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Youth protests could affect the EU for generations to come



Gen Z protests across Europe are set to have wildly varying political implications, despite often being lumped into one big undifferentiated tangle.

Upcoming elections in Spain could see a historically large chunk of the young electorate and first-time voters veer towards the far-right Vox party, helping to bring down the current Socialist Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez.

In next year's presidential elections in France, current high-profile youth protests could help cement the downfall of centrist candidates, with young people overwhelmingly opting in the first round for the far-left Jean-Luc Mélenchon and another large bloc for the far-right Marine Le Pen.

In two other major European countries going to the polls next year, Italy and Poland, youth sentiment is also playing a role, but, again, with different nuances.

In Italy, Giorgia Meloni's far-right party is bleeding youth support but for now it looks as if she might make up for that with more backing from older voters.

In Poland, the massive youth support that helped Donald Tusk end the far right's hold on power in 2023 has shattered, threatening the future of his coalition.

Ironically, or tragically depending on your state of mind, even in places where many first-time and young voters tend towards the left, electoral mathematics could end up benefiting the far right.

Where online manipulation meets electoral math

This also means that irrespective of the righteousness of the cause, a multitude of actors is actively trying to exploit the current wave of Gen Z demonstrations.

Apart from the protests themselves often foreshadowing polarisation in upcoming elections, they are also being used to fan further radicalisation.

In France, for example, EU and French assessments blame Russian, Israeli and American actors for pushing the narrative that migrants and Muslims are responsible for most of the rioting and that the government has lost control.

This is the same scaremongering tactic that has always been used by the far right and other radical anti-immigrant groups, but it is now amplified by TikTok and other social media.

The target is not necessarily the young protesters themselves, but rather the older, or slightly older, generations who feel caught between youth anger, daily subsistence pressures and bleaker prospects for old age.

In Spain, for example, the older Gen Z and younger Millennial segment – the 25–34 age group – is breaking heavily for Vox, now the most popular party in that cohort, according to surveys.

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Where online manipulation might affect the youth and first-time vote, is in making already angry protesters even less likely to opt for candidates that are being cast as not sufficiently radical.

This could help determine the fate, for example, of the winner of last month's French Socialist and centre-left primary, Raphaël Glucksmann.

While campaigning on an outspoken left-of-centre and ecological platform, Glucksmann is mistrusted because of his more moderate rhetoric than Mélenchon's, his intellectual

Parisian roots, his part-Jewish background and less his outspoken stance on Gaza.

For now, polls predict him attracting as little of the youth vote as a potential centrist or centre-right candidate. And were some of the young voters to abandon Mélenchon, French political precedent suggests that Le Pen would profit more than Glucksmann.

One thing the Gen Z protests have in common, despite their often different political backgrounds, is that they're bound to increase voter turnout among the young, where voter apathy is often the determining factor.

In France, this could potentially mean a huge youth turnout for Mélenchon in the first round of voting, which would still not be enough to beat Le Pen in the second round.

Alternatively, if Mélenchon is eliminated, his young supporters are likely to stay away en bloc in the second round, helping Le Pen defeat any centrist alternative.

Shifting youth loyalties

Gen Z protests and political movements are often lumped together, from India to Serbia to France and Italy. But apart from signifying that, in many places, this is a fraught time to be young, local circumstances are by far the dominant drivers.

Take, for example, the Democratic blue wave in the recent US midterms. While issues such as affordability had global resonance, other topics, such as the strongarm tactics used by ICE and fatigue with the culture war, also played a role among young voters.

> Disappointed by the lack of economic change, young voters have swung heavily behind the Democrats

Affordability, too, is something of a double-edged sword. The economy, in terms of inflation, delivered a large youth bump for Trump and the Republicans in 2024. Now, disappointed by the lack of economic change, young voters have swung heavily behind the Democrats.

One hopeful conclusion to draw from this is that despite being bombarded with online manipulation, young voters are not locked in to either side of the political spectrum, despite narratives promoted by MAGA and other right-wing movements.

Yet one caveat Democratic strategists should take seriously for 2028, is that young Republican-inclined voters largely sat out the midterms, which they're much less likely to do in a presidential election year.

Affecting the continent for generations to come

Even though local circumstances dominate, there appear to be highly similar gender gaps around the world among young voters, a phenomenon that has persisted for years now.

Young men still vote overwhelmingly more right-wing than young women. Even in the US midterms, where young men, including young white men, favoured the Democrats, this lagged far behind the support from young women. In other cohorts, such differences are either much less pronounced or absent.



The danger would be to blame young men for the rise of the far right - Marine Le Pen

In Spain, the gap is narrowing slightly, with

more young women expected to back Vox than before, but still leaving them far behind young men.

The reasons for the gender gap are much discussed, with women often said to be more likely to vote progressive due to issues such as MeToo, and young men being hit by status anxiety.

The online environment particularly plays a role in the latter, in the form, among others, of the manosphere.

As is the case with countering other online and social media forms of manipulation, the danger of government crackdowns to fix this is that restrictions will be framed as only proving the online narratives of heavy-handed state intervention, conspiracy and victimisation.

There is a difference in degree between the general manipulation of youth anger and protests on the one hand and the manosphere that helps exacerbate the gender gap.

The political and economic realities that lead to the protests mostly exist and demand urgent action on the part of the state.

Many of the issues raised in the manosphere, on the other hand, are created artificially, often for commercial purposes, as a recent article in The Lancet argued, saying, “the manosphere is best understood as a commercial ecosystem.”

The danger would be to blame young men for the rise of the far right. This would not only be incorrect, as older voters bear much more responsibility, it would also strengthen the feeling of victimisation.

Similarly, it would be both foolish and counter-productive to blame youth anger and protests in Europe for a possible centrist wipe-out in elections this year and next, and the consequences this might have for the EU.

Even so, both phenomena are playing into a highly volatile European election cycle that could affect the continent for generations to come.