Chapter 9
Youth on the Move?
On the Transformation of Political
Engagement in the Second Modernity

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Abstract For the last 30 years, it has been assumed that young people are becoming increasingly "apolitical". This article first traces the basis of this assumption and discusses political engagement against the background of reflexive modernization. The thesis of this article is that the above assumption is more a methodological artefact than a reliable finding. This is because processes of social transformation alter political participation and make it methodologically difficult to assess. This work traces this transformation of political action on the basis of relevant and prominent studies on the political or (civil) social engagement of young people in Germany. In doing so, it addresses the complexity inherent in comparing individual study results and identifies trends in youth political action to show that civic engagement is becoming more dynamic, more fragile and less culturally stable and is challenging organizational forms of political engagement to create low-barrier means of engagement.

Keywords Political engagement · Political action · Youth studies · Research review

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9.1   Introduction: Apolitical Youth or Committed Young People?

Until a few years ago, the attestation of an (increasingly) apolitical youth was considered largely accurate – at least in terms of interest in parliamentary politics (Gürlevik et al., 2016, p. 8ff.; Helsper et al., 2006, p. 12). Three findings from surveys on political engagement and interest may attest to this.

First, there has been persistently lower voter turnout among young adults: in the 2017 German federal election, as well as the 2014 European election in Germany, the 21–24 age group had the lowest voter turnout, just ahead of the 25–29 age group. This was followed by the under-21 age group and then the 30–34 age group (Der Bundeswahlleiter, 2014, 2022). Against the backdrop of a general decline in voter turnout, evidence of low turnout among young adults is widely found for elections in developed democracies (Bhatti & Hansen, 2012; Franklin, 2004; generally described as a "political life cycle model": cf. Cabarello, 2014, p. 456).[1]

Second, there is a low level of involvement in political parties, associations and NGOs: young adults (up to age 30) are significantly under-represented in German political parties, especially the two major parties, the CDU/CSU and SPD (Niedermayer, 2020).[2] Likewise, the youth organizations of major parties have seen a considerable decline in membership numbers (Wiesendahl, 2002, p. 8). Young adults also have a slightly lower level of activity than other age groups in regard to other forms of participation, such as trade union and association memberships (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2018, p. 353).

Third, there is a low level of interest in political issues among young adults: along with their lower voter turnout and declining engagement, young adults in Germany express levels of political interest that are consistently below the average level, although the gap fluctuates (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2018, p. 351).[3]

Taken together, these findings paint a picture of increasingly apolitical, disinterested and uncommitted young adults who are labelled as a social problem and a challenge to democratic states. It is still true that:

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[1] In addition to age, the level of education (a higher level of education correlates with higher level of participation) and social integration into clubs, organizations and families (a higher level of integration correlates with a higher level of participation) are considered decisive factors (Franklin, 2004, p. 16). Gender (women show higher turnout) also seems to have an influence here (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung et al., p. 346). That is, single, educationally disadvantaged young men typically exhibit the lowest voter turnout.

[2] In addition to age, women and less-educated, lower-income occupational groups are also under-represented in all parties. However, the proportion of women is slowly increasing in all parties (see Niedermayer, 2020; Klein et al., 2019).

[3] Here, too, there are drastic educational effects (e.g. political interest among people with a high school diploma is 50–60% with an average of approximately 30%; Statistisches Bundesamt, 2018, p. 351). An older survey of students from North Rhine-Westphalia and Saxony supports this perspective: more than one in two students in Saxony stated that they had little or no interest in politics. In North Rhine-Westphalia, the figure was 43%. In contrast, only 11% and 14% were very or fairly interested in politics, respectively (Krappidel & Böhm-Kasper, 2006, p. 35).

> The decline in political interest among the younger generation poses the risk that the dwindling of charitable and altruistic involvement in associations, parties, clubs and others will visibly erode the foundation of democracy. (Hurrelmann et al., 2004, S. 43; author's translation)

If we focus on electoral participation and club/party membership as "traditional" markers of political participation, we can certainly find indications of political apathy.[4]

Two findings are worth noting here, however, that paint a more complex picture of youth engagement. First, the effects that have been described can be observed across all age groups (and across all Western democracies). In general, there is a trend towards declining voter turnout in Germany (at least until the 2013 federal election), from a high of 91.1% in 1972 to a low of 70.8% in 2009, with a slight increase to 76% in 2017 and 2021. This is equally true for party membership (which has fallen from approximately 3.5% of the German population in 1990 to less than 2%) (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2018, p. 357; cf. Ehrhart & Sandschneider, 1994, p. 445). That is, when considering society as a whole, the apparent trend of political apathy may be an effect of societal transformations and may not be a youth-specific phenomenon (on the conception of youth, see 9.3.2). Studies that focus only on adolescents and young adults can be misleading in this regard (due to a lack of comparability with other age groups). In contrast to other population groups, "the youth" are subject to special social attention by youth associations, research institutes, etc., so naturally, certain social trends are more likely to be classified as youth-specific problems. This becomes clear, for example, when we look at changes in media use. Adults also use digital media and smartphones, and they frequently consult less serious journalistic sources and rely more on social media for information than their young counterparts do (e.g. see Andree & Thomson, 2020); however, this phenomenon seems to be less frequently investigated and problematized than such activity among young people. At the very least, youth policy research findings must be contextualized against the backdrop of wider social transformation processes (see Chap. 2).

