

Youth and the populist wave

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Abstract

If the values of younger citizens and voters are the trend of the future, in what direction do they point? Scholars have long noted a decline in political engagement and knowledge among youth in developed democracies, with the fear that this may undermine the stability of liberal institutions. However, youth electoral behaviour appears inconsistent: in much of continental Western Europe, younger voters support populist parties of both left and right, but in the United States and the United Kingdom, only left-wing populist movements benefit from youth mobilization. We explain this divergence by arguing for a distinction between democratic apathy and democratic antipathy. Democratic apathy is characterized by scepticism regarding the value of democratic institutions, low turnout and lack of interest in politics, whereas democratic antipathy involves the active embrace of illiberal movements hostile to pluralistic institutions. In societies where youth do not face economic and social discrimination, democratic apathy is the more common trend, whereas in parts of continental Europe where youth face systematic social exclusion, apathy has become active antipathy.

Keywords

democratic consolidation, democracy, populism, public opinion, voting behaviour, youth

The ‘populist wave’ of 2016–2018 has seen Donald J. Trump elected to the White House, far-right populists sweep into the German parliament for the first time since 1945, xenophobic parties elected to high office in Poland and Italy and the United Kingdom vote to leave the European Union. To many observers, this series of events has come as a shock and a surprise: Why have voters come to renounce mainstream political parties and embrace candidates that reject liberal policies and institutions? This shock has been

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especially pronounced in academic circles. After all, political scientists had long emphasized that democracy in countries like Germany or the United States is consolidated and documented the spread of tolerant values across North America, Europe and the world as a whole.¹

But while the events of recent years have come as a great surprise, they need not have. For decades, political scientists have observed an erosion in the formal behaviours and values that are required in order to sustain democratic legitimacy. In many countries, electoral turnout, membership in political parties and political trust have all declined.² In a recent global survey conducted by Pew, a majority of citizens worldwide reported being dissatisfied with the way democracy is working in their country.³ But instead of interpreting the declining confidence in political elites, experts and the media as opening the door to new forms of toxic, populist, anti-establishment politics, leading scholars insisted on interpreting them as indicators of increasingly critical or assertive forms of citizenship.⁴

Much of this narrative is now giving way. After decades in which it seemed self-evident that supposedly consolidated democracies would remain stable in perpetuity and that the political space would belong to moderate parties and candidates, a major re-evaluation is taking place. Social scientists are finally grappling with the ways in which the democratic consensus might be more brittle than we have believed. Projects like Bright Line Watch are tracking threats to liberal democracy in countries like the United States, scholars of comparative politics such as Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt are explaining the lessons of democratic breakdown in Latin America and inter-war Europe for developed democracies today⁵ and even long-time optimists like Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart are examining the causes of what they call the ‘populist backlash.’⁶

Youth and democracy

Of particular interest in this debate are the values of younger citizens and voters, which point a sign towards the future evolution of democratic politics. On the one hand, scholars have long noted a decline in political engagement and knowledge among youth in developed democracies.⁷ On the other hand, in two countries – the United States and the United Kingdom – the young, when mobilized to vote, have been less likely to opt for populist positions and candidates, at least during the 2016 US presidential election and EU membership referendum in the United Kingdom. Does this imply that engaging with younger voters could be the key to ending the ascendancy of populist politics? Or, by contrast, could high levels of disaffection among younger cohorts mean that their entry to political life risks new forms of populist, anti-establishment movements?

One thing is clear: At present, younger generations are deeply disappointed with existing democratic institutions. Recent studies have found that the tendency towards taking a critical view of democracy, or even being open towards authoritarian alternatives to democracy, is more pronounced among the young than the old; taken together, this means that key components of what can be termed ‘democratic deconsolidation’ are more, not less, pronounced among the younger than among the older generation.⁸ When

asked to rate ‘how essential it is to live in a democracy’ on a scale of 1 to 10, for example, 72% of Americans born before World War II check ‘10’, the highest value, as do more than half of the same cohort in Europe. But among millennials – those born since the 1980s – only around a third of Europeans and Americans do the same.⁹

Since the completion of the last round of the World Values Survey in 2014, further support for the decline of democratic attitudes among young people has kept emerging from other sources. Data collected by YouGov across seven European countries in 2017 show that dissatisfaction with democracy among young Europeans is very widespread: In the United Kingdom, only half of people aged 16 to 26 believe that democracy is the best form of government. In France, Italy and Poland, less than half of young respondents do. Even in Germany, which has so far shown a less strong tendency towards democratic deconsolidation than other developed democracies, only about three in five young respondents believe that democracy is the best form of government.¹⁰ Meanwhile, data collected by the European Social Survey in its seventh and eighth rounds (in 2014–2015 and 2016–2017, respectively) show a continuing trend towards democratic dissatisfaction among millennial respondents in the European Union, with an especially sharp breakdown in democratic satisfaction among younger cohorts in Southern Europe (Figure 1).

