A survey of young people's sentiment towards local democratic innovations

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Abstract: Concerns about the state of democracy and participation date back several decades. In the 1990's, there were concerns about declining political party membership and voter turnout, and a general political fragmentation. This trend has been strengthened and made visible throughout the 2010's, with increased polarization and populism, and countries moving away from democratic ideals. Democratic innovations, including digital democracy initiatives, are introduced to "fix" democracies and renew interest, but is the public, especially the younger generation, interested? In this paper, we present the findings of a Swedish survey of youth sentiment towards innovations in local democracy. Our findings indicate that young people generally are supportive of local democratic innovations, but that levels of support vary across age groups as well as between different types of democratic innovations. Surprisingly we find that the youngest cohort in our study (16-19) is less supportive of online democratic innovations compared to other groups.

Introduction

Europe and Scandinavia has been concerned with the state of democracy dating back at least to the 1990's, when the power and democracy project (SOU 1990:44) warned about declining political party memberships, fragmentation of political parties and a move from broad social movements towards single-issue politics. Since them, digitalization has been seen as part of the solution. Scholars, practitioners, political parties and governments have created numerous digital democracy solutions (Participedia.org), and since 2008-2009 social media entered the scene as a potential new democratic tool (Karlsson & Åström, 2018).

However, the late 2010's indicated that fragmentation and populist politics continued, with Trump's election and Brexit being the most well-known examples (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). In Scandinavia, we have seen the rise of right-wing parties and a fragmentation of parliament

(Grindheim, 2019). Ten parties, several of which are single-issue or protest-based, are represented in the Norwegian parliament as of the 2021 election. In Sweden, the protest-based and right-wing sweden democrats has made the creation of a governing coalition difficult since the 2014 election (Backlund, 2020).

This seeming rise in protest-based voting can perhaps in part be explained by the increasingly complex definitions and workings of democracy, as shown by Dingwerth (et al) who point out that the number of actors is increasing and democracy is becoming more international, leading to complexity and uncertainty about whom to hold accountable for decisions.

Especially among young people, there is an alienation and a strong feeling of distrust towards political institutions (Foa & Mounk, 2017; Dahl et al., 2018). According to Fox (2015: 275) "Millennials have entered the electorate with the lowest propensity to participate in politics in the history of British survey research". The recent pandemic has led to a further decline in trust, as country after country went into lockdown (Devine et al., 2021).

On the other hand, a survey among Norwegian youth (Nilsen, 2021) provides a more positive outlook. 75 % report they are somewhat or very interested in politics, and 92 % report being interested in society/social affairs When it comes to participation, they are reluctant to engage in discussions in public fora such as social media. They prefer to discuss with close friends, family and in school. Reasons for not participating include not knowing enough about politics, being afraid of negative feedback and losing friends over political disagreement. 18% report having negative experiences as a direct result of sharing political opinions, reflecting earlier research claiming that hateful speech and harassment is limiting the political debate climate (Nadim, Fladmoe & Wessel-Aas, 2016).

This indication that young people are interested in politics, but reluctant to share one's opinions outside what is considered "safe spaces" can be considered problematic in the participatory liberal model of democracy (Ferree et al, 2002). Thus, the purpose of this paper is to further examine young people's sentiment towards democratic innovations. Democratic innovations are utilized to invite groups of citizens who are absent from traditional political arenas (cf. Smith, 2009: 24-26), and can be both on- and offline, or various hybrids. We present the results of a survey of Swedish youth's sentiment towards various forms of democratic innovations, and conclude by offering recommendations for the design of digital democracy innovations.

Democratic innovations

Democratic innovations are forms of citizen participation initiated by government institutions, yet at the same time innovative in relation to existing formalized channels of participation in politics (e.g., voting in elections, party membership, contacting politicians etc.) (cf. Smith, 2009). Thus, democratic innovations can be distinguished both from formal political institutions of participation as well as from bottom-up forms of participation (protest, demonstrations, participation in and through civil society organizations etc.).