Second, there is a gap between young people's interest in and perceived relevance of political participation and their actual participation behaviour. Most studies show a high willingness to engage in political participation – from signing petitions to joining strikes (e.g. see Krappidel & Böhm-Kasper, 2006, p. 35ff.; Böhm-Kasper, 2006; Gaiser & Rijke, 2007). The Shell Youth Studies have also revealed a high level of political interest among young people (despite the low point in 2002).[5] However, a high level of political interest correlates strongly with high

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[4] For example, the 2002 Shell Youth Study (Hurrelmann et al., 2004), referring to possible methodological narrowness, states, "It is possible that the young generation is very much socially engaged and politically interested, but in doing so, it is leaving behind previously common paths" (Hurrelmann et al., 2004, p. 43; author's translation).

[5] Here, 47 and 45% described themselves as either strongly interested or interested in 2015 and 2019, respectively, while the number of those who saw themselves as not interested at all seemed to decrease over the long term, shrinking from 29% in 2002 to 18% and 20% in 2015 and 2019, respectively. However, the proportion of interested young people is approximately 10% points lower than it was in the 1984 and 1991 surveys (Albert et al., 2019, p. 49f).

political involvement (Albert et al., 2019). Approximately one in three German youths say that being politically active is important, and only approximately 39% do not consider it important. There are hardly any differences between male and female youth in these assessments. In contrast to the high level of interest and the importance attributed to it, a lack of knowledge about specific forms of participation and sources of information about how and in what arenas they can influence political decisions appears to be an obstacle to translating this interest into concrete participation (Deutsches Kinderhilfswerk e.V., 2013). In some ways, this reveals a differentiated perspective on the nature of young people's political interest. While trust in democracy and interest in political participation are high, there is less faith in the effectiveness of individual parties and the government (see Ehrhart & Sandschneider, 1994, p. 447; Gürlevik et al., 2016, p. 7). Therefore, it is not so much a "disenchantment with politics as a disenchantment with politicians and parties" (Gürlevik et al., 2016, p. 12; author's translation). Here, a gap between the generally high approval of democratic legitimacy (young people appreciate the democratic system) and the assessment of low democratic efficiency in implementing democratic processes is apparent (Pickel, 2002, p. 88). This is expressed by choosing not to vote, protest voting and exhibiting low (party) organizational commitment (in the case of young people eligible to vote). If, however, a large proportion of young people are politically interested and ascribe great importance to their own political involvement but trust in politicians and parties as well as participation in elections remain low, the question arises as to how young people (want to) become involved.

9.2 Theoretical Background: Youth and Political Engagement in the Mirror of Reflexive Modernization

9.2.1 Social Transformation Processes and the Individualization Thesis

The tendencies of declining formal organizational political participation described in Chap. 1 follow the conceptualization of general social modernization processes. Modernization means the following:

(a) "De-traditionalization" (Giddens, 1996) or "disembedding" (Giddens, 1995) from traditional affiliations that have been taken for granted and the associated behavioural securities (here, traditional and conventional forms of political participation).

(b) The resulting pluralization of orientation patterns (such as multioptionality, Gross, 1994), norms, social affiliations and meanings (here, the pluralization of the opportunities for and goals of participation).

(c) The promotion of individualization processes (Beck, [1986] 2016), wherein people continually create their own respective "tinkering existence" (Hitzler &

Honer, 1994) out of these diverse, juxtaposed, nonhierarchically ordered potential meanings and participation according to their resources.

(d) In the absence of a superordinate instance of orientation, personal decisions are aligned with individuals' own experiential expectations and ideas of what constitutes an experience-rich, beautiful life (cf. Schulze, [1992] 2005). The frames for orientation follow the dynamics of "liquid" relationships and group bonds.

In tracing these social tendencies, one finds that political engagement is becoming more dynamic and fragile, culturally less stable and in some ways increasingly tied to "liquid" (Bauman, 2009) or "post-traditional communities" (Hitzler, 1998). Post-traditional communities bring together like-minded people of all social backgrounds (and even age groups). They are partly stabilizing but often rather short lived. Thus, they are more suited to the requirements and problems of modern life than traditional social ties or rigid forms of organization.

In this sense, individualization should always be understood in terms of a double logic: it provides options for action (e.g. in career choice, religious participation and membership in or affiliation with parties, associations, scenes, etc.), but a choice must nevertheless be made. On the other hand, choosing a course of action requires (at least temporarily) that other options are not pursued, and as a result, there is a risk that these other options would have led to greater satisfaction, happiness or the like (experience orientation always includes a risk of disappointment; cf. Schulze, [1992] 2005, p. 14). The supposed (action) security offered by traditional ties becomes fragile as a result of the growing number of options and the individual's self-responsibility for his or her final action orientation. As a result, over time, the life phase of adolescence and the accomplishment of the developmental tasks it entails have become more individualized, more closely tied to one's own resources and those of one's family and neighbours and fundamentally more fragile and dynamic.

Overall, modernization has led to not only a "dissolution of political boundaries" (Kahlert, 2005) but also a "dissolution of youth boundaries" with regard to coping with typical developmental tasks (cf. Hurrelmann & Quenzel, 2013; see also Spannring & Gaiser, 2008). Due to the complexity of these tasks – the assumption of the adult roles of citizen, consumer, partner and worker – the traditional certainties and routines in these transitions are collapsing, resulting in the expansion of orientations among youth; thus, it is apparent, as Smets (2015) argues based on the low voter turnout of young people, that young people today are taking on the role of conventionally politically engaged citizens much later than their predecessors did.