Taken together, these data points strongly suggest that the young are not more committed to democracy than the old, nor indeed than young people had been two decades ago. However, these initial findings are compatible with a wide range of possible interpretations, some more positive than others. The key question, then, is whether younger citizens have grown antithetical towards liberal democracy – or whether they are merely apathetic.

Democratic apathy

The benign interpretation is that what we are observing is democratic apathy, rather than democratic antipathy. Younger respondents who claim that they no longer hold living in a democracy as essential, or who consider democracy a ‘bad’ way of running the country, may lack a clear preference for any alternative political arrangement. On this view, it is not that younger citizens in established democracies have discovered a penchant for authoritarian strongmen nor that they are deeply nostalgic for the authoritarian politics of the 20th century. Rather, they are simply disillusioned by the existing political elite and its inability to deliver meaningful improvements in their lives. This interpretation is consistent with the large number of millennials who report a lack of interest in politics and who have not engaged in democratic activities such as voting or joining political parties. And such political disengagement may, in turn, be reflective of a more general sense of cynicism and disengagement: as Paul Howe has recently argued, apathetic views towards democracy are correlated with a broader range of antisocial attitudes, including tolerance towards tax evasion, bribery and even theft.¹¹

Recent voting patterns lend some additional support to the ‘democratic apathy’ viewpoint. In both the 2016 US presidential election and the UK referendum on membership of the European Union, for example, the victory of populist candidates and causes

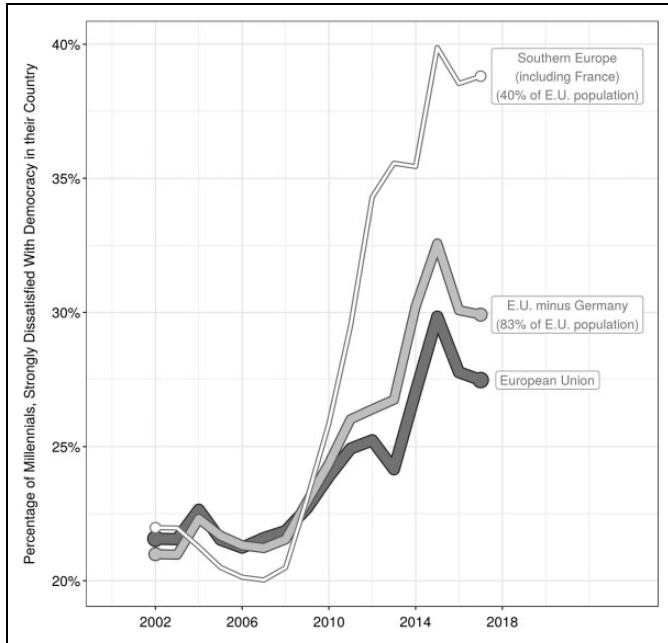


Figure 1. Strong dissatisfaction (0–3 on a 0–10 scale) with democracy among European millennials (respondents born after 1979), 2002–2017. Data from the European Social Survey, waves 1 to 8. ‘Strong’ dissatisfaction interpreted as a response of 0–3 on an 11-point scale to the question, ‘on the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [this country]?’ Due to changing country samples over time in the European Social Survey (ESS) data set, a constant country sample was ensured by first aggregating to a country-year data set and rolling forward country-year results between surveys such as to (i) maintain a full and consistent country sample and (ii) preventing changes in the country sample from affecting estimates of trends over time. Population-weighting applied during aggregation. Southern Europe includes Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, Cyprus and Greece; European Union includes all member countries of the EU.

occurred in good part because so many moderate voters withdrew from the electoral process altogether, leaving anti-establishment forces in control of the ballot box. In particular, establishment parties and candidates were unable to rouse enthusiasm among younger voters, who stayed at home rather than casting their vote. This also adds important nuance to claims that younger voters cleaved towards the Remain cause in the United Kingdom, or largely opposed the presidential candidacy of Donald J. Trump. In reality, over half of eligible voters under the age of 30 did not vote during the 2016 US presidential election, such that only one in four young Americans voted for Trump’s main rival (Figure 2). A similar explanation has been offered to explain the ‘Brexit’ vote in the UK referendum of 2016. And this may also help to explain the paradox of how party politics has become more polarized, despite less evidence of polarization among the public as a whole: due to this democratic disconnect, those of centrist views, by withdrawing from political parties and elections, have vacated the space to those on the extremes.