Democratic innovations are often aimed at increasing civic participation among citizens who are other vice inactive in politics (cf. Smith, 2009: 24-26). This aim of democratic innovations has important implications for their design. Not least, such innovations must be steered towards engaging citizens who are dissatisfied with the current political system (and traditional channels of participation) in order to get critical input into the policy making process and to increase political equality (cf. Åström & Karlsson, 2016).

In this study we will investigate young citizens sentiments towards four types of democratic innovations in local democracy (see table 1 below). This typology of democratic innovations is neither meant to be exhaustive or representative in relation to what democratic innovations are most commonly implemented in Swedish local democracy. Rather the typology attempts to reflect important distinctions between different types of innovations and their implications for local democracy. Agenda setting and discussion-oriented innovations are complementary to and non-threatening towards the strongly party oriented representative democracy of Swedish local government. Referendums however pose a clear alternative to the process of democratic decision-making in representative democracy and is much more controversial in the Swedish context (cf. Kaufmann, 2011). Online innovations can take the form of any of the other three categories and is included to measure and contrast sentiments towards democratic innovations online and offline.

Table 1. Types of democratic innovations.

Type	Definition	Examples
Agenda setting	Democratic innovations geared towards influencing the political agenda of democratic institutions rather than their decisions. Most often by giving citizens the opportunity to place issues on the agenda for local councils and boards.	Petitions Citizens´ questions to policy-makers
Discussion	Democratic innovations geared towards generating discussion around local issues and policies. Such innovations can (but must not) adopt ideas from deliberative democracy	Public hearings Mini-publics Policy-forums
Referendums	Democratic innovations granting citizens the opportunity to decide or advice the decision of democratic institutions by way of voting on alternative policy directions.	Local referendums either initiated by the public (citizens initiative) or by government institutions
E-participation	Online democratic innovations can take on any of the characteristics of the types described above but are utilizing ICTs and the internet. Citizens can participate through digital technology such as computers or smartphones. This type of democratic innovation is often referred to as e-participation.	E-petitions Online discussion forums E-voting in referendums

Methods and material

The analyses conducted are based on the SOM (Society, opinion and media) survey conducted by SOM-institute at Gothenburg University, in the autumn of 2020. The survey questions regarding support for democratic innovations were added by the authors (as well as the primary investigator of these survey questions Joachim Åström). All other items used in the analysis belong to the standard set of questions in the SOM-surveys. The survey was conducted via a combination of postal and online surveying, and sent to a random sample of 3750 swedes and received 1875 responses (response rate: 50%).

The analyses conducted in this study are descriptive crosstabulations. The variables used in these analyses can be divided in two categories: (1) demographic variables, and (2) support for democratic innovations. Demographic variables are restricted to the respondents' age. We make comparisons of level of support for democratic innovations across age groups using a categorical variable dividing the respondents in 8 age groups. This variable is devised to create a nuanced division among young people distinguishing between 16-19 year old, 20-24 year old and 25-29 year old.

The variables measuring support for democratic innovations are based on four survey questions asking the respondents to what extent they find it desirable that their local government initiate more democratic innovations of four different types: (1) innovations aimed to give citizens influence over the political agenda, (2) innovations oriented towards generating political discussions around local policy, (3) innovations that gives citizens say over decisions (specifically in the form of referendums) and (4) innovations that utilizes information and communication technology. Each question is answered on a scale from 1 (very desirable) to 4 (not at all desirable).

Table 2a. Descriptive statistics (all respondents).

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Agenda Setting	1743	1	4	1.92	.807
Discussion	1739	1	4	1.98	.798
Referendum	1734	1	4	2.11	.880
Online	1728	1	4	2.10	.939
Valid N	1719				

Table 2b. Descriptive statistics (age 16-19).

