

# YOUNG PEOPLE AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION. A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS ON CRAIOVEN STUDENTS

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**Abstract:** *The involvement of young people in politics is a recurrent topic in local public debates. Protestant movements in the last period come to confirm and enhance the interest of researchers and public figures for this issue. Through this research, without any exhaustive claims, we intend to investigate the degree of interest and participation of the students in Craiova in the political life, the perceived quality of life among them, the trust in the political institutions, their ideological positioning. The conclusions we have reached show an increased interest and active political participation of young people, satisfaction and optimism regarding the political direction in which Romania is heading, but also a notable contradiction between the self-positioning and the real ideological positioning.*

**Key words:** *political participation, ideological positioning, quality of life*

## 1. Theoretical premise

### 1.1. Argument

There has been a great deal of talk about young people and their role in various contexts, so that, being associated with the idea of change and novelty in a society, a social distance has been created between them and the elderly, socialized after another value and behavioral pattern. Recently we participated in an academic debate where one of the topics was "the withdrawal of the right to vote for retiring people".

Thus, through our research we aim to find out the degree of interest and involvement in the political life of young people, in the context of the monopolization of their political and social life. We want to make it clear from the beginning that in the present study we have identified young people with the students, so that the research will not have holistic claims, not taking into account the attitudes of those without a high formal education.

In the recent history of Romania, after 1989, there was a balancing between the attitude of repudiation towards the students, who were

considered intellectuals and therefore, the natural enemies of the working class and the exaggerated valorisation, attributing the qualities of the rescuers of a population knelt and chained by venal leadership. Thus, epithets such as "country hope", "beautiful and free", "bright future", etc. were joined by them. Also, the social movements that marked the beginning of 2017, had this peculiarity, the mobilization and the massive participation in youth protests across the country. Above all fetisation or defamation is the extent to which these social groups actively involve, know and understand the phenomena of socio-political life.

Young people who engage in political life, though very active, remain minorities. Many previous studies have shown that young people are less interested in political life because of scandals, corruption and nepotism, which they all claim. Also, from the same studies, there is a sense of mistrust and repulsion towards the entire political class, with no nuances of ideological coloring. We also want to test this, namely, the involvement of young people in political life, but we also want to find out if there is a correlation between the state of gratitude and involvement in the political life and the participation in the January-February protest movements 2017 and the right-wing political position.

## **1.2. Defining and operationalizing concepts**

### **1.2.1. Participatory citizen**

In the national and international political leaders' discourses, we hear about the so-called "participatory democracy" frenetic. Citizen involvement in decision-making is a sine qua non condition of a mature democracy. The participative citizen is, in this context, an indicator of the degree of evolution of democracy in a particular state. We will illustrate, in the following, the defining features of the participative citizen:

- "Believes he can influence public decision; Believes equally that others can and should participate;
- Considers that public authority has an impact on one's own life;
- Believes that cooperating with fellow citizens to influence a public decision is possible and effective (cooperation);
- Has the inclination to be active: pursues politics, debates politics; If it has a political communications network it will be inclined to mobilize it to try to influence the government;
- Has a high level of trust in people in general; Its social values are not separated from political values, but on the contrary, it can be said that political action is influenced by social values, (such as trust in people and cooperation with fellow citizens);

- He is part of a kind of organization, which increases its level of political competence;
- He has experience of participating in family, school or work decision making;
- He is more inclined to express its attachment to values associated with the democratic system; Is more inclined to believe that the common man has an obligation to participate in community affairs;
- He is more inclined to have a more positive attitude towards the performance of the political system;
- He maintains a balance between commitment to and independence from politics, avoiding alienation or excessive partisanship. (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004: 22-23)

### **1.2.2. Political participation among young people in Romania**

The presented operational definition expresses, in a synthetic manner, some of the attributes of the participatory citizen, which we will use to evaluate the degree of participation in the political life of the young people we are going to question. Regarding the stage of knowledge accumulated so far on the subject, the literature includes numerous sociological investigations, focusing on objectives such as evaluating the trust of young people in political institutions, participation in voting, their involvement in nongovernmental organizations, etc. As far as the political information of young people is concerned, research carried out in 2010 reaches several recurring conclusions in most investigations:

- “The Internet and television occupy a significant place in the lives of adolescents interviewed by us”; (Soros Foundation Romania, 2010: 62-63)
- “Romanian adolescents predominantly prefer media channels that provide condensed information and selectivity”; (Ibid)
- “The Internet is the most accessed media channel by adolescents and, at the same time, the least used for political information”; (Ibid)
- “Politicizing the adolescent's family environment (the extent to which adults around it are interested in and aware of politics) seems to play an essential role in the interest of children's politics and their attitudes towards the importance of being informed on political issues.” (Ibid)