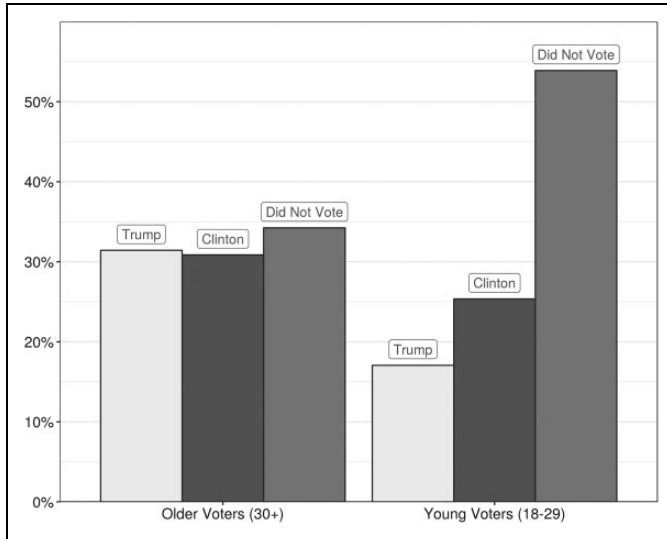


Figure 2. Voting in the US 2016 presidential election.

Source: Estimates based on data from the US Census Bureau and the CIRCLE (Center for Information and Research on Civil Learning and Engagement) election exit poll analysis.

Democratic antipathy

There is a strong case for interpreting youth disenchantment with democracy as a case of mere apathy: younger citizens, so this story goes, are simply ‘switching off’ from mainstream politics. However, there is also a growing case for an even more pessimistic interpretation: voters who start off by being cynical or apathetic can eventually be mobilized by anti-establishment parties and candidates that openly challenge liberal democratic norms such as freedom of speech, the independence of the press or the rule of law. Far from revitalizing centrist politics, therefore, the eventual mobilization of younger citizens could deepen political instability.

In this respect, it is worth noting that democracies beyond the United Kingdom and the United States show younger voters coalescing towards extremist parties rather than the political centre. Whereas during the 2012 French presidential election, millennials broadly supported the moderate campaign of François Hollande, 5 years later, over half of voters below the age of 25 lent their support to either far-right populist Marine Le Pen or far-left populist Jean-Luc Mélançon.¹² Similarly, in the 2017 elections to the German *Bundestag*, the right-populist *Alternative for Germany* was widely shunned by older German voters, winning a larger share of the vote among the youngest age cohorts, and doing best among voters aged between 30 and 44 years. In Greece, the far-right Golden Dawn continues to draw disproportionate support from young voters, with voters below the age of 25 being twice as likely to vote for this extremist party in the 2015 election than voters over the age of 55.¹³ This typifies a pattern across the European continent, whereby populist parties on both the right and left of the political spectrum draw their support disproportionately from younger voters (Figure 3).

