

# Reconciling with You(th)

## Toward a New Roadmap to Active Citizenship

# EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY: THE REQUIRED INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS

## RECONCILING WITH YOU(TH) TOWARD A NEW ROADMAP TO ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A positive voter turnout in the 2024 European elections would barely improve the quality of political participation of the young EU citizens. As the latter remain largely disengaged from EU affairs, this policy paper draws on a qualitative-quantitative mix-method approach to explore an alternative roadmap to active citizenship. It assesses the impact of Citizenship Education on any potential sort of civic engagement, regardless of the field of study. Then, it connects the debate on education with the untapped potentials of the Transnational Lists (TNL). In the last EU stretch to the 2024 elections, this paper concludes with recommending two EU-brokered reforms: first, the implementation of a common curriculum of Education for Democratic Citizenship (CED), and, second, the establishment of TNLs to truly “europeanise” the political agendas.

## Social Media summary

In the last EU’s stretch to the 2024 elections, EU-brokered reforms on education and electoral law could tackle alienation of young citizens and foster active citizenship in the long run.

## Keywords

#EU #elections #citizenship #youth #education #transnational list

## Short bio

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AFCO - Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs  
 ALDE - Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe  
 CiCe - Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe - Jean Monnet Network  
 ECR – European Conservatives and Reformists  
 EDC – Education for Democratic Citizenship  
 EP - European Parliament  
 EPP – European People's Party  
 EPRS - European Parliamentary Research Service  
 EU - European Union  
 ESC - European Solidarity Corps  
 EVS - European Voluntary Service  
 G/EFA – Greens – European Free Alliance  
 GUE/NGL – The Left in the European Parliament  
 ID – Identity and Democracy  
 MEP - Member of European Parliament  
 S&D – Socialist and Democrats  
 TNL - Transnational List  
 y/o – Years Old

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## INTRODUCTION

Although the 2022 European Year of Youth has shone light on the importance of the young EU citizens, the post-pandemic hostile economy has put education at stake and jeopardised professional careers. The rapid transformation of the labour market has brought the younger generations to rethink the myth of material progress in spite of the burden of the expectations of older generations.

Even if the young EU citizens remain most knowledgeable about these challenges for the years to come, AFCO signals a severe lack of engagement with politics stemming from misrepresentation and unrecognition (2023:19). When manifested, “pathologizing narratives” depict youth’s political participation and uncritically associate it with polemic topics (Henderson, 2014).

The EU has launched its EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 and endorsed the idea to establish a European Education Area by 2025 (Katsarova, 2022) for unraveling untapped potentials of youth participation in democratic life and ensuring necessary resources to all young people for social and civic engagement. Among the different milestones, priorities are given to the development of citizenship competencies to gain through the means of Citizenship Education (CE). Hence, education as a whole is understood as the stepping-stone to employability and active citizenship for the young people in the long run.

*By definition, citizenship education is a dynamic and complex idea deeply connected with the “ideals of democracy, participation and human rights in Europe. [In it], civic, political and social matters can be addressed beyond national borders and frameworks, where European values and ethics can be cultivated, discussed and questioned while shaping, affecting, or involving the political sphere*

Source: Edu4Europe 2019 & EPRS 2021

Yet the implementation on the ground of qualitative methods of educating the European youth and future generations remain a major concern. More precisely, implementation remains unmanageably broad, albeit scholars and experts attempt to narrow down a clear definition embracing the wealth of concepts and related dynamics (EPRS, 2021). Additionally, the development of common curricula and their potential introduction into each national schooling system have been neither brief nor straightforward.

The 2024 EP elections will be the testing ground for the EU youth’s engagement beyond voting. This upcoming exercise of democracy will show the extent to which the pandemic-torn education has had a negative impact on the voter turnout of the young EU citizens. It will also probably reveal to what extent the constant rise of populist voices and actors would gain consensus among the European youth and potentially derail the EU roadmap toward a greener, more inclusive, and better digital society.

## METHODOLOGY

This policy analysis explores untapped potentials of CE by looking at the issue of political alienation among young EU citizens. It precisely explores (1) the learning experiences of civic education, (2) how a potentially EU-tailored CE curriculum may restore youth's relations with political participation, and (3) the political urgencies to be discussed in the eyes of young EU citizens. Accordingly, qualitative perspectives are taken into consideration to (1.1) assess the impact of civic education curricula during the education period; (2.1) whether the latter, regardless of the field of study, has stimulated political participation of any sort; (3.1) consider the TNs as a means to "Europeanise" the political agendas while reconciling the younger segments of the EU societies.