9.2.2   Youth Political Participation

Particularly with regard to political issues, young people are influenced in a polarized way. Klaus-Jürgen Scherer describes this in the context of socialization in the following way: "On the one hand, youth is the object of socialization influences; it

is about the question of how the young generation fits into society. On the other hand, youth is an active factor of social change; it is a question of the young generation entering society trying to reshape it according to its own ideas" (author's translation, Scherer, 1988, p. 17). Young people's political engagement is described either as desirable and innovative or as a threat to the social order (Eisewicht, 2019). On a positive note, researchers studying young people see them as seismographs that indicate social problems as well as future social trends (Quenzel & Mathias, 2008; Kurtenbach, 2013).

The stability and order of democratic systems rely on having educated, responsible and committed citizens. The lowest form of political engagement is exercising one's right to vote and thus legitimize political elites. Further (direct) political engagement comes in the form of public discussions, demonstrations, etc., which are considered necessary to ensure that the interests of citizens are sufficiently taken into account. Indeed, "beyond its immediate role within a democratic system, political participation is seen as a value in itself increasing citizens' self-confidence, social and political skills as well as their social and political integration" (Spannring & Gaiser, 2008, p. 12). It is therefore hardly surprising that research from an international perspective has verified that the lack of interest in political issues and low level of engagement are seen as a threat to democracies (Furlong & Cartmel, 2006, p. 121).

Organizations such as parties, churches, associations and clubs play a major role in the (political) socialization of children and adolescents, as these life stages are when values and value orientations are passed on and existing structures are reinforced. Nevertheless, Reingard Spannring (2008) points out that based on European data, young people prefer individualized forms of participation to formalized opportunities for participation. This observation is mainly supported by the fact that organizations (a) fail to dedicate sufficient attention to youth-specific issues and perspectives and (b) offer them only superficial involvement. Existing power structures and organizational structures are seen as obstacles to youth engagement (Spannring, 2008; cf. for parties also Hackett, 1997). Our (main) interest is in analysing the conjectured changes in forms of political engagement by means of a review of German language studies.

9.3   Research Interest and Methodological Considerations

9.3.1   Research Question and Design

The aim of this research was to clarify and classify three aspects of political engagement among young people with regard to the existing literature on the German context:

(a) What methods are used to examine political (or by extension civil/social) engagement, and what are the consequences of this methodological choice?

(b) How interested are young people in politics, and what is their relationship to political institutions?

(c) What conclusions can be drawn about the changing forms of young people's political involvement?

To systematically answer these questions, we conducted a literature review of quantitative studies and publications that focus on the political engagement of adolescents and young people. The first step was to collect works on youth political engagement in Germany. To this end, we did the following: (a) we searched databases (Google Scholar, Google Books, Google Talk-to-Books, university library catalogues, ResearchGate, etc.) for publications (overviews from textbooks, monographs, anthologies, journal articles, study reports) using various terms and combinations of terms (political/civic/social engagement/participation/action of youth/ young adults, etc.). (b) Then, we aggregated the references in the articles to identify commonalities and build a citation network. (c) Next, we reviewed papers for their relevance to the field, eliminating papers that merely extended or adapted a previous survey (i.e. that were not "new" studies in the context of the sample). (d) Last, the final sample was selected from the remaining papers according to three criteria: (I) their level of acceptance in the field (determined via citations), (II) their detail (via extensive operationalization and item batteries) and (III) their organizational anchoring (determined via their association with renowned youth research and/or survey institutes, as well as federal ministries). The final sample therefore does not include all the studies reviewed (or originally found) but represents a theoretical sample of independent, relevant studies. In the course of our work, this sample provided a foil against which we developed our argumentation.

The aim was to provide a comprehensive overview of the political engagement of young people and the surveys that have been conducted to examine this. Generally, the approach can be seen as a form of research synthesis or (integrative) research review that focuses on empirical work (Cooper, 1998, p. 3). For this procedure, it was fundamental that the final sample of studies examined political or (civil) social engagement and/or action. After we explicitly searched for studies that dealt with young people and their engagement or political action in general (such as the Shell Youth Studies or the Youth Study Baden-Württemberg, 2020), we added studies such as the German Volunteer Survey. Therefore, we did include studies that included young people as a group in their analyses and presentations even if they were not explicitly focused on this age group. The resulting pool of studies and publications included 18 different surveys (in terms of basis of their respective data). Some of the studies had follow-up surveys or were conducted on a regular basis, and the data from these studies were taken into account in the analyses but were treated as a single survey.

In the analysis, we identified which age ranges were applied and, above all, how political or (civil) social engagement was operationalized in each survey. In particular, we focused on forms of organizational engagement (in parties, churches, citizens' initiatives, NGOs, etc.) and nonorganizational engagement (signature campaigns, demonstrations, movements, buy- and boycotts, etc.).

9.3.2   Methodological-Conceptual Problems

With regard to the political participation of young people, two methodological and conceptual problems arise, especially in building an overview of various studies: first, how to operationalize and define youth, and second, how political participation is understood and surveyed. The way these issues are handled in studies varies widely, pointing to the need for further methodological-theoretical considerations regarding the life phase of adolescence and the understanding of modern democracies, which are greatly affected by the specific approach taken. In this article, with a focus on Germany, we attempt to outline overarching tendencies that are more apparent in a comparative, critical synopsis of various studies than in an examination of isolated figures. In doing so, we are also concerned with the theoretical classification of these trends against the background of contemporary modernization processes and their consequences for the life phase of adolescence and the transition to adulthood (Chap. 2).