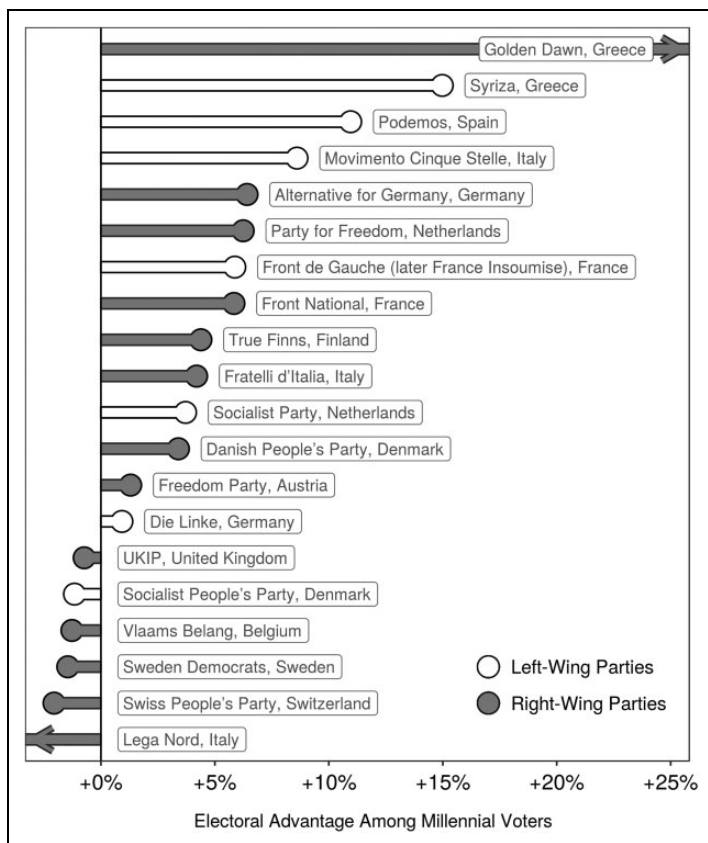


Figure 3. Populist parties in Europe, electoral advantage among millennial voters. Data from the European Social Survey, waves 1 to 8. Estimates from most recent available survey following the last parliamentary or presidential election. ‘Electoral advantage’ calculated as the difference between the share of millennial respondents who reported voting for that party and the share of millennials in the overall survey sample. Millennials defined as respondents born post 1979.

Further evidence of democratic antipathy among youth is reflected in the rise of extremist movements, in particular the set of causes that have coalesced under the label of the ‘Alternative’ or ‘Alt-Right’ – an umbrella term for political activism, much of it focused online, that is fluent in youth culture and uses memes to spread intolerant ideas. This growth of right-wing activism has also been associated with a sharp increase in recorded hate crimes, with the large majority of such acts committed by youth offenders.¹⁴ In mid-2017 the Anti-Defamation League noted an 86% increase in anti-Semitic incidents, while the Council on American-Islamic Relations reported a 91% year-on-year jump in Islamophobic hate crimes.

Another key question in assessing the degree of youth antipathy towards current liberal values is as much conceptual as it is empirical. It is clear that in recent years, a wide range of new populist movements has enjoyed strong support from young voters

and activists, in particular on the political left. In the first round of the 2017 French presidential elections, 27% of voters under the age of 35 supported *Unsubmissive France*, a left-populist movement whose first manifesto commitment is to abolish the French Fifth Republic. Similarly, Italy's Five Star Movement attracted a third of voters under 45 in the 2014 European parliamentary elections, compared to little more than a fifth among voters overall.¹⁵ In Greece, meanwhile, a plurality of young voters supported the populist *Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza)*, in the 2015 elections, and a majority voted No in the subsequent eurozone bailout referendum.¹⁶

The rapid rise of populist movements and their strong support among young voters are uncontroversial; what remains contested, however, is whether support for these movements should be seen as a sign of antipathy towards liberal democracy or merely with existing liberal parties of the centre-left and right.

Observers who believe that youth support for left-wing populist movements is benign make two primary arguments. First, they emphasize that these movements are less overtly xenophobic than most right-wing populist movements. This is true to a degree, though left-populist movements are typically Eurosceptic, engage in nationalistic rhetoric and are prone to anti-Semitism.¹⁷ Furthermore, it is a conceptual mistake to assume that only xenophobic movements could turn into a danger for democracy; as cases like Venezuela show, liberal democracies have, in the past, been destroyed by populist leaders that are not right-wing. Second, they emphasize that these movements often claim to be more truly democratic than establishment parties. However, that same claim holds true for right-wing movements like the French *National Rally* or the *Alternative for Germany*, which similarly claim to represent an excluded yet silent majority. The appropriate criterion, then, may be not whether parties and movements oppose all forms of democracy, but rather whether they are inimical to existing liberal democracies, including their representative and judicial institutions as well as the media. By that measure, *Unsubmissive France* and the *Five Star Movement* qualify as clearly as the French *National Rally* and the *Alternative for Germany*.

