

THE CURRENT SITUATION AND TRANSFORMATIONS OF DEMOCRACY

Young people: between news disconnection and institutional disconnection

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A young man walks past the main entrance to the University of Barcelona, blocked by a student picket line, on 20 April 2021. Photo: Jordi Borràs

At the end of 2023, Javier Milei won the presidential elections in Argentina, confirming what has been detected elsewhere: the chronic inability of democratic systems to provide solutions to people's problems benefits anti-establishment candidates. Notably, his extremism managed to captivate a significant proportion of younger voters, who glimpsed hope in his devastating discourse. However, what this youth support reveals transcends the country's borders: national specificities cannot be ignored, but they interact with international factors and global communication channels that create a common ground that young Argentines share with the young people of other countries.

This is a generation shaped in the context of two changes that have taken place in contemporary societies during the democratic *deconsolidation* process: a transformation in political systems and a change in communication infrastructures. Indeed, this is a generation that, in one way or another, has grown up in contexts of chronic crisis: economic, political, migratory, climate, pandemic, inflationary, etc. They have not known any other reality and they have come of age without any expectations of professional or financial stability. Therefore, many young people do not believe in the mainstream political

system: they see it as obsolete, corrupt and unable to meet their needs, interests and values. This feeling of exclusion has driven many young people towards alternative forms of participation, in which they act with the legitimacy of frustration and imbued with the logic of social media.

In the digital age, the younger generations are in constant contact with other people through a mediated relationship (which does not only include social media) and they are exposed to an infinite amount of content produced all around the world. Inseparable from their smartphones, they use social media for socialising, entertainment, information and politicisation. The central role played by social media in their lives has distanced them from the information produced by the mainstream media, particularly the news media; on the other hand, viewing politics mainly through the filter of digital networks draws them closer to the mediation based on algorithmic filters. [1]

Young people like anti-elite, anti-party and anti-institutional politics. They support provocative, politically incorrect, amusing and jovial candidates

These dynamics have implications for what young people look for in politics: they feel attracted to what seems to be authentic, new and different from the institutional - different from what is produced by institutions they do not value. They like anti-elite, anti-party and anti-institutional politics. They support provocative, politically incorrect, amusing and jovial candidates (regardless of their age). Javier Milei, therefore, is the extreme South American version of anti-establishment politics that is expanding around the world, and which young people's information and politicisation dynamics through social media are helping to spread.

Taking as a starting point the interaction between the transformations in communication infrastructures and the political culture of democracy, this article reflects on these changes and how they shape young people's values, attitudes and practices, while putting contemporary democracy under even greater pressure.

Young people and information

With the advent of mass democracies at the turn of the 20th century, being informed became a fundamental dimension of citizenship. For a long time, this perception was associated with journalism, seen as the most important media content for fulfilling this civic duty. However, with the new millennium, we realise that many young people who grew up with social media, and even though they are permanently connected, have developed a more superficial and less meaningful relationship with public affairs than previous generations[2] In fact, the younger generation has not internalised the idea of consuming information as a civic duty. They are not interested in issues that are important for society

as a whole but do not affect them directly. They reserve their attention for those issues that can have a concrete effect on their daily lives: for this generation, topics' importance has become more of a personal thing than public, which in turn has led to more individualised definitions of what is newsworthy.

In order to connect their personal world with the world at large, young people look for and need news, but they do not see journalism-generated information as the best way to get it. In fact, they prefer to access news through secondary channels, such as social media, [3] among others, because most of what interests them lies on the periphery of the news agenda. Aside from the fact that mainstream media topics and approaches usually do not align with what they consider to be useful, interesting or entertaining to know, there is a widespread perception that the media are not transparent and are biased. Many young people think that the media are part of a broader harmful system (which includes parties and politicians) and perceive them as lacking credibility, inadequate or outdated. Consequently, they try to overcome these "vices" through Internet, which they see as a plural, diverse, alternative source of information.

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Permanently connected, they move through a wide variety of digital spaces and have a broad repertoire of information provided mostly by influencers, celebrities, friends and relatives. [4] [5] [6] [7] Unlike previous generations, who tend to consume different content separately (information, entertainment, sport, etc.), young people consume them interconnectedly: at the same time as they are watching a funny video on TikTok and receiving a notification of a reel, they are reading something about the latest political event and liking a photo posted by a classmate.