On the Concept of Youth   Quantitative studies in particular – which offer advantages in terms of objectivity and especially in panel and longitudinal studies, comparability – necessarily quantify youth in terms of social structure. Accordingly, a wide variety of age ranges and cohorts are constructed. For example, the first report on children and young people commissioned by the German government (1961) defined people aged 15–25 as young people, while the 16th report on children and young people (2020) included people aged 12–27. The first Shell studies (known as Emnid studies), which began in the 1950s, included 15- to 24-year-olds (Zinnecker, 2001, pp. 244, 259); today, the Shell Youth Study includes young people between 12 and 25. In contrast, the Sinus Youth Study (launched in 2008) covers only young people between 14 and 17 (in line with the legal definition and distinction in SGB VIII §7 between children under 14 and "young adults", who are between 18 and 26). Therefore, some studies include adolescents in the narrower sense of the term (14–17), others include children 10 years of age and older (Maschke et al., 2013), and still others include young adults up to 29 years of age (DJI Youth Survey; cf. Table 9.1). Only in the case of 17-year-olds is there consensus that they should be regarded as adolescents.

This is a general problem for comparability – but a particular problem for examining attestations of political interest and political participation. Political interest generally increases in adolescence, as do opportunities for participation. If younger respondents are surveyed, for example, certain forms of participation, such as voting in elections and attending demonstrations, fall steeply in comparison with the findings for a survey of older "young people" (cf. on elections Political Youth Study by YouGov Deutschland GmbH, 2017, and Gille, 2020, based on the DJI Survey AID:A 2014;[6] on demonstrations Hoffmann-Lange & Gille, 2013). It is therefore difficult to make statements on reliability and ensure comparability across studies;

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[6] The age range considered here is 16- to 32-year-olds.

Table 9.1 Overview of German language youth studies and their age delimitations

	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	…34
Emnid/Shell 1950-70er					█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█						
1. Jugendbericht 1961					█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█					
KuJB 2020		█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█			
Shell 2002		█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█					
DJI Survey 1995/1997/2003		█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	
Jugend.Leben 2012/NRW Kids 2001	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█												
Sinus 2008–2020					█	█	█	█													
FES/DJI/infas Jugendstudie 2015					█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█
Kinderhilfswerk 2012	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█													
Freiwilligensurvey 2017 Sonderauswertung					█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█			
Junges Europa (ab 2017)						█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█					
Jugendbeteiligung BaWü 2019					█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█									
Jugend BaWü 2020			█	█	█	█	█	█	█												
Wir 2020					█	█	█	█	█												
Jugend will bewegen 2020					█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█						
BRAVO/YouGov 2017					█	█	█	█													
On3-Jugendstudie "Dein 2020"					█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█					
Jugendstudie Bayern 2019						█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█	█

this is aggravated by the fact that many studies are individual studies that focus on young people, further impeding comparisons with other age groups.

On the Concept of Political Engagement The operationalization of political participation is relatively complicated. As mentioned in the introduction, political participation can be narrowly defined in terms of voter turnout and party membership. However, broader definitions include forms of participation such as involvement in NGOs and/or clubs, although this often leads to more questions: for example, do only NGOs, unions or certain clubs count, and is membership and involvement in, say, a sports club political involvement or not?[7] Did the study include or focus on

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[7] For example, in the 2019 Shell Youth Survey, the only option listed "club" is given, so this option includes sports clubs; participating in signature collection or signing an online petition, on the other hand, is not inquired about. In the German Volunteer Survey, on the other hand, the option

political engagement or participation (e.g. the DJI Survey AID:A 2014 according to Gille, 2020; the Jugendstudie Baden-Württemberg, 2020, the Political Youth Study by Bravo & YouGov, YouGov Deutschland GmbH, 2017), social engagement (e.g. the On3 Youth Study "Dein 2020") or both (e.g. in the Shell Youth Studies)? When comparing studies, it is always important to consider how they surveyed specific forms of engagement, such as participation in a citizens' initiative. For example, the DJI Survey AID:A 2014 asked about participation in a citizens' initiative within the last 12 months, and the Political Youth Survey by Bravo & YouGov 2017 asked whether respondents agree with the statement "I participate or have participated in a citizens' initiative". The 2014 German Volunteer Survey, on the other hand, asked about the extent to which people have participated in citizens' initiatives, and the 2019 survey asked whether people have "participated in a political party, political group or citizens' initiative".

In addition to this variety in methods for assessing electoral participation and party membership, there is a clear lack of agreement about how to record other forms of formal organizational participation. This also applies to nonformal forms of participation. However, there is relative agreement that demonstrations are an appropriate indicator of political participation (e.g. in the German Volunteer Surveys, DJI Surveys and the Political Youth Study by Bravo & YouGov, 2017). Furthermore, a "fringed" picture emerges: are signature campaigns and online petitions considered political participation (as in the 2014 Volunteer Survey, Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2014)? Are online activities considered too low threshold to be recorded? Furthermore, are participation in political discussions or following parties and politicians on social media proof of political participation (YouGov Deutschland GmbH, 2017, Jugend will bewegen, 2020)? Beyond this thematic operationalization (what counts as political involvement?), there are also differences in the scales for the answers, the effects of which are discussed here. For example, is political interest or engagement surveyed in as a binary dimension (yes/no) or are there gradations (e.g. three or more response options)?[8]

"club" is not provided, and in the Bravo/YouGov 2017 Political Youth Study, membership in a club is only considered in the context of contact points on political issues.