In order to do so, an online questionnaire (in English) has reached n=107 EU citizens (58 females and 49 males) from the "prolonged youth age group" - namely, between 12 and 35 y/o<sup>1</sup>, through snowball method, in the period of July, 23rd and August, 8th, 2023. Although this small-scale sample is not exhaustive to represent the entire young audience in EU, data triangulation with statistics and reports commissioned by the EU is employed (when possible) in the following sections, thereby advancing policy recommendations vis-à-vis the 2024 EP elections.

## 2024 EP ELECTIONS: WHY BOTHER?

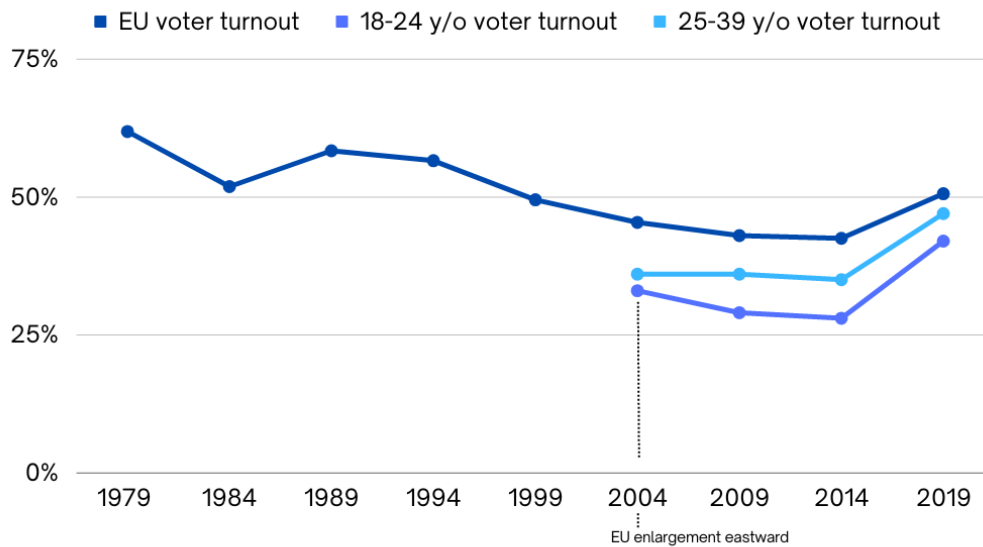
Although the 2004 EU enlargement eastward<sup>2</sup> lowered the voting age, youth participation in the EP elections has shown contrasting results. EU-wide, the voter turnout has remained far from the pre-1994 voter outcomes (Statista 2020). The participation of EU citizens between 18-24 and 25-39 y/o has further lowered – respectively, 33% and 36% in 2004, and 29% and 36% in 2009 (Eurobarometer 2009). A paradox was also registered in the wake of the 2014 European elections: the largest group of abstainers was registered among EU citizens between 18-24 y/o, who expressed the most positive feelings about the EU. Yet again in 2019, an +8% improvement of the voter turnout, which reached 50,66% EU-wide, did not follow suit among the youth. Also, the voter turnout among EU young people remained lower in relation to the general statistics (Eurobarometer 2019:22) - respectively, 42% and 47% among EU citizens of 18-24 and 25-39 y/o.

<sup>1</sup> Although some EU reports indicate two groups - respectively, between 18-24 and 25-39 y/o, this policy paper was organised around a sample of EU citizens between 18 and 35 y/o. It must be also pointed out that most respondents declare to have finished their MA studies (See Annexes, Figure 1)

<sup>2</sup> On 1 May 2004, the largest expansion of the European Union concerned the following countries: Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