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Agenda Setting	72	1	4	2.00	.872
Discussion	73	1	4	2.15	.776
Referendum	73	1	4	2.03	.745
Online	72	1	4	2.19	.959
Valid N	72				

Analysis and results

As is evident from table 3 below, the level of support for democratic innovations is generally strong among Swedish citizens. The table displays the share of citizens in each age group that find each form of democratic innovation either very or somewhat desirable. More than 60% of citizens in all age groups are supportive of all four types of democratic innovations. In some age groups and for some types of innovations the share of respondents supportive is even over 80%. However, beneath this general pattern it is also evident that the level of support is varying across age groups. For agenda setting innovations and innovations geared towards political discussion, the most common forms of democratic innovations, support is generally higher among middle aged and older adults than among the younger groups.

Table 3. Support for Local democratic innovations in different age groups.

	16-19	20-24	25-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-75	76-85
Agenda setting	73,6%	74,1%	75,4%	76,7%	<u>78,2%</u>	<u>81,1%</u>	**<u>82,2%</u>**	<u>81,3%</u>
Discussion	67,1%	75,3%	70,1%	<u>77,1%</u>	76,2%	77,9%	**80,3%**	75,5%
Referendum	**<u>76,7%</u>**	65,4%	70,9%	72,0%	66,1%	65,4%	63,1%	67,9%
Online	62,5%	**<u>77,8%</u>**	<u>74,8%</u>	76,8%	75,2%	64,9%	63,1%	57,9%
N	72	81	126	270	238	278	490	164

Notes: underscore signifies the type of DI most supported within each age group. Bold signifies within which age group the support for a type of DI is strongest.

Regarding support for referendums and online innovations, the pattern is reversed. 16–19-yearolds are the group most supportive of referendums (the least popular form of democratic innovation across the whole population), and what is more, referendums is even the most widely supported out of the four forms of democratic innovation in this age group. This result may reflect a greater tendency towards supporting direct democracy in younger segments of the population found in earlier research. Similar findings in earlier studies have been discussed as potentially related to greater dispersion of post-materialistic values in younger generations (Dalton, 1984) as well as reflecting that young people have weaker attachments to established political institutions such as political parties (Donovan & Karp, 2006).

Lastly, as might be expected, the level of support for online democratic innovations is much stronger in younger age categories (20-49 years old), while less supported by older middle-aged citizens and older citizens (50-85). For citizens in their 20s and 30s this form of democratic innovation is the most widely supported among the four types analysed. There is however, one exception from this age-related pattern, within the youngest group (16-19) support for online innovations is quite sparsely dispersed as only 62,5% of the respondents in this age category finds initiating online democratic innovations very or somewhat desirable. This is a somewhat puzzling result given that this is a group of citizens in which ICT use is widely disseminated and frequent. For instance, the Swedish survey of internet habits from 2021 found that computer and smartphone use was most widely adopted among citizens between 15 and 19 (Svenskarna och internet, 2021).

Our results indicate that not only is online innovations the least supported form of democratic innovations within this age category but also that online innovations are more widely supported in a majority of the other age groups. While it might seem logical to assume that a group of citizens in which ICTs are almost universally adopted would be supportive of democratic innovations utilizing such technologies, their attitudes tell a somewhat different story. This result contrasts greatly with earlier evidence on the relationship between age and e-participation that generally show that young people are more likely to participate in e-participation (cf. Hoffman & Lutz, 2021).

Table 4. Support for Local democratic innovations among young people (16-19).

	1 (Very desirable)	2 (Somewhat desirable)	3 (Somewhat undesirable)	4 (Very undesirable)	1-2 (Desirable)	3-4 (undesirable)
Agenda setting	**31,9%**	41,7%	20,8%	5,6%	73,6%	26,4%
Discussion	20,5%	46,6%	**30,1%**	2,7%	67,1%	32,8%
Referendum	23,3%	**53,4%**	20,5%	2,7%	**76,7%**	23,2%
Online	27,8%	34,7%	27,8%	**9,7%**	62,5%	37,5%

Notes: Bold signifies within which type of democratic innovation has received the highest frequency of answers within each answer category.