[8] For example, the Baden-Württemberg 2020 Youth Study asks, "Do you get involved in political issues in your environment (school or place of residence)?" with the response options of "Yes", "No" and "No answer", and the 2019 Shell Youth Study asks, "Are you active in your free time for social or political goals or simply for other people? Please go through the following list and tell me if you are personally involved in the following", with the response options "Often", "Occasionally" and "Never". Similarly, the Shell Youth Study surveyed political interest and provided the following response options: "Very interested", "Interested", "Not very interested", "Not at all interested" and "Don't know/no idea", while a study on the political interest of students in North Rhine-Westphalia and Sachen provided five response options: "Very interested", "Fairly interested", "Somewhat interested", "Not very interested" and "Not at all interested" (cf. Krappidel & Böhm-Kasper, 2006). The Bravo/YouGov 2017 Political Youth Survey asks about political interest in a similar way (response options include "Very strongly", "Fairly strongly", "Moderately", "Less strongly", "Not at all") but also provides the response option "Don't know/no idea".

The combination of the two research fields of youth and politics thus gives rise to a highly complex array of survey possibilities that produce correspondingly diverse and widely scattered results and make it difficult to obtain a clear picture of the situation. In our opinion, this calls for a broader and deeper debate on the – sometimes changing – understanding of what youth (e.g. Heinen et al., 2020) and political participation (Kahlert, 2005) conceptually mean.

9.4 Results: Young People's Political Interest and Transformation of Political Engagement

In order to trace the possible changes, we focus on three topics: interest in political engagement and trust in political actors and institutions, engagement in formal organizational contexts and nonformal engagement. Finally, we contextualize these findings within the (theoretical) background of contemporary diagnostic analyses outlined herein.

9.4.1 Political Interest and Trust

While political interest was still at 57% in 1991 according to the Shell Youth Study, this reached a historic low of 34% in 2002 and has since stagnated at around 47% (Albert et al., 2015) or 45% (Albert et al., 2019).[9] In contrast, the perceived importance of political involvement is somewhat lower. In this metric, however, there has been a clear change in recent years: in the three surveys between 2002 and 2010, only 20 to 23% of young people considered their own political involvement to be important, but in the 2015 and 2019 surveys, this figure was approximately 33%. Similarly, findings regarding the perceived popularity of being involved in politics show that such involvement is still considered "out" by the majority, although this seems to have gradually softened in the two most recent surveys (Albert et al., 2019).

A higher level of political interest is associated with a higher level of commitment (cf. Gille, 2020, p. 7). Inequalities among young people are very pronounced, especially along lines of education level and gender. Boys are considered to be more interested in and committed to political issues than girls are (YouGov Deutschland GmbH, 2017; Krappidel & Böhm-Kasper, 2006; Shell Youth Studies).[10] Older youth are more interested and more likely to participate in demonstrations, for example,

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[9] The values for level of political interest sometimes differ significantly: for example, the TUI Foundation study 2019 shows only 36% of young people are very strongly or strongly interested, while the data from the DJI Survey AID:A 2014 identify 32% of 12–29-year-olds (cf. Gille, 2018) as "very strongly" or "strongly" interested, respectively.

[10] Notably, 41% of boys and only 20% of girls say they are "very strongly" or "fairly strongly" interested in politics (Bravo & YouGov, 2017). Similar results emerge when looking at political

than their younger counterparts (Hoffmann-Lange & Gille, 2013), and youth with higher levels of education are more interested and engaged than youth with lower levels of education (regarding interest, see the Shell Youth Studies; Krappidel & Böhm-Kasper, 2006; regarding engagement, see Junges Europa, 2018; Gille, 2020; for a general overview, see also Gille, 2018).

Approval of democratic state systems[11] and interest in political participation (see the Albert et al., 2019; Jugend will bewegen, 2020; Deutsches Kinderhilfswerk e.V., 2013) is then contrasted with distrust in political parties. Parties have always elicited a distinctly low level of trust. What is interesting here is the observation that the German government, like the United Nations, is trusted much more than parties. Environmental protection groups are trusted even more than the German government, followed by the German armed forces, trade unions and citizens' initiatives (Albert et al., 2019, p. 93). Similar results can also be found in the Young Europe 2018 study, which reveals, for example, that EU institutions, as well as trade unions, the parliament and the government, are trusted more than parties (Junges Europa, 2018, p. 50f). A low level of trust is also evident in the fact that approximately 70% of young people (tend to) agree with the statement "I don't think politicians care what people like me think" (cf. Albert et al., 2019). Consequently, it can be concluded that young people are definitely dissatisfied with current politics – or at least political parties.

9.4.2 Conventional Engagement: Voting Behaviour, Party Political Involvement and Association Activities

With regard to voting behaviour, three phenomena are of interest: the low voter turnout mentioned at the beginning, the preference for "smaller" parties and voter volatility. With regard to the low voter turnout among young people, it is certainly debatable which effects come into play here (e.g. cohort or life-phase effects, social transformations). What is certain, however, is that low initial voter turnout within an age cohort typically has a negative effect on turnout in subsequent elections (and does not lead to rising turnout in later life phases; cf. Franklin, 2004), since the "sense of obligation to vote […] is usually acquired in the socialization phase" (Cabarello, 2014, p. 455; author's translation).[12]

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interest in North Rhine-Westphalia and Saxony, where the difference between boys and girls is 11 percentage points (Krappidel & Böhm-Kasper, 2006).

[11] For example, according to Bravo/YouGov 2017, 71% are satisfied with democracy as a form of government, 68% see democracy as the best form of government, and only 4% consider other forms of government to be better. Strong levels of satisfaction are also evident in the 2019 Shell Youth Study, in which 77% of young people state that they are "very" or "rather satisfied" with democracy in Germany.

[12] Franklin (2004) argues that lowering the voting age to 18 has a negative effect here and that either a lower (e.g. voting rights at age 16) or a higher voting age could have a more positive effect.