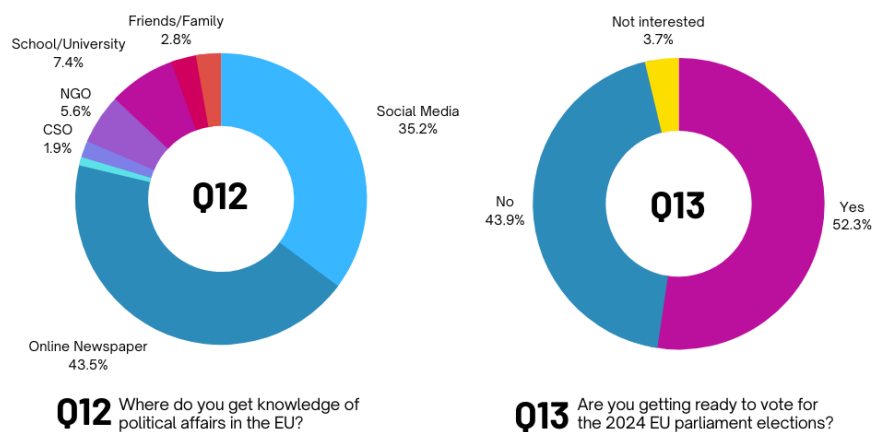


TABLE 1



At the Conference on the Future of Europe (April 2021-May 2022), the European Citizens' Panels shared high expectations on the EU institutions to guarantee transparency and unanimity principle for all EU citizens given the historic moment (News EP, 2022; Conference on the Future of Europe 2021:39). According to the sample of respondents, 61% affiliate themselves neither with political parties nor with other organisations – either NGOs or student collectives [Table3, Q3]. In Table 2, Q13 shows half of the respondent are not getting ready to vote. Q12 provides a different perspective than the Eurobarometer report (2022:59). Schools and universities are not considered the places where young EU citizens hear about EU opportunities. Acquisition of information happens through social media platforms and online newspapers, showing how the latter are by far the new spaces of activism and knowledge construction about EU affairs and politics in general.

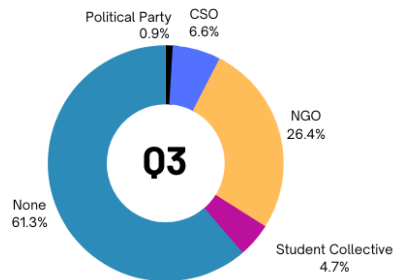
TABLE 2



% based on n=107 respondents  
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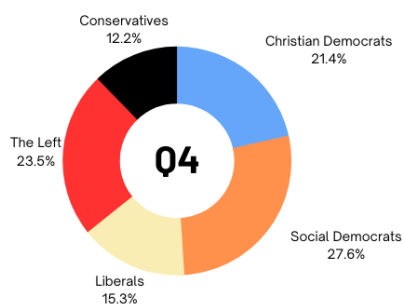


This data does not come as a surprise, though. It rather confirms that exerting the right to vote on local, national, or EU grounds, is considered important for making young people's voices heard (Flash Eurobarometer, 2022:26).

**TABLE 3**

**Q3** Are you a member of a ...

% based on n=107 respondents  
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**Q4** Which of the EU Parliament families, you feel closest to ...

The tandem of underrepresentation and alienation from active citizenship is worth addressing through the nexus of populism-electoral turnout. Granted that a handful of EU countries are exposed to populist parties on a national level (Pirro and Portos 2021), young segments of the EU societies are instrumentally addressed for the 2024 EP elections. In theory, populist parties can politicise “young issues” that are usually kept off the agenda of mainstream parties, thereby potentially boosting political participation by managing to mobilise disaffected citizens who do not normally vote (Leininger and Meijers 2020, 2021). In this regard, young citizens may also be exposed to far-left/-right actors through risky online campaigns and making full use of digital activism. At the time of

writing, polling by Europe Elects shows a growth of two extreme poles of the EU political spectrum. More precisely, ↑9 of the GUE/NGL and ↑21 of the ECR - respectively, moving from 41 seats in 2019 to 50 seats, and from 62 seats in 2019 to 83 seats (June 2023). In the 2023 July projection, ECR and ID make moderate gains while the forecast of G/EFA and GUE/NGL (Left) has three seats less, 50 in total (July 2023). This polarisation seems also underway among respondents [Above, Table 3, Q4].

