activity.

The first policy is based on the assumption that increasing knowledge (a proxy for political interest) will increase political engagement. One way would be to develop civic education classes, in consultation with administrators and teachers; what is most relevant is that they have to be interesting to students, through different kinds of learning stimulations (e.g., to tie important historical events to contemporary problems, to develop simulations and role-playing, to use interactive on-line materials, to introduce political partisan). However, it's important to note that improving the level of knowledge does not necessarily lead to higher turnout among young people with low political interest.

The elite mobilization model involves a top-down approach, based on the assumption that young people are not politically engaged because parties and politicians do not mobilize them. There is potential for the Internet to play a significant role for mobilizing the young as opposed to in-person contact. However, at the same time, it's difficult to assume that mobilization effort may affect political interest and trust (indirect effects).

The third policy - improving registration procedures - could increase turnout by making voting easier. Also in this case, the Internet could play a significant role, particularly among young non-voters. At the same time: is it desirable to mobilize voters with low levels of political interest and political knowledge?

Whereas the previous policies have looked at the role of individuals and elites, the fourth suggested policy - the electoral system reform - involves factors exogenous to the individual. Martin suggests two important institutional factors that may increase turnout: proportional representation systems and compulsory voting. The first factor would increase electoral representation and competitiveness, driving up turnout among the young; the second one compels people to vote, in particular the young who may be easily distracted and not motivated.

In summary, although some reforms are very unlikely to be introduced, this section shows that increasing political engagement is not out of policy makers' control; however, aside from turnout, it's worth asking how measure the effect of some policy interventions in the case of political attitudes (e.g., trust, interest, etc).

Finally, *Young People and Politics* is undoubtedly an interesting book that can make us more aware of the fact that politics goes on everywhere, and that we need to make

research methods and measurements more able to analyze new trends in political engagement. The insightful comparative approach used is innovative and underscore the need for systematic explanation of political engagement among young people. The more interesting pattern is the increasingly multifaceted nature of young people's engagement with politics.

The data cited throughout this work suggest that electoral participation seems not to be a norm of citizenship for many young people. However, taken together, the evidence does not support claims of a crisis of democracy; in fact, Martin rejects suggestions of a negative (or entirely positive) trajectory, instead concluding that the relationship between young people and the democratic process is dynamic and complex. Written in a clear style, the book is a fascinating contribution to the current debate about youth and politics, and should be of interest to students and scholars of political sociology, political science and public policy.

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