Furthermore, it is also evident that the proportion of young voters who vote for and are members of "smaller" parties[13] is greater than the proportion of such voters in the overall population (Niedermayer, 2020, p. 30f.). However, compared to the population as a whole, young people (aged 16–20) also remain under-represented in the "smaller" parties – the liberal FDP, the Left Party and the Green Party Bündnis90/ Die Grünen – but their share among supporters of these parties has increased significantly in recent years over their share among SPD and CSU/CDU supporters. The representation of 21- to 25-year-olds has even risen to such an extent that in 2019, an almost balanced ratio is found, and in the case of the Left Party, they even appear to be overrepresented (ibid.).

In addition, young people show a decline in party loyalty, stronger voter volatility (for more on this, see Schoen, 2014) and an increasing in interest in "smaller" parties.[14] Switching parties between elections as well as between voting and not voting is sometimes seen as a sign of political disinterest or another problem (Ehrhart & Sandschneider, 1994, p. 445). In general, party-switching rates between federal elections have been increasing since the 1990s (cf. Schoen, 2014), and approximately one-third of voters are considered switchers (Weßels, 2011). Young people in particular (according to the Jugendstudie Bayern, 2019, p. 21ff.), more than other age groups, see themselves as swing voters, and the overall proportion of swing voters is increasing. According to the Bavarian Youth Study, 65% of respondents still saw themselves as regular voters in 2005. This proportion fell to 60% in 2010, 55% in 2016 and 52% in 2019. In contrast, self-identification as a swing voter rose from 33% in 2005 to 40% in 2016/2019.

With regard to other organized forms of participation (NGOs, trade unions, associations), the data are less clear (cf. Chap. 1 on methodological and conceptual problems). The Shell Youth Study shows that associations account for the largest share of organizational involvement (40% in 2002, 47% in 2010, 37% in 2019), followed by youth organizations, aid organizations, citizens' initiatives and political parties. Youth organizational activities, however, declined from 19% in 2002 to 9–12% in subsequent years, only recently (2019) increasing again to 13%. Other areas of activity, such as involvement in a religious community (2002 15%, 2015 13%, 2019 15%), trade union (2002 2%, since 2010 3%), rescue service or volunteer fire department (2002 7%, 2019 8%) and political parties (until 2019 at 2%, 2019 at 4%), have stagnated at a low level for almost two decades. At least in 2019,

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With a lower voting age, the sense of obligation to vote can be stabilized via socialization processes such as those that occur at school. Franklin argues that at 18, moreover, individuals face many important decisions (e.g. choice of university or career) that loom over them and have a hindering effect.

[13] In the 2021 federal election, the vote shares for 18–24-year-olds were as follows (ordered by size): Greens 23%, FDP 21%, SPD 15%, Union 10%, Left 8% and AFD 7%. In addition, a group of smaller parties together received 15% of the youth votes, whereas only 3.2% of the over-70s cast votes for smaller parties (national average, 8.7%).

[14] In the 2021 federal election, for example, the youth vote (18- to 24-year-olds) share of the CDU/ CSU fell from 25% to 10.8%, while those of the FDP and the Greens increased significantly by 7 and 10 percentage points, respectively (Der Bundeswahlleiter, 2022, p. 17).

however, involvement in NGOs or aid organizations rose from 4–5% (2002/2015) to 8%.

9.4.3   Nonconventional Engagement

With regard to nonorganizational involvement, the data situation becomes even more confusing in that this is not always surveyed. For example, the Shell Youth Studies ask about social involvement in clubs, schools, parishes, youth organizations, aid organizations, trade unions, political parties and citizens' initiatives, all of which are types of organizational involvement. Nonorganizational involvement, on the other hand, is recorded only via the items of "self-organized project/project group" (11–15% from 2002 to 2019) and "solo/personal activity" (32–39% from 2002 to 2019). Where more numerous items are found (including the DJI Survey AID:A, Volunteer Survey), different dimensions are sometimes chosen or are mixed together. For instance, the DJI Survey AID:A separates participating in signature collection or online protest activity, which raises the question of the category to which online petitions belong, as these are recorded separately from signature campaigns within the "Young Europe" initiative (in 2018 and 2019 but not in 2020 or 2021).

9.4.4   Summary

In summary, an initial list of various forms of extraorganizational participation can be identified:[15]

- *Signature campaigns/petitions*: 34% of 16- to 32-year-olds (according to the DJI Survey AID:A 2014 cf. Gille, 2020, p. 7; signature collection); 37.1% of 14- to 29-year-olds (according to the Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen, 2019, p. 240); 38% of 16- to 26-year-olds (according to Junges Europa, 2019, p. 64).
- *Buy- and boycotts*: 20.8% of 14- to 29-year-olds (according to the Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen, 2019, p. 237); 29% of 16- to 32-year-olds (according to the DJI Survey AID:A 2014 cf. Gille, 2020, p. 7); 33% of 16- to 26-year-olds (according to Junges Europa, 2019, p. 64).
- *Participation in discussions*: 15% of 16- to 32-year-olds (according to the DJI Survey AID:A 2014 cf. Gille, 2020, p. 7); 17% of 16- to 26-year-olds (according to Junges Europa, 2019, p. 64).
- *Demonstration participation*: 14% of 16- to 32-year-olds (according to the DJI Survey AID:A 2014 cf. Gille, 2020, p. 7); 18% of 16- to 26-year-olds (according

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[15]Young Europe also records active campaign support (16%) and party donations (13%); the Volunteer Survey, on the other hand, still records contact with politicians (5.4%).

to Junges Europa, 2019, p. 64); 20.2% of 14- to 29-year-olds (according to the Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen, 2019, p. 237).[16]