## RECONCILING WITH THE YOUTH VIA EU-BROKERED EDUCATION REFORM

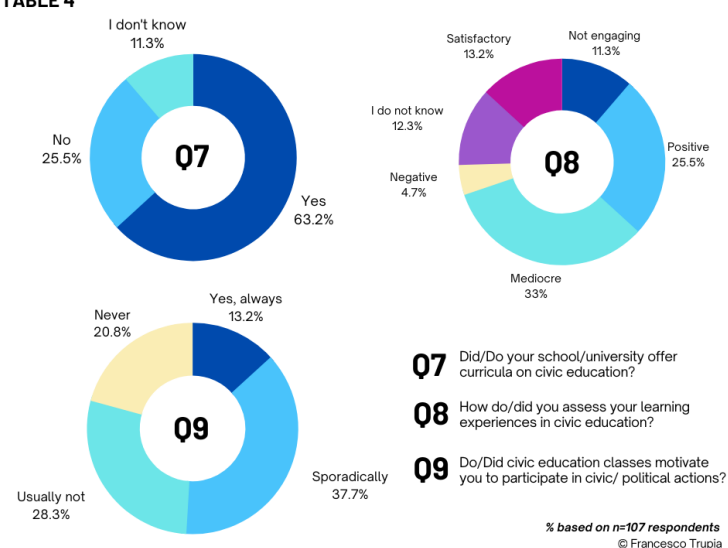
Raising awareness and encouraging civic engagement would unlikely come by default. It would rather require a long-term investment in stimulating the wheezing old generations to come to terms with new EU rules while engaging the young EU citizens in the democratic arena.

Education policies cannot be confined, nor simply understood, as the instrument for the sole acquisition of information about the EU and its mechanisms. CE can largely be the common space where to reconcile both generations and to commit to the wealth of practices of active citizenship. It was the Manifesto of Ventotene by Altiero Spinelli and Ernesto Rossi (1941), whose legacy inspired the idea for a European federation and ultimately resulted in the Schuman Declaration of 1950, which acknowledged the pivotal role of state schools not only for their pedagogical mission, but also for leading social reforms. In retrospect, that Manifesto laid the groundwork for thinking democracy in tandem with education.

CE is thus not only the catalyst for conveying values and practices of active citizenship, but also the EU-envisioned common ground where the already-existing CE programs can converge into an EU-wise common programme and prepare the terrain for a lifelong process of learning-by-exercising democracy at all levels. The Conference for the Future of Europe has already recommended “programmes [to be] included in the school curricula about European citizenship and ethics with content adequate to the age” (2021:16) to tackle the issue of alienation of the youth from politics. In fact, modules or ad hoc programs have been tailored for national schooling systems, yet failing to have an equal implementation. To provide other means for the latter issue, countless projects around the themes and practices of active citizenship have been launched.

Yet, all of these neither seem to mobilise the youngest segments of the EU societies, nor do they properly fill the gap due to the shortage of study hours, the issue of tailoring civic education for diverse fields of study, the unpreparedness of the teachers, the unawareness of such programmes in the peripheries, etc.

TABLE 4



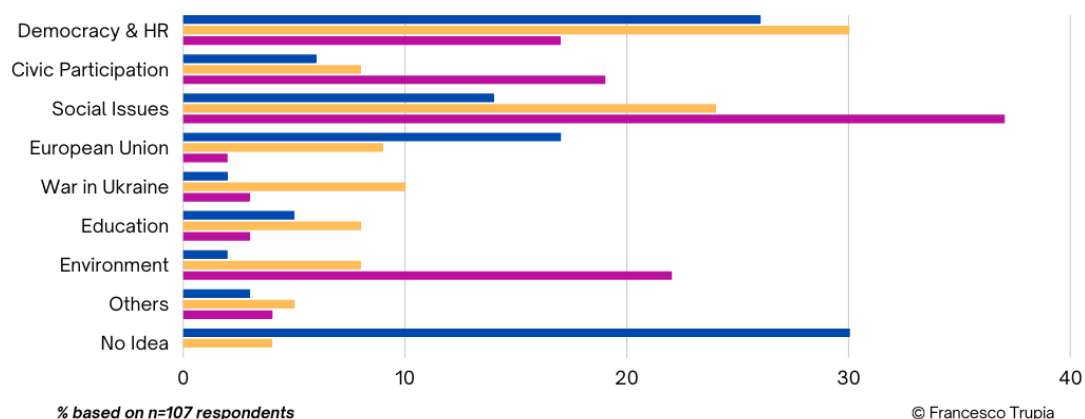
According to Table 4 above, respondents confirm to have attended CE classes and courses. Although CE seems here in the spotlight in many EU countries, qualitative perspectives show that the accessibility and the acknowledgment of active

citizenship (Eurydice 2012) have not shifted gears. N=35 assess their experience as “mediocre” and n=12 “not engaging”, while n=41 have only some “positive” experience mostly because of their higher education qualification (e.g. Political Science, Law, History) and participation in EU mobility programs (e.g. Erasmus+ and ESC, formerly EVS. See also Annexes, figure2). Tellingly, Q9 reveals a deficit between motivation/engagement in activism and political participation after receiving civic education classes/courses assessed mostly negatively (Q8).