In table 4 above, we will look more closely at the support for democratic innovations among young people (age 16-19). The analyses presented in table 4 makes it evident that beneath the pattern of broad support for all four types of democratic innovations, there are some important variations between the different types of innovations. Discussion oriented innovations and referendums garners less strong support ("very desirable") as well as less strong antipathy ("very undesirable") compared to the other categories of democratic innovations. Hence, sentiments towards these types of innovations are less polarized, and evoke a broad yet "lukewarm" support. This is expected for discussion-oriented innovations that earlier studies have shown to be less polarizing, among citizens (Neblo et al., 2010) as well as administrators (Åström & Karlsson, 2020) and policy-makers (Karlsson, 2012). It is however more surprising that referendums, a controversial form of citizen participation in the context of Swedish local democracy, is less polarized. As stated above, it is also evident that referendums are the forms of democratic innovation that garners the greatest overall support from young citizens, indicating that this demography are more open to direct democracy and challenging the structures of representative democracy compared to other citizens.

Democratic innovations focused on agenda setting is the most widely supported form of democratic innovation among Swedish citizens overall (see table 3 above). While support for this type of innovation is broad also among young citizens. There is a somewhat greater antipathy towards agenda setting innovations among young citizens compared to discussion-oriented innovations as well as referendums (5.6 per cent find it very undesirable).

The share of young citizens who find each type of democratic innovation "very undesirable" is worthy of extra attention. As is evident from table 4 above, online innovations are found very undesirable from a larger share of young swedes (9.7 per cent) compared to other types of innovations. This is important since democratic innovations generally engage only a fraction of the public in actual participation. The support for such innovations among citizens who are not likely to participate is therefore important for the democratic legitimacy of democratic innovations. It is thus important to pay attention to the antipathy towards democratic innovations as a way of measuring the legitimacy of such innovations among citizens who are likely not to participate themselves.

The evidence concerning online innovations points to a need for caution. The youngest cohort of citizens are, as we have shown above, less supportive of online democratic innovations compared to most other age groups. Further, the antipathy towards online innovations is non-negligible as

about one in ten young citizens finds this form of democratic innovation very undesirable. This finding should be taken into consideration in relation to the common practice of using online channels of citizen participation in efforts to reach and mobilize young citizens (cf. Khan & Krishnan, 2015: 51-52).

Discussion

This study aims to further our understanding of young peoples sentiments towards democratic innovations in local democracy by way of analysing survey data among Swedish citizens. Democratic innovations offer important channels for citizen participation in local politics alongside traditional channels of participation: both government initated (voting, party membership etc.) and citizen iniated (protest, demonstrations, civil society organizations etc.). However, local democratic innovations seldom reach a scale of participation that supports legitimate claims of representing the view of the whole citizenry. Rather, such processes often engage only hundreds or even dozens of citizens. Threfore the democratic legitimacy of democratic innovations rests heavily on two factors: (1) the representativeness of those who participate in relation to the whole demos and (2) the level of support for democratic innovation among non-participants. This study offers new insights into the latter of these factors.

We generally find broad support for local democratic innovations among Swedish citizens across innovation types as well as age groups. There are however important variations to consider. Young citizens are found to be more supportive of referendums, a more radical form of democratic innovation that challenges the logic of democratic policy-making in representative democracy, compared to older citizens. Further, and more surprisingly, we find that the youngest cohort in our study (age 16-19) are less supportive of online democratic innovations compared to most other age groups. This finding contrasts with earlier studies that have found young age as a strong determinant of online participation. While our finding does not directly contradict earlier studies: a lower support for online participation could theoretically emerge in a group of citizens where online participation is high, it might put them in a new light.. What our findings indicates is that the support for online participation among young people who do not participate in online democratic innovations may be relatively low. This finding puts the legitimacy of online democratic innovations among young people in question and should be taken into consideration when designing democratic innovations targeting young citizens.

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