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The Political and Civic Involvement of Students: a sociological research

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Abstract. On a democratic society, it is desirable to consolidate the relation between citizens and political system through a participatory political culture. Romania – as others post-communism spaces – is characterized by a low level of political communication, poor civic involvement and insufficiently cooperation between government and citizens. During this context, the position of the new generation is crucial in consolidating democracy. Previous studies showed that the young Romanian is perceived rather as an *outsider* in the relation with the system, have a low trust in institutions by comparison with other age categories, and is not optimistic regarding the capacity of public contestation. On long term, these issues can lead either to a decrease of interest on civic engagement and – in time – to the emergence of a democratic deficit or a subject political culture, or to the emergence of anti-system positions. Nowadays, young people have new tools to help developing a participatory culture, such as new media, new forms of political socialization, an increasing interest in non-governmental organizations et. al. The purpose of the paper is to approach a set of indicators specific to civic and political involvement, using data from a sociological quantitative study conducted on a sample of 430 undergraduates' students from three specializations: Sociology, Social Work and Human Resources ("Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi), in order to observe their civic and political attitudes.

Keywords. democracy, political culture, civic involvement.

1. Introduction. General considerations

Youth position towards the political system in a certain social space represents an important element in the analysis of the future of democracy in that state. The dominant type of political culture and the level of civic participation are defining elements for democratic systems. In that regard, it is desirable to have a transparent and open government-citizens relationship, based on bilateral communication, political knowledge, and access to public contestation. In Romania, the effects of communist regime maintain present in collective consciousness: there is still a high degree of social and political mistrust at macrosocial level. If these imbalances are maintained – also favored by intergenerational transfers and political socialization processes –, the transition to a genuine democracy, based on a participatory political culture can be delayed.

The purpose of this article is to present – in a sociological approach, some data regarding young people's participation and interest in civic and political life, based on a

sociological quantitative study conducted on a sample of 430 undergraduates' students from Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi).

When it comes to democracy, according to Robert Dahl, there are two theoretical dimensions of democracy: *public contestation* – the measure in which in a society are permitted opposition, public contestation or political concurrency, and *inclusiveness/ right to participate* – the measure in which it is guarantee the right to participate at public contestation (Dahl, 2003). Another important concept is *political culture*, which refer to specific political orientations: attitudes towards policies and its different parts, as well as attitudes towards the role of good in the system (Almond & Verba, 1996). Almond and Verba (1996) bring into attention three types of political cultures: parochial cultures, subject cultures, and participant cultures – the last one being more congruent with a democratic political structure. A participant culture implies that the members of the society are oriented towards the input and output aspects of the political system.

At general level, according to The Economist Intelligence Unit's measure of democracy, 48.4% of the world's population live in a democracy of some sort, although only 5.7% reside in a "full democracy". On a scale of 0 to 10, Democracy Index in 2019 was 5,44, the worst score since the index was first produced in 2006 (EIU, 2020). The overall score for Romania was 6,49, as a result of five elements taken into consideration: electoral process and pluralism (9,17), functioning of government (5,71), political participation (5,56), political culture(4,38) and civil liberties (7,65). This score place Romania between *flowed democracies*, but the study shows that our country registered an improvement, based on the rise of political participation (street protests, strong voter turnout in the European Parliament election in May 2019 and presidential election in November 2019, anti-corruption movement etc.) (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020).

Sociological studies (IRES 2012, IMAS 2011, TNS Political & Social 2013, 2018) showed that the young Romanian is perceived rather as an *outsider* in the relation with the system, have a low trust in institutions by comparison with other age categories, is not interested to a great extent about politics, and consider that the capacity of public contestation is limited.

2. Sociological Survey

The quantitative survey has been conducted within the Department of Sociology and Social Work – Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi, as a part of a practical application for the discipline Applied Sociology (Training), with the involvement of a hard-working group of undergraduates students in Sociology, Third year - to whom I am grateful. Data collection was carried out within December 2019 – January 2020. The sample size is 430 respondents from first, second and third year of study of the following specializations: Sociology, Social Work and Human Resources. The criteria used in constructing the sample are: educational program, year of study. Data collection method: selfadministered questionnaire.

Table 1

Specialization	Percentage
Social Work	53%
Human Resources	34%
Sociology	13%
Residence environment	Percentage
Urban	43%
Rural	47%
DA	10%

Year of study	Percentage
First Year	62%
Second Year	13%
Third Year	25%
Gender	Percentage
Male	15%
Female	85%

Research objectives: (1) To evaluate students' interest on political and civic life. (2) To analyze the time that students invest for getting informed on civic/ political issues. (3) To establish students' perceptions regarding some political concepts, ideologies or institutions.

3. Data analysis

Prior to discover and understand the students' position and interest on political and civic participation, it is important to establish the perceptions of youth regarding the path/ direction in which things in our country are heading.

In general, do you consider that things in our country heads to a...

Figure 1

As we can see from the figure above, 58% of respondents consider that things in our country are going in the wrong direction, while a contrary opinion is supported by 27% of the students that were involved in the study. 15% of the student haven't expressed an opinion regarding this subject. These results bring into attention that most of the students aren't optimistic about the future of our society. The perceptions about the general directions are not influenced by academic programs or year of study. A crosstabulation analysis with residence environment shows that even though there are no significant differences when it comes to the category *good direction*, people from urban areas are more undecided to give a verdict: 20% of them versus 12% from rural areas, and this difference is reflected in the percentages for category *wrong direction* (60% students from rural environment vs. 53% from urban environment).