A further triangulation shows that [Table 5] education is not considered as a means to implement political agenda. As reported in other regional studies (see Gubalova and Dravecky 2023:6), “Democracy and Human Rights” win the hearts of most respondents. Granted that both macro-topics are deeply embedded and connected with education as a whole, a nexus between the latter and what respondents care about the most, is definitely worth addressing by the EU parties vis-à-vis the 2024 EP elections.

**TABLE 5**

■ Q7.1 - Which was/is the theme mostly discussed during your education period?  
 ■ Q10 - Which of the issues listed below you care the most?  
 ■ Q15 - Which issue needs to be considered by the political parties to engage young citizens?



## TNL AND CE: CONNECTING THE DOTS?

To serve the “ultimate goal of the educational system, [which shall allow all] EU citizens to be well integrated both in their own societies and in the broader European community” (CiCe 2017:3), the EU cannot solely recommend CE and support. Inconsistently covered by national governments, which are engulfed by the rhetorics of substantive differences within and between EU Member States, CE could represent a manifesto for reforming schooling system on a national ground. An EU-centred common lifelong roadmap could go beyond education proper, following the Copenhagen Declaration (2018) and the Council resolution (2021/C 66/01) lending impetus to a process of cooperation in vocational education and training engaging adults between 34 and 64 y/o.

Time has definitely matured to connect the dots between the health and stability of democracy, practices of active citizenship, the quality of civic engagement, and the

untapped potentials of young EU citizens contributing to the democratic arena at all levels. In between, the role of CE cannot but come to the fore. In fact, it was the Resolution adopted by the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education in Kraków (Poland) in October 2000, as well as by the Committee of Ministers in October 2002, that the then-defined EDC was understood as a priority objective of educational policy-making and reforms (Bîrzéa 2005:13).

*“EDC is a set of practices and principles aimed at making young people and adults better equipped to participate actively in democratic life by assuming and exercising their rights and responsibilities in society.” (mentioned by Bîrzéa 2005:18)*

Hence, a potentially EU-brokered education reform could contribute to europeneise the 2024 EP elections by constituting a subject of debates for political parties and their policy ideas for the 2024-2029 period. Again, CE and political participation follow one another. Just as EDC became a common goal for education policymakers to reform the educational systems since the 1990s, so the constitution of a pan-European constituency was aimed at europeneising democracy at the EU level. Over the last fifteen years, scholars and law experts have been hardly fizzling with the idea of establishing TNLs at various points. In the wake of the Brexit vote, which left 28 seats vacant on top of the current 705 seats in the EP, one of the most discussed themes of the 2024 EP elections has been about a potential EU electoral law reform (News EP, 2022). The latter could aim at establishing a two-vote system: EU citizens could cast one vote for national parties in national constituencies, and the second one for a TNL, whose candidates will run for EU transnational parties with same programme within a pan-European constituency. At the time of writing, the establishment of TNLs remains an apple of discord, as follows:

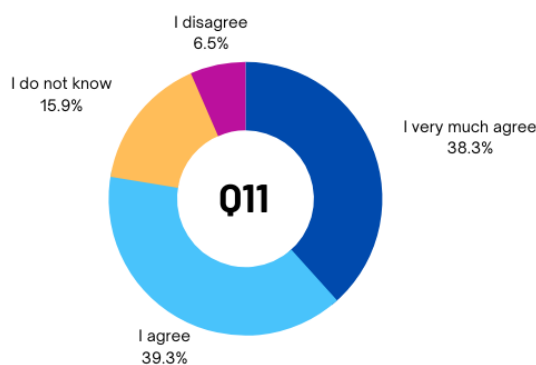
CRITICS point out that:	PRAISERS argue that:
1) the already-existing <i>Spitzenkandidaten</i> <sup>3</sup> fosters an Europeanisation of debates and mechanisms of representation.	1) the <i>Spitzenkandidaten</i> was aimed at turning out people to vote, but in 2014 it registered a decline in voter turnout.
2) before EP electoral campaign starts, each party on the European level can publicly announce who their transnational spitzenkandidat will be, informally making them the face of their election bid.	2) in 2019, the <i>Spitzenkandidaten</i> system reinforced national positions of political parties, which barely presented their lead candidate in clear terms to the EU voters during the electoral campaign
3) the <i>Spitzenkandidaten</i> process is one of the measures proposed by the Conference on the Future of Europe.	3) the <i>Spitzenkandidaten</i> system can be complementary to the TNLs.
4) TNLs disrespect proportional representation of EU smaller member states in the EP.	4) some countries did not elect a single woman MEP, and TNLs could consider “zipped lists” for gender equality among candidates.