For this reason, scholars such as Yannis Stavrakakis, Giorgos Katsambekis and Cas Mudde have argued that parties like Syriza or the Five Star Movement should be classified as 'anti-system'. Though they often emphasize their democratic nature, they are inimical to representative democracy for two primary reasons: They have a narrow conception of 'the people' that excludes a broad class of perceived elites; and they are willing to undermine independent media, civil society organizations and parliamentary procedure when these conflict with their political goals.¹⁸ It should not come as a surprise, then, that supporters of populist parties on both the left and the right are, according to a 2017 Pew global survey, much more likely to favour 'direct democracy' over representative democratic institutions.¹⁹ Moreover, these affinities between right-wing and left-wing populism can also help us explain another curious phenomenon: the tendency of right and left-wing populists to work together in governing coalitions, as they have done in Greece (Syriza and Independent Greeks) and Italy (the Five-Star Movement and the Lega), and also the European Parliament, where the 'right-wing' *Alternative for Germany* and the 'left-wing' *Five Star Movement* now form a single joint party group. Such cooperation arguably reflects a deeper ideological affinity which spans from scepticism towards international organizations, to support for détente with Russia, to

anti-scientific causes such as opposing compulsory vaccination, and to broader conspiracy theories, including a willingness to indulge anti-Semitic tropes as part of their anti-establishment and ‘anti-elite’ rhetoric.

Restoring democratic legitimacy

Why are younger citizens in many Western democracies increasingly cynical of democratic governance and attracted to anti-system parties and movements? Some of the causes for the dwindling support for democracy among younger citizens are likely separate from those that explain changing opinions among older citizens. For example, it seems likely that younger people have a much less vivid understanding of the alternatives to liberal democracy than older respondents. When asked whether it is important to them to live in a democracy, members of older cohorts may remember their personal experience of living in totalitarian regimes, or the times when their country was at war with a fascist or communist country; part of the reason they believe it to be so important to live in a democracy, then, is that they recognize the importance of not living under a dictatorship. Members of younger cohorts, by contrast, may not have the same degree of understanding about non-democratic regimes;²⁰ because they have little knowledge of the history of totalitarianism in the 20th century, they ascribe less importance to living in a democracy.

Far from providing reassurance, this underlines how dangerous youth disenchantment with democracy can be. After all, the populists who are on the rise differ from earlier extremist movements precisely in that they do not openly advocate for fascism or communism. A widespread willingness among voters to try something new because they are deeply discontent with the status quo and thoroughly unafraid of what might happen tomorrow could easily put these populist movements in a position to undermine democratic institutions. As we have seen in countries like Turkey and Russia over the past decade – and may now be observing in countries like Poland and Hungary – it does not take jackboots and swastikas to fell liberal democracy.

The special causes of democratic disenchantment suggest that we should ponder some tailored remedies. If young people lack an understanding of the fragility of democracy – or indeed the dangers posed by its alternatives – then a renewed emphasis on basic democratic values might make a real difference. In particular, the educational systems of Western countries desperately need to be reformed to put a greater emphasis on civic education, the teaching of history and the transmission of fundamental liberal democratic principles.²¹

However, it would be a mistake to believe that the reasons for youth disenchantment are completely disconnected from the reasons why citizens of all ages have become increasingly angry at the political system over the past years. As Colin Crouch has argued for some time, democracy requires not only the formal mechanisms of citizen participation but also proof of genuine political agency. By contrast, what he terms ‘post-democracy’ – a situation where powerful minority interests become more active than the mass of ordinary people in making the political system work, and ‘boredom, frustration and disillusion’ replace active civic participation – risks creating a vicious circle of ever more unequal political influence, and more unequal economic

