

CHANGES IN POLITICAL CULTURE AMONG YOUNGER GENERATIONS TRIGGER LOSS IN TRUST IN DEMOCRACY AND PREFERENCE FOR TECHNOCRATIC ALTERNATIVES

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Abstract:

Democratic values are on the crossroads, facing threats such as polarization, economic uncertainty, social unrest, disinformation or the challenge of raising authoritarian and illiberal regimes. When understanding changes and proposing measures to strengthen political culture, younger generations should come to the center of the debate, as this cohort will be the one to consolidate said trends for better or worse. The youngest voting generation (centennials) will be among the most affected by the long-term the effects of the pandemic; the scaling geopolitical tensions and the overall decrease in democracy across the world that high-impact studies have warned about. This piece will address one of the key characteristics that this generation exhibits when analyzing their political values: the support for technocracy and even census voting. The World Values Survey (WVS)'s last edition measures citizens decision-making preferences, which was crossed with 38 "Free" countries in the Freedom in the World report 2021. Partial results show that "expert decision making" over "politicians" is stronger in people under 29 years old in developed countries, when compared to the average population. In the case of recently-established democracies, the difference between generations was mixed. Several interpretations can be withdrawn from these results, and the recommendations towards strengthening political culture should not ignore this reality and rather address it to consolidate democracy instead of leaving room for authoritarian technocratic narratives to penetrate across the youth¹.

Keywords: Youth, Democracy, Political Culture, Technocracy, Decision Making

Introduction.

Although performance results of democracies around the world are mixed depending on each country's context, research on measurable freedom and institutional defense of basic civil rights, has shown losses for more than a decade. These reports include international indexes such as the Freedom in the World², The Economist³ or several Pew Research Centre reports⁴.

¹ This issue revisits results obtained from an analysis on the 2021 Freedom in the World report and the latest data from the World Values Survey. These data were first released on the Hitotsubashi University *Institute for Global Governance Research, Issue Briefing, N°10* on September 2022, under the title: "Are disengaged centennials endangering democracy? A technocratic future for decision-making might be brewing within consolidated democracies".

²Freedom House (2021) "Democracy Under Siege", available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>

³ The Economist (2021), "Democracy has a very bad year", available at: <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2021/02/02/global-democracy-has-a-very-bad-year>

⁴ Pew Research Center. (2017). Globally, broad support for representative and direct democracy. Washington, DC: available at: <http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/10/16/globally-broadsupport-for-representative-and-direct-democracy/>

Recently established democracies, especially those institutionalized after the Cold War, are on the spotlight as they exhibit more fragility to change and a different approach to democratic values⁵. As societies around the world face upcoming challenges such as polarization, economic uncertainty, social unrest, disinformation or raising authoritarian and illiberal regimes, it is necessary to create responses that aim at strengthening political culture. In that context, younger age-cohort will have a larger responsibility on the consequences of these phenomena, as they are the most affected by the crises that will determine their future opportunities or the hindering factor for their development in society⁶. Even though millennials (ages 27-41 according to Pew Research⁷) are often the focus of research, new available sources enable a deeper understanding around the *sub-29 generation*, mostly composed by centennials, who have experienced different challenges compared to their predecessors.

To provide some highlights on this uncertain scenario, this piece reviews recent research based on data from the World Values Surveys (from here on WVS)⁸ and from international indexes such as Freedom House (specifically 38 countries that were tagged as “free” on that year) and available data from polls and surveys, to present an introductory dimension of this discussion. It is important to note that, even though the researched group is the most interconnected and affected by similar globalized challenges, world views and values differ considerable depending on the country’s democratic performance and demographics⁹.

For example, antisocial behavior such as a tendency to cheat on taxes among sub-29s was detected even in the most established republics, but in some young democracies such as Mongolia, young people were more inclined to engage in these activities compared to the country’s average. In terms of economic growth as an aim for democratic countries, newly developed democracies put much more emphasis in the need for economic achievements than developed nations, while Greece showed the largest disparity between its youngest and the general population in this area¹⁰.