Figure 2

As the chart above points out, students are more interested on national politics rather than local politics. The results show that 55% of the respondents are interested on a great and very great extent on national political life, while 4 of 10 students are not preoccupied by this topic. When it comes to the political life of local community, more than 50% of students are less concerned: 40% to a little extent and 13% - very little extent, while 45% said that are interested (very great and great extent). Regarding local politics, there are no significant differences based on specialization or residence environment. On the other hand, for national politics there are some variations on specialization: students from Sociology and Human Resources are more interested on general political life than students from Social Work (very great + great extent: 61% students from HR, 59% - Sociology, 51% - Social Work).

	Social Work	Sociology	Human Resources
Very great + Great extent	51%	59%	61%
Little + Very little extent	44%	30%	37%
Don't know/ Don't answer	5%	11%	2%

Table 2

On a regular day, how much time do you spend getting informed about civic and political events?

Figure 3

According to the results of the study, 47% of the respondents declared that are spending less than an hour per day to get informed about the civic and political events, while almost 4 of 10 students (38%) are not interested on these types of topics. 6,5% of students invest between one and two hours searching for information about civic/ political events, and a small percent (1,5%) dedicate more than 2 hours on this action. An analysis of responses shows a small difference of time spent on getting informed depending on student's residence environment and specialization.

In terms of residence environment, 43% of the students from rural area don't invest time daily to find information on civic or political matters, while a similar view is held by 35% of those from urban areas. A difference of 4 p.p. is specific to categories *less than an hour* and *1-2 hours*, with a higher consume for students that lives in cities. 42% of students from Social Work don't get informed daily about civic/political events, by comparison with 32% of Sociology's students and 35% from Human Resources.

Figure 4

In general, more than 3 quarters of students declared that are proud by the fact that are Romanian and European citizens. As the chart above shows, respondents of the study reported stronger feelings towards European than Romanian citizenship, even if the difference is not significant. Stronger identification with UE citizenship is reflected by the smaller percentage of people that feel fairly less and very less proud as a European citizen (14%) by comparison with the same category for Romanian citizen (22%). The fact that almost 1 of 4 students are not proud with their national citizenship can be a sign of lack of trust in public institutions.

When you hear the following terms, are you thinking about something...				
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	DK/ DA
Capitalism	14%	37%	34%	15%
Communism	3%	13%	81%	3%
Democracy	71%	21%	5%	3%
NATO	68%	21%	5%	6%
Nationalism	46%	38%	6%	10%
European Union	82%	14%	1%	3%

Table 3

Additionally to the previous item, another objective of the research was to establish the students' perceptions regarding some political concepts, ideologies or institutions. As we can see from the table above, there is a strong support for the European Union amongst younger generation: 82% of the respondents associate EU with something positive, while 14% with something neutral. Another term that has an intense positive connotation for youth is *democracy* (71%), but it comes into notice that 21% of the respondents don't have a firm position in terms of good or wrong. 68% of the students associate NATO with something positive, while 21% have a neutral opinion. Less than half of the respondents' associate *nationalism* to something positive, while 38% have a neutral position, 6% have a negative perception, and 10% couldn't appreciate. Similar percentages' for neutral and negative positions are registered for the term *capitalism*, while 14% of the students give a positive connotation. Not at least, regarding

communism, 8 of 10 students have a negative opinion, while 13% correlate with something neutral, and 3% with something positive.

Do you consider that decisions taken on high level bring into consideration citizens' needs?

Figure 5

Students are not optimistic when it comes to the decision making process. Most of the respondents believe that citizens' needs are taken into consideration in little (60%) or very little extent (17%). Thus, there is a small percent of young students who consider that policy decision process is guided by citizens' needs in a very great extent (5%), and 16% to a great extent.

To which extend do you consider that citizens can influence the important decisions' that are been taken on national level?

Figure 6

On the other hand, students are skeptical about their capacity to influence the important decisions that are been taken on national level. 4 of 10 young people consider that citizens can influence on a little degree the public decisions making, while 20% declared that it's possible in a very little extent. About a third of respondents consider that citizens have the power to influence the important political decisions on national level.

4. Conclusions

As it was said before, the position of the new generation is crucial in consolidating democracy. Nowadays, young people have new tools to help developing a participatory culture, such as new media, new forms of political socialization, volunteer opportunities etc., but in order to do

that, there's an essential condition: to express interest. Thus, the purpose of the paper was to establish the level of interest that students from three specializations in social-science have on civic and political life.

The results indicate the fact that, most of the students are not satisfied by the direction taken by things in our country, this can be an explanation for the lack of interest on local/national politics manifested by more than 4 of 10 students. On the other side, students are more interested on national politics rather than local one, but almost a half spends less than an hour per day to get informed about the civic and political events, while almost 4 of 10 students doesn't inform at all about these types of topics. Not at least, most of the respondents believe that citizens' needs are taken into consideration in little and very little extent when it comes to public policy decisions making. These data bring into attention that the new generation have a low trust in institutions, and are not optimistic regarding the capacity of public contestation.

The article has an introductory and descriptive character, opening the interest for thoroughgoing studies and exploring the other dimensions of civic and political engagement included in the sociological research.

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