It is worth noting that in addition to these various forms of participation, particularly in the wake of the climate activists' Fridays for the Future demonstrations, participation in demonstrations has received special attention in social discourse and has also been highlighted in many youth studies and generational attestations. Empirically, however, they tend to be a rarer practice among young voters – petitions, boycotts and participation in discussions are more frequent forms of participation. In addition, there are digital forms of participation, which are recorded differently than other forms:[17]

- For example, the DJI Survey AID:A 2014 surveys participation in online protests (23% of 16- to 32-year-olds, according to Gille, 2020, p. 7) and participation in political discussions (9%).
- The Volunteer Survey (Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen, 2019, p. 209) asks about the use of social media (blogs, platforms, forums, wikis; 53.4% of), the creation of newsletters and online reports (19.9%), homepage support (14.3%), online fundraising (15.5%) and online consulting (7.3%) in the context of volunteering among 14- to 29-year-olds.
- Young Europe (Junges Europa, 2019, p. 65) captures digital engagement most broadly, with questions about liking political posts (44% of 16- to 26-year-olds), participating in online petitions (42%), forwarding others' posts (36%), commenting on others' political posts (18%), distributing their own posts (19%), using government-sponsored civic participation platforms (10%), contacting politicians online (9%) and making political blog posts (7%).
- The Vodafone study (Jugend will bewegen, 2020, p. 14) asks only about digital forms of participation such as sharing or liking political posts (42%), discussing political topics in private messenger groups with friends and family (39%), commenting on political posts (20%), posting memes/gifs/videos on political topics (14%), writing new posts (7%) and participating in online discussions of political organizations (6%) among 14- to 24-year-olds.

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[16] In the Bravo and YouGov Youth Study (2017, p. 10), only 7% of the 14–17-year-olds surveyed responded affirmatively to the statement "I take part in demonstrations". Thus, the proportion of young people taking part in demonstrations varies considerably between 7% and 20%. Not only is there assumed to be an age effect here (Hoffmann-Lange & Gille, 2013), since the Bravo Study has comparatively younger respondents, but an effect of the question (on the question problem, see Chap. 1) is also assumed.

[17] The 2017 Bravo and YouGov Youth Survey asks about signing online petitions (answered in the affirmative by 26% of 14–17-year-olds), participating in political discussions online (17%) and following parties and politicians on social media (15%).

This reveals a range of diverse practices and low-threshold forms of participation[18] and, above all, indicates that there is still no consensus regarding the framework for assessing digital social engagement.[19]

9.5   Discussion: Engagement Beyond Formal Organizations? Trends in Political Action Among Young People

If we look at the studies of the last 20 years that have dealt with the political engagement of young people in Germany, we find – despite the numerous differences in the specific results – that traditional participation through electoral participation and membership in associations is still at a comparatively high level but is continuing to lose relevance (albeit more slowly than many studies would have us believe). Here, the involvement of young people is an early sign of the way long-term changes in civic engagement and political participation will likely manifest. The first Volunteer Report (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2001, p. 120) spoke of a "crisis of volunteerism" – referring to "traditional" volunteerism in associations, religious institutions, political parties and trade unions that have fixed membership and require a high level of commitment. This assessment is largely confirmed by the overview of the most encompassing studies, although it is clear that continuous additional research is needed here. It is misleading to infer a disenchantment with politics, a "lack of interest in a fixed object of politics" (Hurrelmann et al., 2004, p. 219) and a self-centred pragmatism on the part of young people (see the question about the generation of "ego-tacticians" ibid., p. 31). Additionally, comparisons to other age groups are especially lacking because, as mentioned, other age groups show similar effects. Seemingly, a more fitting explanation is the "dissolution of [political] boundaries" (ibid., p. 43). This means that new, more ephemeral, dynamic, nonorganizational forms of participation are emerging, but they nevertheless rely on individual opportunity and risks and thus perpetuate inequalities.

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[18] A wide variety of communication platforms are used for this purpose, although there is considerable variation between the studies that survey them. For example, according to the Vodafone study (Jugend will bewegen, 2020, p. 18), 54% of the young people surveyed (14–24 years old) use private messengers for political statements; according to the TUI study (Junges Europa, 2019, p. 66), only 17% use the messenger WhatsApp for political engagement. Nevertheless, it is apparent that Facebook (26% TUI; 31% Vodafone), Instagram (28% TUI, 31% Vodafone) and YouTube (17% TUI, 21% Vodafone) in particular are relevant platforms, with Twitter (12% TUI, 10% Vodafone) and Snapchat (7% TUI, 7% Vodafone) being less relevant. TikTok has not yet been considered in such surveys, which is indicative of the dynamics in the field.

[19] Thus, participation in political discussions online is surveyed consistently. In turn, political discussions with family, in school and with friends should also be included, as, for example, the 2017 Bravo and YouGov Youth Study (2017, p. 8) does (it found that 76% of 14–17-year-olds talk about politics in school, 57% with family and 47% with friends, whereas only 17% say they discuss political topics online).

Christof Ehrhart and Eberhard Sandschneider (1994, p. 449) also point out that high voter turnout and party membership alone are insufficient evidence that a democracy is stable. Rather, these forms of participation seem increasingly less suitable ways to become involved and express dissent (hence the persistently low voter turnout and increase in party swapping), whereas protests, demonstrations and other forms of nonvoting participation are suitable for this purpose (Ehrhart & Sandschneider, 1994, p. 455; Hirschman, 1970, p. 118ff.). Consequently, purely formal organizational markers of political participation are not suitable for making an adequate assessment of the state of political participation.