A much more generalized trend is the support for expert decision making on this generation, in which young people from many democracies seem to distrust politicians and prefer specialized individuals when creating policies. There were exceptions such as Chile, in which young people are more skeptical of this policy-making mechanism. In this same young democracy, more people were inclined to engage in violence for political gains.

The contribution of this piece is its focus on young democracies that are more sensible to change and the loss in trust for democracy, along with the overall analysis of this rather unexplored generation and the interpretation of the results. Moreover, the effects of the Covid 19 pandemic (not measured by these data) could have affected future behavioral trends for

⁵ A case of this is Tunisia, one of the only countries that had remained democratic after the counter revolutions on the Arab Spring movements, and that is now becoming unstable. Anouar Boukhars (2017) The fragility of elite settlements in Tunisia, *African Security Review*, 26:3, 257-270, DOI: 10.1080/10246029.2017.1294093

⁶ Klint Jensen, K. (2015) Future Generations in Democracy: Representation or Consideration?, *Jurisprudence*, 6:3, 535-548, DOI: 10.1080/20403313.2015.1065649

⁷ Dimock, M. (2019, January 17). *Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins*. Pew Research Center; Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>

⁸ Haerpfer, C., Inglehart, R., Moreno, A., Welzel, C., Kizilova, K., Diez-Medrano J., M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin & B. Puranen et al. (eds.). (2020) “World Values Survey: Round Seven - Country-Pooled Datafile. Madrid, Spain & Vienna, Austria”: JD Systems Institute & WWSA Secretariat. doi.org/10.14281/18241.13

⁹ Hannig Núñez, S. "Are Disengaged Centennials Endangering Democracy?" *GGR Issue Briefing*, No. 10.

¹⁰ Greece was one of the country’s in Europe which’s youth (especially millennials) has been most affected by the 2008 crisis. Unsuccessful policy implementation and lack of opportunity might have affected the country’s expectations for the future. Lefteris Kretsos (2014) Youth policy in austerity Europe: the case of Greece, *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 19:sup1, 35-47, DOI: [10.1080/02673843.2013.862730](https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2013.862730)

this and future generations, as it happened for the Millennials after the 2008 financial crisis¹¹. Recommendations for further research should include a deeper understanding of each country's characteristics and proposals to help institutions face these societal changes.

Generational traits.

Even though people's opinions vary even within countries and socioeconomic distributions, there are cultural and circumstantial factors that affect the way people behave according to their demographic traits. For example, millennials constitute a generational group of citizens born in the 80s and mid-90s that was largely affected by the Subprime crisis, and therefore had exhibited clear behavioral similarities, as they have been regarded as a highly educated generation with poor economic prospects which caused frustration with the system¹².

Following that same analysis, exposure to internet and digitalized debate has been addressed as a cultural trait of younger citizens, which is said to homologize behavior and opinions across borders in which notions, concepts and values are shared¹³. The exposure to this environment has dragged people to become more skeptical of facts and digital content, but also fostered polarization, which undermines values and the ability of civil society to serve as a check for undemocratic tendencies¹⁴. This upcoming generation will also be much more affected by the Covid-19 pandemic from top to bottom, that is, from school students to recently graduates, but these effects are not yet measurable.

Previous studies also used WVS data to elaborate over younger generations' attitudes towards democracy. While authors Foa and Mounk (2016) proposed that citizens in western democracies have "become more cynical about the value of democracy as a political system"¹⁵, emphasizing on millennials attitudes; Voeten (2016) concluded that younger people always tended to be more critical of democracy, no matter which generation they belonged to or which year they were born, and they became less critical with age¹⁶. However, cultural traits are important in explaining what differences.

Because of generational renewal and the expectable time researchers need to conduct thorough research, previous studies had focused on Millennials' attitudes, but mostly within developed countries or only in the United States, leaving the question of how spread these trends were, if they were even generalizable and what factors seems to change when evaluating young people's perceptions outside the developed democracies' realm¹⁷.

Democratic attitudes across free countries.