Understanding how young people consume information is therefore a complex task, as it involves kaleidoscopic behaviours. [8] However, we can say that the news repository of the younger generations resembles a fragmented, personalised mosaic of content, in which third parties post, algorithms recommend, and friends share. Like a slot machine, this "randomness" is central to part of their news consumption, particularly when it comes to politics.

Interest in political information: news disconnection

Although some young people actively look for journalistic information to keep abreast of politics, most find it accidentally amidst the incessant flow of content on their favourite social media: YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat and, more recently, TikTok. However, when they come across political messages, they prefer the opinions of influencers or friends to

the debates generated by the information. This means that most of what they consume is channelled through unvalidated, unauthoritative opinions expressed by other people, which increases the chances of it being poor quality or a source of disinformation. This fuels polarised, intransigent debates in the notorious “digital bubbles”, driven by animosity, that foster a fragmented rhetoric and produce echo chambers.

Moreover, as well as lacking journalistic mediation, the content preferred by young people mixes politics with entertainment. One thing that young people share is an interest in the accessible, light-hearted, funny or satirical political approaches expressed by YouTubers, TikTok influencers and WhatsApp memes. They love this humorous, controversial, irreverent content. On the other hand, they admit their lack of interest in “serious” societal and world issues and their low motivation to follow them. [9] [10] [11] [12] They also admit to knowing little about the substance of the issues and are aware of their ignorance of political activity and political parties, and the workings of the state. There is thus a reinforcing effect: the initial lack of interest in hard politics and in-depth debates is compounded by the fact that these issues are not compatible with the informal, entertainment-based patterns of their favourite social media, and they are usually not featured in their feeds.



A young man skates in Plaça dels Àngels in Barcelona, Catalonia, May 30, 2016. Photo: Jordi Borràs

However, this does not mean that young people are totally, or always, disconnected from what is going on in the world: they become interested in current affairs when a major crisis erupts (such as COVID-19 or the war in Ukraine) or when there are watersheds in a long-

running conflict (such as the Hamas attack in the conflict between Israel and Palestine). In these phases, they resort intensely to social media to look for and share information, while their feeds are fed with a multitude of content snippets from multiple sources.

Faced with the flood of information, young people prefer alternative, more horizontal channels: they give more credence to influencers, YouTube channels, podcasts, activist accounts, memes and friends than to the mainstream media. This approach distances them from the institutional and journalistic mediation we alluded to earlier: it is not enough that this type of content is available in young people's digital feed, as they prefer what fits with their structure of relevance. [13] For many, the institutional discourse is too technical, too distant and too difficult to understand, and they find the informality, proximity and emotivity of their favourite content more appealing, accessible and compelling. They also view the personal stories as more authentic, genuine and truthful and, therefore, more trustworthy.

Young people give more credence to influencers, YouTube channels, podcasts, activist accounts and memes than to the mainstream media

While it is true that young people are becoming increasingly disinterested in mainstream news, this does not necessarily mean that they are detached from reality: we must broaden our understanding of information to comprehend their engagement with the world around them. For many, this connection is unconventional and extra-institutional, as seen both in their news consumption and in their relationship with politics.

Young people and politics

In 2020, Cambridge University's Centre for the Future of Democracy published a report in which it analysed data from surveys conducted in 154 countries between 1973 and 2020. [14] The study concluded that the younger generations are increasingly dissatisfied with democracy. The dissatisfaction is not only growing in absolute terms but also in relative terms, compared with how the older age groups felt at the same stages of life. The intergenerational gap is particularly evident in the Anglo-Saxon countries - especially the United States and the United Kingdom - Europe and Latin America.

This dissatisfaction is fuelled by income inequalities and the deteriorating economic conditions of the new generations compared with previous generations. The difficulty in finding a stable job and an affordable home, and the rising cost of living, have condemned many young people to live on lower (and often unstable) incomes, and to have few opportunities and expectations of improving their lives. The dissatisfaction is also related to their opinion of the policies pursued by democratic institutions, that is, to the State's inability to solve their problems, political corruption and poorly functioning public services.