<sup>3</sup> *Spitzenkandidaten* is the German term that traditionally refers to the “lead candidate” that each EU political party family elects for the position of Commission president if nominated by the European Council (Heads of national governments and states).

By being included into a reform of the EU electoral law, TNL can in theory bolster europeisation of political issues such as education, among others. In practice, lending one vote for TNL candidates could provide an option to make the next 2024 EP elections truly European. In other words, the establishment of a pan-European constituency could make room for discussing a potential implementation of a EU-wise CE curriculum based on active citizenship and on core values for exercising democratic practices, thereby strengthening social cohesion and equality, fighting divisive nationalism and the spread of disinformation.

Granted that the nexus of democracy and active citizenship cannot be taken for granted, it should be pointed out that the context-related deficit of democratic culture and the rise of democratic backslidings across the EU are inherent of the deficit of citizens' preparedness to deal with the challenges of the years to come. Needless to say, a pan-European constituency for the 2024 EP elections would barely resolve the issue of alienation at once, and thereby reconcile the youngest segments of societies with politics without properly informing them about how to exercise democracy on a transnational ground. However, the idea behind the development and further introduction of an EU-wise citizenship education curriculum lies in beginning to prepare young EU citizens for the long run and foster political participation among those who lost hope over the last few years. Such an idea seems viable for most respondents, keen on having a common CE curriculum in the EU [Table 6].

TABLE 6



**Q11** What do you think about introducing the same civic education curriculum for all EU member states?

**Q16** Do you know about TNL?

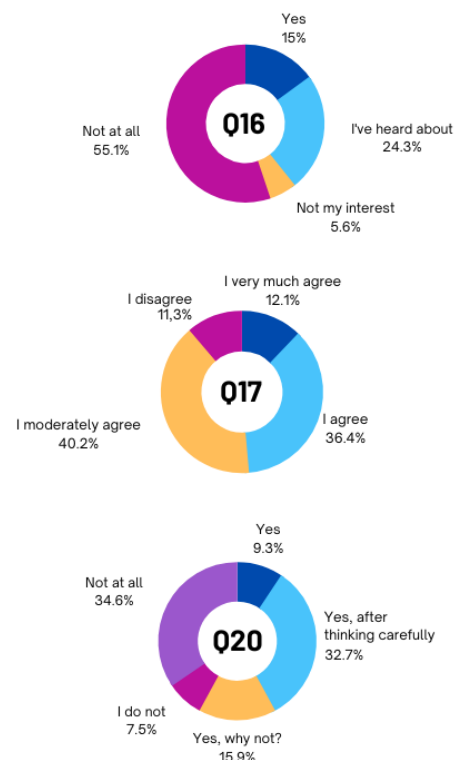
**Q17** Do you think that TNL will help to "europeanise" the political agendas across EU?

**Q20** If proposed to you, would you take into consideration a potential candidature for a TNL?

% based on n=107 respondents

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TABLE 6.1



Q16 shows that TLNs are almost unknown among respondents. Nonetheless, many deem positive to cast a second vote in the next 2024 EP elections (Q17). As shown in other reports (see Gubalova and Dravecky 2023:6-7), they may also see themselves as actively engaged if asked to consider a direct and personal engagement as a TNL candidate (Table 6.1, Q20).

## CONCLUSIONS

Although the above-mentioned data is not exhaustive for assessing the state of the affairs with regard to the young EU citizenry, some of these issues discussed above would suggest a further Europeanisation of certain major topics in the 2024 EP elections. At this stage, the implementation of an EU-wise, age-tailored, multilingual, common CE programme is to be understood as aspirational. A vast majority of EU members states outright rejected the idea of establishing a pan-European constituency. As things stand, however, time is running out to truly europeanise the next 2024 EP elections and guarantee an improvement of the quality of democracy across the EU. A reform of the EU electoral law could help political parties to europeanise their agenda through TNLs and their course of actions for the 2024-2029 period.