### **1.2.3. Operationalization of *right* and *left* concepts**

Another sub-theme of this research is the issue of ideological positioning and self-positioning among young people. The right-left cage, emerging in modernity, remains an essential paradigm distinction for the understanding of

political guidelines, both at the level of political theory and in the concrete elaboration of public policies. Based on the traits that differentiate the two fundamental dimensions of the political spectrum, we will operationalize the right and left terms within a matrix:

**Table 1.** Operationalization of *right* and *left* concepts

LEFT PERSON	RIGHT PERSON
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is for progress at all costs, for radical structural changes, even if they involve the risk of destroying traditions.</li> <li>• He prefers to experience new experiences, to change his or her innate spirit.</li> <li>• It shows a high degree of tolerance towards disadvantaged social group:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- is willing to accept marriages between same-sex persons,</li> <li>- is willing to accept Muslim immigrants coming from war zones or economically unstable ones,</li> <li>- engages in campaigns to protect children, protect people with disabilities, etc.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Considers that the state is responsible for the well-being of every citizen (it must provide jobs, social assistance, subsidies, etc.).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He prefers gradual changes that do not over-render the traditional order of things.</li> <li>• Prefers conforming to institutionalized behavioral patterns without trying to create new ones.</li> <li>• Reject same-sex marriage and refugee reception, as it could jeopardize traditional rule.</li> <li>• Considers that every person is responsible for its successes and failures, and must bear the consequences of the decisions made.</li> <li>• Believes that everyone is responsible for their well-being (finding a job and ensuring daily living.) The state is not responsible for the economic situation of everyone.</li> </ul>

#### 1.2.4. The specificity of the protesters movements

Social movements, as a theme of reflection and sociological analysis, have been concerned with researchers since the end of the 19th century. Gabriel Tarde and Gusatve le Bon are the founders of the psychology of the multitudes as a self-conscious study, the latter emphasizing irrationality as a defining

feature of the crowd. Protestant movements are a particular type of social movements that publicly declare their refusal or hostility to certain values, behaviors, states of things, ideologies, to what is accepted or institutionalized in a society, being constituted around personalities (In the fields of literary, political, philosophical, religious), but do not seek to change the essence of the existing social-political order; (Otovescu, 2009: 435).

The second half of the previous century meant strengthening democracy and promoting civic and political activism as a central element of any consolidated democracy. At that time, there are ample social movements for the emancipation of blacks, the widening of women's social and legal rights, the acceptance of sexual minorities, etc. The rise of social movements has accentuated the dynamics of thought-driven ideological trends since the beginning of modernity: progressive currents and conservative trends.

While Progressivists emphasize the role of protest as a regulator of the political factor, Conservatives emphasize the importance of respecting democratic legitimacy mechanisms (participatory democracy versus representative democracy). According to them, citizen participation in the life of the fortress is carried out by voting, and protest movements can not influence the actions of the decision-makers, legitimated by the vote of the majority of citizens. This debate is extremely important in the Romanian society, and the theme divides the society into two camps: those who consider these movements to be necessary and those who consider them unnecessary or even dangerous for the health of Romanian democracy.

## **2. Methodological landmarks**

### **2.1. Purpose and objectives of the research**

**Purpose of the research:** sociological analysis of the degree of participation of the students in the political life in the context of the protestant movements in January-February 2017.

#### **Operational objectives:**

- Measuring students' degree of interest for politics,
- Identifying the main source of information used by students to keep up-to-date with political,
- Measuring students' degree of satisfaction with the current political situation,
- Identifying the most serious problem of Romanian politics, in the opinion of the students.
- Measuring the trust of students in different institutions of the political system.
- Determining students' attitudes towards the protesters' movements in the

last period,

- Ideological positioning and self-positioning of students (right-left).

## **2.2. Assumptions and research questions**

**Hypothesis 1** - The majority of students who consider the protest movements lately to be necessary, are self-positioning to the right of the political spectrum. Protestant movements generally focused on a move taken by a left-wing party. But are most supporters of right-wing movements, or are we talking about an ideological heterogeneity? To determine ideological positioning, we used both an item that describes how respondents define themselves (self-positioning), and an array in which we have operationalized the two concepts.