> Corresponding spaces of participation and protest represent differentiated political action spaces in the pluralized society beyond the established political institutions endowed with decision-making power. The political participation of young people in these arenas is at odds with the stagnation of their markedly low participation in elections and their reluctance to engage in party politics. As studies on youth volunteering have shown for some time […], it is subject to other forms of participation: targeted, short-term, non-binding political participation thereby becomes a project of asserting a specific interest in the context of individual political decision-making contexts. (15th Children and Youth Report, 2017b, p. 107; author's translation cf. Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2001, p. 120)

Looking at the studies, it can be stated that for a long time, atypical political activity among young people was simply overlooked in the literature. This was simply because studies often focused on traditional forms of political involvement, such as parties and associations, including NGOs, which stagnated at a consistently low level. What was overlooked were alternative, low-threshold forms of political action in mostly digital spaces that initially attracted little interest, especially among older people. The idea of online communities as stages for political articulation hardly seemed conceivable. This has changed in recent years, as digital political engagement has come into sudden and shocking focus. This therefore explains the kind of "overreaction" in the breadth of surveyed digital participation and purely digitally focused studies. Digital spaces are well-suited for low-threshold, project-based and time-limited forms of participation. This suitability stems from easy-to-perform actions in digital spaces, such as likes, retweets, hashtags and online petitions, and may grow into participation in demonstrations and protests in nondigital public spaces. Low-threshold, digitally mediated participation is often associated with negative connotations such as clicktivism or hashtag activism. In social protest events, however, such participation serves as a catalyst through which, for example, purely online protests are quickly and widely carried into social discourse, e.g. the "#Aufschrei" debate in 2013, which sought to highlight everyday sexism and spread from Twitter to daily newspapers to prominent national talk shows before disappearing relatively quickly. In 2017, a similar effect was observable with the "#MeToo" movement. Neither of these was a youth-specific phenomenon, as both were largely carried by young adults. Without the great digital attention moderated by comparatively "small" participations through likes and reposts, these discussions might have been less effective. Simple participation, in particular, is based on the work of a smaller organizational elite, whose intensive and extensive engagement

enables the spontaneous, short-term participation of others. Such forms of participation are highly dynamic and fragile, often swing rapidly between growth and decline and lead to spatiotemporally fragmented and stretched fields of discourse via on- and offline forms.

However, the new forms of political participation can be described not only as nonformal and low threshold but also as characterized by an experiential and lifeworld orientation. In addition, with the eventization of protests (cf. Betz, 2016), the simple fun and promise of a memorable experience stemming from engagement are becoming increasingly decisive factors (cf. Jugendwerk der Deutschen Shell, 1997, p. 83).

> Experience orientation is the most immediate form of the search for happiness. The opposite action type is the action pattern of deferred satisfaction, which is characteristic of saving, long-term courtship, tough political struggle, preventive behaviour of all kinds, hard training, a busy life, renunciation and asceticism. In actions of this type, the hope for happiness is projected into a distant future; in experience-oriented action, the aspiration is directed to the current situation of action without delay. One invests money, time, activity and expects the equivalent value almost at the same moment. With the project to experience something, however, man sets himself a task at which he can easily fail, and this the more intensively he devotes himself to this project and the more he associates with it the meaning of his life in general. (Schulze, [1992] 2005, p. 14; author's translation)

As an everyday activity, this orientation also reinforces short-term participation and rapid (re)exit from various forms of participation. In turn, this makes the motive of self-realization (cf. Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2001, p. 121; Cabarello, 2014, p. 456) more significant than obligations. This then leads to a third change – that of lifeworld-related forms of participation. Thus, youth are primarily engaged in topics that they consider relevant or pressing in their own environment. In this context, independent work that is less restricted by organizational guidelines and has a direct relationship to the topic in the real world or to the people most affected or involved becomes a more favourable form of participation and experience. Together with low-threshold forms of participation and, above all, flat hierarchies, self-efficacy in one's actions is thus brought to the fore (as codetermination; Jugendwerk der Deutschen Shell, 1997, p. 325; cf. Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, 2001, p. 121), which threatens to be quickly lost in associations and party hierarchies. Thus, in the "new" engagement, individual relevance is intertwined with social issues:

> In this sense, the new social movements (environment, peace, women) are, on the one hand, an expression of the new danger situations in the risk society and of the emerging contradictions between the sexes; on the other hand, their forms of politicization and problems of stability result from processes of social identity formation in detraditionalized, individualized life worlds. (Beck, [1986] 2016, p. 120; author's translation)

With reference to the tendency of individualization described above, we can say that the demands placed on young people if they want to participate and those placed on organizations and people who want to support young people in doing so are intensifying. On the one hand, young people must have the skills to determine for themselves what they want to do, given the confusing nature of the opportunities for

participation, and they must also be motivated to seek out and pursue appropriate opportunities. They must have or develop the relevant skills and abilities to seize opportunities for participation and use them effectively, and finally, they must feel entitled to participate – even when other young people or adults seek to deny this right to participation. In short, they must want to, be able to and be allowed to participate (cf. Pfadenhauer & Eisewicht, 2015). In particular, the lower participation rates among socially disadvantaged groups, such as young people with a migration background or young people with a low level of education, and the increasing influence of education and socio-economic status on the engagement of young people can be seen as an indication of the corresponding prerequisites for participation (cf. Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen, 2019), which tend to increase and thus promote social inequalities. On the other hand, "conventional" organizations need to reflect on the extent to which they can and want to take up these changing and pluralized forms of and motives for political engagement in an organizational way and to what extent young people deem such actions are appropriate, i.e. whether their corresponding offerings are considered an adequate and appropriate match for young people's participation motives and practices.

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