Here, it must be said that a potentially EU-brokered education reform may exacerbate the anti-EU sentiments due to anti-genderism and ethno-nationalist rhetorics that have already penetrated the education sectors through different moral and religious sensibilities that influence some EU societies. In the case of the TNLs, instead, the establishment of a pan-European constituency will barely reconcile EU citizens, regardless of the age, with the EU. To a certain extent, it may increase people's fear over transnational actions. Yet TNLs would be a great chance for all EU citizens to extend their exercise of democracy through a two-system vote, while the introduction of CE as a subject of a European political debate could be ideal for the 2024 EP elections and beyond.









## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the two topics this policy paper deals with, two lines of policy recommendations are here suggested. In the case of CE understood as a potential common space to reconcile the European youth with political participation:

- Think of an EU-brokered reform across Member States centred around the adoption of a common EU-wise citizenship education curriculum to complement and also facilitate the acquisition of values and practices of active participation at school, higher education and beyond;
- Reintroduce the term of Education for Democratic Citizenship as an umbrella paradigm in order to include the wealth of references to “political education” (Germany), social education (Estonia), “civic education” (France, Italy, Bulgaria), among others, and to use such a paradigm for extending learning-by-exercising forms of active citizenship in and beyond education;
- tailor a would-be CED curriculum not only in the national languages of each EU Member States, but also partially in English and recognised minority languages



with the scope of acknowledging the EU cultural and linguistic diversity, promoting diversity and effective communication of all European citizens;

LEVEL OF EDUCATION	AGE	MODULES BASED ON	ACTIVITIES	EXPECTED RESULTS
Primary Education	5-10	Diversity, inclusiveness, relationship and sexuality education	 non-formal education, innovative and creative teaching methods, use of participatory games;	 equip children with attitudes and values that empowers them to realize their well-being and develop respectful social relationships;
Middle school (secondary school)	11-14	Civic participation, institutions and citizens, digital transformation	 online activities, visits to local NGOs & EU volunteers, talks with EU representatives elected/appointed in the region/city of the school;	 introduce the student to the different forms of active citizenship and inform about the places where to exercise democracy;
Highschool	14-18	Environment, digital transformation, democracy in the EU and EU integration	 extracurricula activities: volunteering, school and urban gardening, vertical farming, school exchange programs, participation at debates in and out the classroom;	 prepare the student to become an active citizen at all levels, exert their right to vote at 16 y/o and the right to stand for election at 18 y/o;
University higher education	19 ->	Secondary specialization (minor subject) while pursuing the BA degree	 Complementing the field of study in which the student will seek a professional career.	 strengthen cooperations between universities and EU organs and bodies by promoting <i>ad hoc</i> internships at EU level; prepare the student to the job market;

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- increase investments to properly equip schools, especially those in peripheral and rural areas, with tools and instruments in order to support teachers within a systematically engaging and teaching level appropriate system; in these areas, open, or implement if present, Europe Direct offices to exchange know-how and exercise different practices of participation at all levels and in cooperation with EU organs, bodies and representatives;
- consider exerting the right to vote from the 16 y/o and the right to stand for election after 18 y/o in accordance with the experience of the Conference on the Future of Europe;

Although Q19 shows that (Annexes, figure4) the large majority of respondents (n=77) would like to see TNLs with members from “all the EU countries”, amendment/reform of the EU electoral law should:

- ensure balanced geographical representation within TNL, whose candidates should be selected in a proportional way. To do so, EU member states would be divided into three groups depending on the size of their population, thereby guaranteeing 2/3 of all seats on TNL for small and medium countries in accordance with the Article 15;
- include a “zipped list” within TNL to ensure gender equality;
- kick off a transition period informing EU citizens about TNLs and how the latter can hand a new means of participation and sense of unity through exerting the right to vote on both national and transnational level. To do so, awareness campaigns about the 2024 EP could be organised, with a specific focus on the TNLs as an instrument of democracy and representation.
- political parties and their would-be coalitions currently can begin informing potential candidates and discuss EU-wide issues such as education, among other major concerns, and the potential risks of low voter turnout;



- in light of Q14 (Annexes, figure3), grant online voting for EU young citizens residing in a different EU country, even temporarily. This will avoid double-voting also among EU citizens with more than one citizenship. To do so, electronic and internet voting option, or postal voting in compliance with GDPR policy to exchange/protect voters' sensitive data.