**Hypothesis 2** - The more students are dissatisfied with the current political situation, the less their participation in political life. Another research question concerns the possible causal link between student dissatisfaction and participation in political life. We aim to see to what extent students' pessimism, measured by a few indicators in the area of quality of life adapted to the topic of this research, corresponds to low political participation.

## **2.3. Methods and techniques used**

To achieve the purpose and objectives and to verify the hypotheses, we used the sociological survey based on the questionnaire. The questionnaire contains 21 closed and open questions.

**Target population:** students of the University of Craiova.

**Sampling:** An exploratory lot was selected in a semi-linear manner. The batch picked up 40 subjects. Four students from each of the 11 faculties of the University of Craiova were interviewed. Only two people in Theology were willing to answer, and two questionnaires were canceled because of very contradictory responses. Because the lot contains less than 100 subjects, the results will be presented not in percentage but in the form of frequencies. For efficient space management, we'll only show the most relevant graphical representations.

## **3. Interpretation of results**

### **3.1. Interest and participation in political life**

To the first question (*It is said that in the democracy the citizens have to be involved in political decision-making. To what extent do you agree with this statement?*), 27 of the respondents stated that I agree with the great and very

much assertion, one person is indecisive, and two people agree little and very little. The second question is to confirm the increased importance that students attach to this area of social life (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Frequencies of answers to the question *On a scale of 1 to 10, how important are the politics for you?*

Numeric indicator	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Frequency	3	3	1	1	1	3	5	5	6	12

We then measured this interest through two matrix questions based on a more specific indicator. Thus, most students discuss politics with their friends and family, vote in electoral elections and inform about candidates' political programs, as shown in Table 3

**Table 3.** Response frequency to political involvement.

You personally	YES	NO	DNK/DNA
Do you talk frequently with your friends about politics.	23	17	0
Do you often comment on the novelties of politics with family.	22	18	0
Do you usually vote in the election.	32	8	0
Are you informed about the political programs of the candidates / political parties before the elections.	28	12	0

Students agree with the principles of participatory democracy, considering cooperation with fellow citizens a possible and effective method to influence political decisions. Also, they validate citizens' initiatives, petitions and non-governmental organizations as forms of political participation. (Table 4)

**Table 4.** Response frequency to the principles of participatory democracy.

<i>To what extent do you agree with the following statements?</i>	<i>Total agreement</i>	<i>Partial agreement</i>	<i>Undecided</i>	<i>Partially disagree</i>	<i>Total disagreement</i>
Working with fellow citizens to influence a political decision is possible and effective.	<b>27</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>
The citizen must ensure that the principles of democracy are respected and intervene when they are violated.	<b>33</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>
It is productive to be part of a non-governmental organization.	<b>23</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>

Petitions and initiatives can influence political decisions.	22	10	4	1	3
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The main source of information on political life is, as expected, the internet (19 responses), followed by television (9 responses), written press and discussions with friends, with two answers each. Interestingly, it seems to us that no one has selected the radio as an information source, which shows its very low popularity among students. Also, the most serious problem of the Romanian policy, as seen by students, is the corruption (27 responses), followed by the abuses of justice (4 answers), the low political culture of the citizens (3 answers), the lack of transparency (3 responses), the low participation of citizens (2 responses) and the incompetence of politicians (1 answer).

Regarding the attitude towards protest movements in the last period, 19 people participated in the protests, with the mention that a larger number (24) consider these protests necessary even though they did not personally get involved. A larger number of students (31) attended the last parliamentary elections.

An interesting aspect is the attitude of the respondents regarding the political direction towards which Romania is heading. Thus, 25 people evaluate this direction as good and very good, 7 can not appreciate, while only 8 people think that Romania is heading in a bad and very bad direction. Optimism and satisfaction remain constant in the following question: How do you evaluate your life now, compared to five years ago? While 29 respondents think their lives are better and 8 people can not appreciate, only 3 respondents think their lives are worse than in the past. As regards the desire for emigration, as an indicator of the perceived quality of life. 28 of the respondents would not be willing to emigrate for the next 5 years, while 11 consider this idea, one being undecided.

### 3.2. Trust in political institutions

As shown in Table 5, students' trust in political institutions can be represented as a bipolar axis: the positive pole is the Presidency and Justice, and the negative one is the Government and the Parliament. By correlating this reality with the previous results, we can conclude that students' optimism about political life derives from the anti-corruption fight and the pro-Western direction of Romania.