This perception generates “democratic apathy”, [15] manifested as scepticism towards democratic institutions, low voter turnout and little interest in mainstream politics. Despite their dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy, many remain loyal to democratic principles – and some take part in other forms of political and civic action (such as protesting against the war in Ukraine or volunteering in refugee camps). However, as a consequence of a feeling of systematic social exclusion and frustration with governments’ inability to respond to their needs and concerns, other young people eventually develop feelings of “democratic antipathy”: [16] they give support to movements that are hostile to institutions such as the media and the judiciary, and to liberal ideas such as respect for political opponents. For Foa et al., [17] this “democratic disconnect” helps explain the electoral success of many populist and anti-establishment projects in Western societies. Barbara Pfetsch [18] gives the term “deconsolidation” of democracy to this cultural reaction (change of values) that has contributed to reshaping political parties, especially through polarisation, the growth of political radicalisms and the erosion of central parties in Western democracies.

The “democratic disconnection” helps explain the electoral success of many populist and anti-establishment projects

However, other authors dismiss these interpretations based on an individual deficit in young people’s values and instead focus on the political and social barriers that foster an exclusionary political culture. [19]

Interest in politics: institutional disconnection

As we have seen, from the perspective of many young people, formal politics is unable to solve the problems related to their living conditions. They also see it as ineffective in addressing systematically unsolved collective problems, such as climate change. The younger generations’ scepticism also arises from their perception of professional politicians: they think they are cynical, self-serving and unreliable. [20]

The perception of widespread corruption, and also the lack of communication channels and structures that facilitate effective participation, alienate them from institutional forms of politics. However, this does not necessarily mean that they are not interested in other forms of action: perhaps this generation is not mobilised by the parties, but it is by specific issues and causes. In fact, young people look for other collective action strategies outside of the institutions to address more local, immediate and “post-materialist” issues. [21] They organise themselves more informally and horizontally to advocate humanitarian, climate, animal rights and social justice causes, among others. For example, extra-institutional forms, such as violent protests and civil disobedience, have been used by various groups in defence of climate action.

It is important to note that the fact that young people reject institutional strategies for

political action does not mean that they are anti-democratic. Most of them believe in democracy: they see it as synonymous with individual freedom of expression, community involvement, especially online, and transparency (accountability), mainly through social media. [22] However, their relationship with democracy is not simple; it is complex, contradictory and highly nuanced: their lack of trust in institutions coexists in different ways with adherence to democratic values and, consequently, the attitudes and practices that seem to reflect a “democratic disconnect” [23] usually reveal above all an “institutional disconnect”. [24]

The fact that these young people are committed to democratic freedoms and, at the same time, are distrustful of the institutions that guarantee them leads many of them to wish for a “departisanship” of the political system. [25] However, in the current context of democratic “deconsolidation”, this attitude entails several risks, for example, the fact that anti-establishment politicians, albeit for different reasons, defend something similar, for instance, these outsider politicians proclaim that the institutional order is hostage to political elites immersed in the logic of power and alien to the population’s real concerns.

Many anti-establishment politicians have achieved prominence through digital platforms. In their videos or posts, their speeches are aggressive, dramatic, and generate strong emotions, while claiming an unlimited right to offend others based on the freedom of speech. They are also characterised by a very particular way of combining aggressiveness and humour, and if there is one thing that the younger generations appreciate, it is these personalities’ ability to entertain. Their sense of humour, by which their speeches are likened to comedians’ monologues, aligns with what young people most appreciate on social media. On the other hand, these same young people, by consuming different content interconnectedly, have learned to value certain types of information and reject others. This practice is based on a logic of viewing fragments, whose rationality does not include complete thought or discursive consistency, which ties in well with how these politicians express themselves.

The lack of trust in institutions coexists with adherence to democratic values. Attitudes and practices that seem to reflect a “democratic disconnection” usually reveal above all an “institutional disconnection”

The fact that the new generations have grown up permanently connected to smartphones and social media has created an ecosystem with different logics to those of the pre-digital world. This has generated information consumption dynamics structured around the news disconnect and a politicisation anchored in the institutional disconnect, which has profound implications for democracies’ deconsolidation process. These young people allow themselves to be swayed by aggressive, politically incorrect spectacles, performed under the banner of individual freedom of expression, which is a value that is very dear to them. Rather than sway them towards anti-liberal projects, this renders them vulnerable to

proposals that, under the guise of freedom, are in fact extremely dangerous.

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