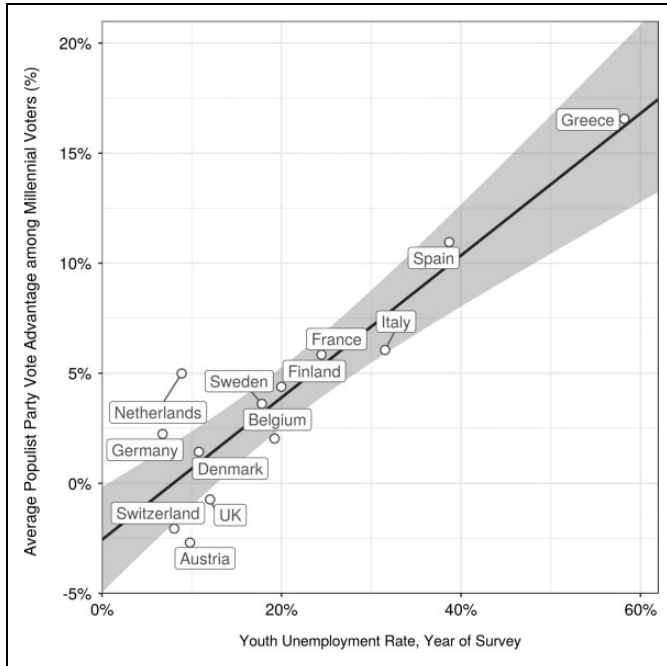


Figure 4. Youth unemployment and youth vote advantage among populist parties in Europe. Note: Data on voting behaviour from the European Social Survey, waves 1 to 8; most recent wave used in each case. This figure is the difference between the proportion of millennial respondents (born after 1979) in the total sample and the average proportion of millennials in the subsample who have voted for a populist party. Youth unemployment data from the World Bank, World Development Indicators, taken for the year in which the survey was conducted.

returns.²² The recent failure of Western democracies to deliver concrete life improvements for their younger citizens is associated with their dwindling legitimacy, and this is evidenced from the correlation between youth unemployment and millennial support for both left-wing and right-wing populist parties (Figure 4).

In many Western countries, it is the younger cohort that faces the harshest combination of relative deprivation, stagnant or declining real wages, higher indebtedness and lower rates of asset ownership, and all of these make a rejection of mainstream liberal democratic politics more likely. As authors such as Bo Rothstein and Eric Uslaner also argue, the effect of rising asset and income inequality is a social trap of falling political trust and declining institutional performance.²³ There is limited reason to believe that Western democracies are any more immune from such risks than transitional democracies have been when exposed to similar pressures. And so it is especially notable that attitudes to democracy in the longstanding democracies of Europe and North America correlate surprisingly well with inequality in pre-tax income: the most plausible explanation is that the relative stagnation of living standards experienced by many younger citizens over the past decades has convinced them that political elites are self-serving and made them deeply pessimistic about the future.²⁴

If we are to understand the populist wave of recent years, and to recognize the extent of the danger that will face liberal democracies throughout Europe and America in future, it is necessary to acknowledge and analyse democratic disenchantment among the young. For now, this disenchantment largely expresses itself as apathy: manifested through low levels of political information, lower rates of voting, lower membership of political parties and cynicism regarding democratic politics. But in some cases, this apathy has already been mobilized into outright hostility towards liberal institutions, and in other cases it is only because the right political entrepreneur has yet to appear on the scene who is capable of mobilizing widespread latent feelings of frustration and relative deprivation.

One of the remedies to this problem is rhetorical and educational: Faced with an unprecedented threat to their legitimacy, liberal democracies need to recommit themselves to the task of transmitting their values to a young generation. But talk without action is ultimately not going to be enough. And so the only way to solve the long-term drivers of the populist wave is to ensure that democracies once again deliver on the traditional metrics of success – including a greater degree of equality and a more rapid increase in living standards from one generation to the next.²⁵

Notes

1. Inglehart and Welzel (2005); Norris (2002); and Dalton and Welzel (2014).
2. E.g. Solijonov (2016); Foa and Mounk (2015).
3. Wike et al. (2019).
4. Norris et al. (2011).
5. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018); Foa and Mounk (2019b).
6. Inglehart and Norris (2018).
7. Foa and Mounk (2016).
8. Foa and Mounk (2017a, 2017b).
9. Foa and Mounk (2016).
10. See ‘Young Europe 2017 – The Youth Study of TUI Foundation’. *TUI Stiftung*.
11. Howe (2017).
12. Bamat (2017).
13. See Sakellariou (2015).
14. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, the majority of hate crime offenders are under the age of 26. Cited in Steinberg et al. (2003).
15. Signorelli (2014).
16. Public Issue for Avgi, Publication date: 3 July 2015.
17. See Tindall (2017).
18. Stavrakakis and Katsambekis (2014); Mudde (2017); Pappas (2016).
19. Wike et al. (2017).
20. Foa (2018).
21. Mounk (2017).
22. See Crouch (2004).
23. See Rothstein and Uslaner (2005); Rothstein (2011); and Uslaner (2008).
24. Foa (2016); Mounk (2017, 2018).
25. Foa and Mounk (2019a).

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