**Table 5.** Students' trust in the institutions of the political system.

On a scale of 1 to 10, how much trust do you have in the following institutions?										
<b>PRESIDENCY</b>										
<b>Numeric indicator</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>Frequency</b>	5	1	1	3	2	2	3	1	5	17
<b>GOVERNMENT</b>										
<b>Numeric indicator</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>Frequency</b>	15	3	6	5	2	3	2	1	1	2
<b>PARLIAMENT</b>										
<b>Numeric indicator</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>Frequency</b>	12	11	2	4	4	1	1	1	2	2
<b>JUSTICE</b>										
<b>Numeric indicator</b>	1	2	3	3	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>Frequency</b>	4	1	1	1	0	2	4	4	8	15

### 3.3. Ideological positioning and self-positioning

To measure self-positioning, we used a closed question, which showed that most (22) considered themselves close to the political right, 15 respondents considered close to the political left, and 3 people could not. For the right and left concepts we have selected four indicators that we consider to have a sufficiently large representation of these concepts, which we have integrated into an array of dichotomic items (Table 6). The items were interleaved in the questionnaire matrix so that the left column included both the right-hand and inverse indicators to avoid the position effect. The matrix was later rebuilt to facilitate an overview of the results.

As it results from the presented matrix (Table 6), the indicators of the left politica prevail over the right ones, which contradicts the way in which the students are self-positioning from the point of view of ideological orientation. We consider that there are two possible explanations: either there is an ignorance of these concepts, and the answers to the question of ideological self-position are vitiated by the prestige effect or the ideological incoherence on the Romanian political scene, where the left-wing political parties take measures right and vice versa, is also reflected in the minds of the citizens.

**Table 6.** Ideological positioning of the students in Craiova.

LEFT		RIGHT		DNK/DNA
The state must ensure the welfare of each individual citizen.	24	Every citizen is responsible for his own well-being.	14	2
We must be tolerant towards disadvantaged social groups, even if we have to leave more for that.	22	We must be tolerant towards disadvantaged social groups, as long as this does not affect our way of life.	16	2
The progress of society must take precedence over the preservation of traditions.	28	Conservation of traditions must take precedence over progress.	11	1
The state must intervene to protect domestic producers.	23	It is not the role of the state to favor domestic producers because we are part of a free common market.	15	2

#### 4. Hypothesis check

To verify the formulated hypothesis we used correlative. The first hypothesis is confirmed: most protestors are defined as right, with the indication that self-positioning also contradicts the actual positioning, as shown in the first two correlative tables (Tables 7 and 8).

Also, the second hypothesis is confirmed. Young pessimists are also characterized by a lower degree of political participation, measured by participation in elections and protest movements (Table 8).

**Table 7.** The correlation between ideological self-positioning and participation in protest movements.

<i>From the point of view of political orientation, you consider yourself to be</i>	<i>Have you been involved in protest movements in recent months?</i>	
	YES	NO
Close to the political right	15	9
Close to the political left	2	12
Can not tell	2	0

**Table 8.** The correlation between the state's role in welfare and participation in protest movements.

Which of the following statements do you agree to?	Have you been involved in protest movements in recent months?	
	Yes	No
The state must ensure the welfare of each individual citizen.	16	8
Every citizen is responsible for his own well-being.	2	12
Can not tell	1	1

**Table 9.** The correlation between the political direction towards which Romania is heading and the participation in the last parliamentary elections, respectively the protest movements.

Do you think that the political direction Romania is heading for is:	Have you attended the last parliamentary elections?		Have you been involved in protest movements in recent months?	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Very good	17	1	12	6
Good	7	0	5	2
Can not tell	5	2	2	5
Bad	2	3	0	5
Very bad	0	3	0	3

## Conclusions

Contrary to common sense judgement, the participation and interest of young people in politics is high. Most young people are optimistic, get political information on the Internet, have high trust in the Presidency and Justice, and low trust in Parliament and the Government, and see corruption as the most serious problem of Romanian politics.

Young people are also the depositories of democratic values, and it can be said that with the maturity of this generation, the transition from communism to democracy tends to end. They accept citizens' means of influencing political decision-making, participate in elections, participate in, or at least approve, protest movements.

Young people's optimism and satisfaction is reaching surprising odds, most of them thinking that their lives are better than five years ago, not wanting to emigrate.

These facts contradict Inglehart's theoretical model, according to which the values of survival are dominant among the Romanians, which corresponds to a

low degree of political participation. The new generation does not seem to be guided by these values.

There is a contradiction between ideological positioning and self-positioning, which reflects the ideological incoherence of the parties on the Romanian political scene.

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