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## ANNEXES

FIGURE 1

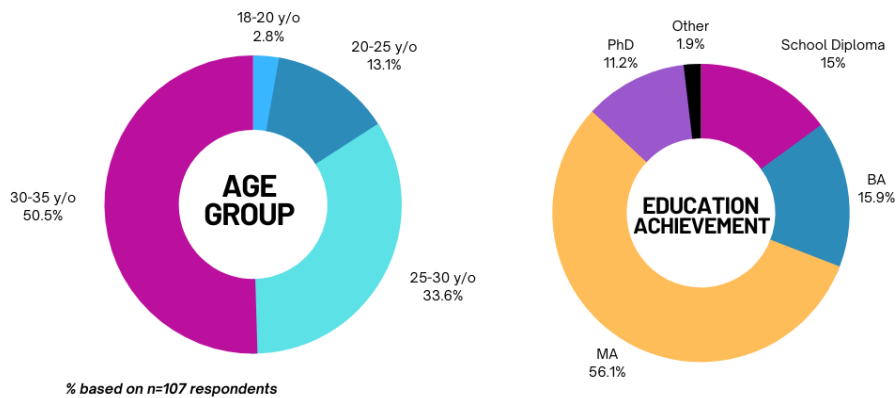
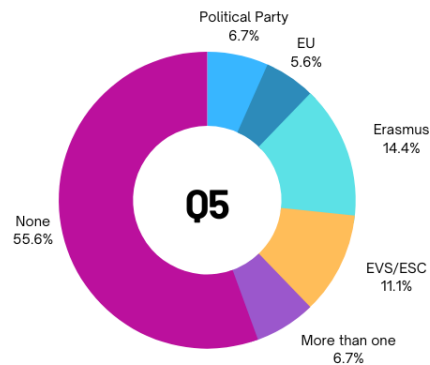
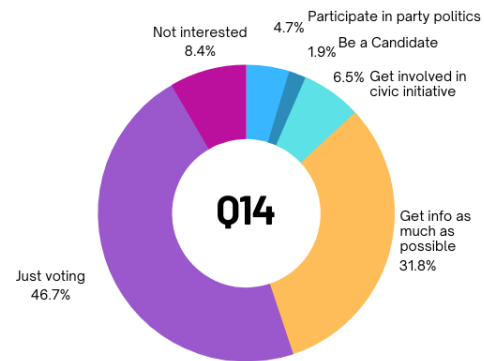


FIGURE 2



**Q5** Did/Do you contribute to one of these entities?

FIGURE 3



**Q14** How would you like to participate in the 2024 EP elections?

% based on n=107 respondents  
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## Respondent Insights to Q5

- "I have studied in four EU countries, and I am quite happy with the civic education in each and every one of them" - Respondent 6, male, 30-35 y/o;
- "I was lucky as I had participated in many civic education activities in my studies through various mobility programs, while my university also provided platforms for these kind of activities" - Respondent 48, female, 30-35 y/o;
- "I have not had experience with civic education. Yet I participated in 2 Erasmus student exchanges" - Respondent 4, male, 20-25 y/o;

FIGURE 4

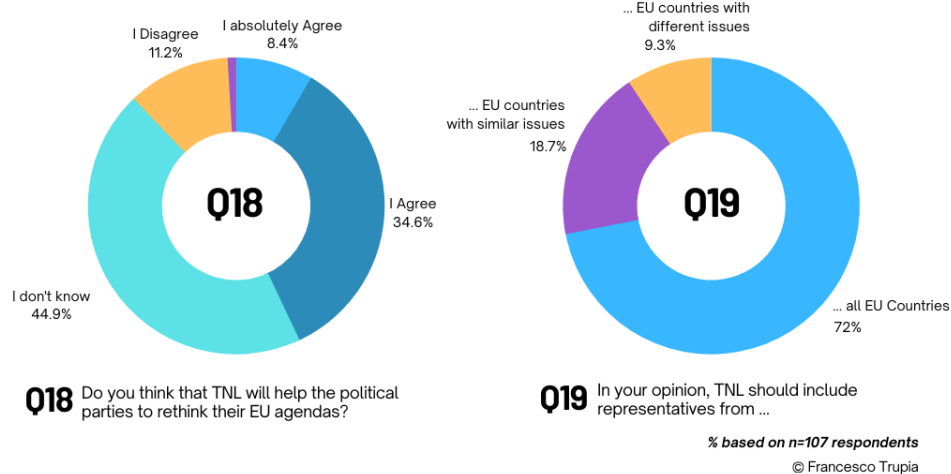


FIGURE 4

