



**THE MILLENNIAL  
DIALOGUE**

## Involving Millennials in Politics

The policy brief highlights potential responses, discussing, respectively, (1) strategies to incentivise voting, (2) strategies to incentivise participation in political parties, and (3) the central role of civic education in cultivating a sensibility for politics among young people.

**Fabio Wolkenstein**  
European Institute  
London School of Economics and Political Science

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This policy brief addresses the question of how Millennials—citizens aged between 15 and 34—can be involved more in politics. This question has pressing relevance since many **Millennials feel alienated from traditional partisan politics. This emerges clearly from the findings of the Millennial Dialogue study.** Politics ranks low among Millennials’ interests, and many think that politicians ignore the views of young people altogether. None of these findings are particularly surprising, but they give renewed urgency to the issue of institutional reform. **How can political participation among Millennials be incentivised? How can politics be made more attractive for young people?**

## **1. Incentivising voting**

**Millennials are not averse to voting. In fact, the vast majority of Millennials are inclined to participate in elections.** For example, in the Millennial Dialogue study 80% of the German respondents, 79% of the Austrian respondents, and 70% of the Italian respondents say they would vote if there was an election tomorrow. This is in principle good news. However, it would be wrong to interpret Millennials’ willingness to vote as reflecting passionate support for a certain political party or great interest in politics. The most straightforward explanation of why most Millennials are favourably disposed to voting is rather that they regard it as an important means to exercise voice, one that they feel obligated to make use of *despite* their disaffection with traditional politics.

Those 20-30% of Millennials who abstain from voting abstain mainly because they are disaffected with politics. In particular, they lack trust in politicians. But this is not the whole story. Some of those who are inclined to abstain from voting are under 18 and hence have no right to vote in their country. That this group of Millennials is unwilling to vote is obvious: without the right to cast a ballot, there is no rational incentive for them to care about politics. Giving them voting rights can encourage them to increase their interest in politics and become politically active; it can help socialise the youngest of Millennials into democratic participation at an early age. So one potential way of encouraging more Millennials to vote is simply lowering the voting age. There is also no reason to worry that 16 year olds lack the competence effectively to participate in elections. Research on the case of Austria, the only European country where the voting age for national elections is 16, shows that teenagers are able to make informed electoral choices that enable their interests to be represented.<sup>1</sup>

In this context it is also worthwhile considering Millennials’ own proposals for electoral reform. When asked what would encourage more people to vote, Millennials often respond that the costs of voting should be reduced. By this they mean for example that one should be able to vote online, via a secure app or website, or that citizens should have the opportunity to vote in more places, like in shopping malls or libraries. Such proposals should be taken seriously. Especially online voting could be a promising way forward when it comes to getting more young people to vote: as the Estonian case shows, it can raise the attractiveness of electoral participation for Millennials.<sup>2</sup> However, one must also be alert to the hazards of lowering the barriers too much. When casting a ballot becomes as easy and trivial as “liking” something on Facebook, it is deprived of its dignity as a unique means for citizens to decide what laws they want to be governed by. In short, reducing the costs of electoral participation can be a worthwhile strategy to mobilise young voters, but it ought not lead to the devaluation of voting as a civic practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Markus Wagner, David Johann and Sylvia Kritzinger (2012) “Voting at 16: Turnout and the quality of vote choice.” *Electoral Studies* 31: 372-383.

<sup>2</sup> R. Michael Alvarez, Thad E. Hall and Alexander H. Trechsel (2009) “Internet Voting in Comparative Perspective: The Case of Estonia.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 42(3): 497-505.

## **2. Incentivising participation in parties**

The most challenging question is how to reduce Millennials disaffection with traditional partisan politics. The most straightforward answer to that question is that parties have to make a credible effort to show that they care about Millennials, and take their demands and concerns seriously. This can be done by involving Millennials more in intra-party debates and the making of internal decisions. **Parties have to invite Millennials to participate, and they have to provide participatory channels that offer Millennials incentives actually to become politically active within partisan organisations.**

Three main strategies can be pursued in order to create such incentives:<sup>3</sup>

- a. ***Boosting the rewards of traditional activism.*** Parties can increase the rewards that come with traditional partisan activism. For example, they can empower local party branches and give them a greater say in the making of internal decisions. This is crucial for targeting those who want to devote themselves more to political activism.
- b. ***Reducing participatory costs.*** Parties can reduce the costs of participating in a party. This can mean reducing financial costs, for instance by introducing “trial memberships” for those who are potentially interested in participating but are put off by high membership fees. It can also mean reducing procedural costs, for example by allowing citizens to participate online in partisan discussion fora. In this way, technology-savvy but time-poor citizens can be attracted to participate—characteristics that are certainly often found among Millennials.
- c. ***Redefining partisan boundaries.*** Finally, parties can try to speak to those Millennials who are already politically engaged by building stronger links with like-minded but formally unaffiliated activist organisations. Especially progressive parties have a strong tradition of cooperating with like-minded civil society organisations (e.g. trade unions), and there is plenty of scope for new cooperations of this kind. The trick is to show Millennials how the activist work they are engaged in connects with the larger vision of the party.

This list must be supplemented with two remarks. First, parties must be aware that there is no magic bullet for incentivising Millennials to join. If a party enjoys very little trust among young people, it is unlikely that any of the three just-mentioned strategies will work. Likewise, if a party is ideologically too indistinct, even the most attractive participatory opportunities might not manage to motivate Millennials to participate. This is perhaps the main lesson to take from the leadership campaign of Labour’s Jeremy Corbyn: if they offer distinctive political visions young people can identify with, even long-established parties have the capacity to inspire Millennials. Of course, this does not mean that a political platform that appeals to Millennials has to be developed prior to inviting Millennials to participate. On the contrary: it can be developed together with them, setting the stage for repeated engagement in the future.

Second, in pursuing these incentive-creating strategies, parties must resist the temptation of focusing only on reducing the costs of participation and redefining partisan boundaries. No doubt, these appear to be the most efficient strategies to encourage Millennials to become active in parties. But failing to enhance traditional forms of partisan activism would be a mistake. This is because parties must not only cater to those who want to engage on an ad-hoc basis; they also have to

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<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 6 in Susan Scarrow (2014) *Beyond Party Members*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

provide more politically committed Millennials with meaningful opportunities for continuous engagement in the party. After all, it is these Millennials who are best able to build and maintain a connection with other young people and motivate their peers to engage. Thus classic institutions such as local branches have to be made more attractive, for example by giving them greater decision-making power within the party.<sup>4</sup>

### **3. The role of civic education**

In addition to offering Millennials strong institutional incentives to engage in politics, it is important to ensure that **civic education** cultivates among the youngest of them (and among future generations) a sensibility for the opportunities and limitations of participating in political life. Most pertinently, civic education **should promote a better understanding of the collective nature of democratic politics**. By this is meant that it ought to raise awareness for the fact that democratic decision-making typically requires forging compromises with others; for the institutional constraints that limit the discretion of political actors (especially in an interdependent Europe); and for the minor statistical difference a single vote actually makes. Addressing these issues in a candid fashion is important in order for young people to correctly calibrate their expectations for politics. To effectively combat political disaffection among the young, incumbent parties therefore also have to invest their efforts and energies into thinking about the civic education curriculum.

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<sup>4</sup> Fabio Wolkenstein (Forthcoming) "A Deliberative Model of Intra-Party Democracy." *Journal of Political Philosophy*.