¹¹ Milkman, R. (2017). "A New Political Generation: Millennials and the Post-2008 Wave of Protest". *American Sociological Review*, 82(1), 1–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122416681031>

¹² Mannheim (1928); explains that generations tend to be marked by significant events or crises that impact their

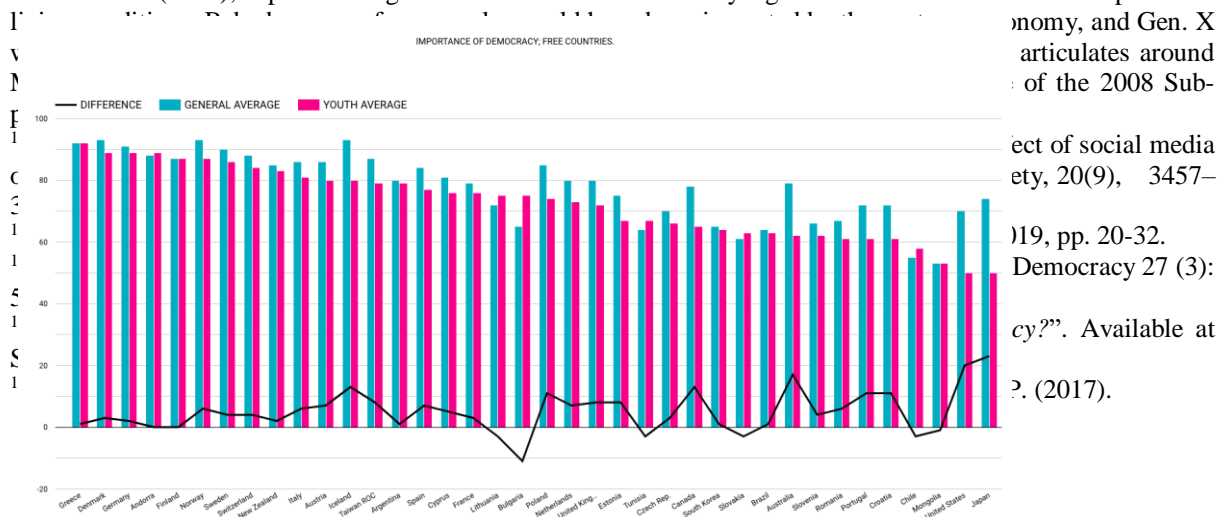


Figure 1 WVS Q. 250, comparison between "Very/totally important" (8-10 pt), of the country's average and the under 29th Average. Built in Data Studio. S. Hannig Núñez., 2022.

When conducting cross-analysis between the analyzed data bases, the first issue that comes to light is that the freedom score of countries does not necessarily correlate with citizens manifested support for this governance system. Overall, the youth in consolidated western democracies expressed more cultural entanglement with the idea of democracy than some developing countries, like Romania, Chile or Mongolia, but indifference or apathy towards democracy was also strongly detected in Japan, the United States and Australia. Except from some specific cases, as Bulgaria or Tunisia, sub-29-year-olds put less emphasis on the importance of democracy than the country's average. The results could indicate both dissatisfaction with the system, honest indifference to the governance mechanism or other factors that need to be explored.

Antisocial behavior is not a global trend.

Despite the above-mentioned statement, experts such as Howe (2017) dismiss the direct relation between the in-satisfaction with democracy and the erosion of values. The author expresses that stating: "*democracy is important*" is not enough to defend or help consolidating its values. Howe therefore focuses on targeting another source for erosion: antisocial behavior, which he measures in terms of younger generations condemning acts such as tax evasion or bribery in their societies. He also criticizes the notion of generalization in studies conducted in the US towards a whole generational group and warns that it is necessary to include other perspectives¹⁸. Two of these behaviors would be how much do the sub-29 group justify cheating on taxes and using political violence to achieve political objectives. In tax evasion condemnation (figure 2), young people in consolidated democracies tend to have a similar or even more drastic position in relation with their population's average. For example, even though Japanese youth ranked more indifferent than other democracies, they also are much more severe in condemning tax evasion, and strongly reject violent means, which could be interpreted as if they support deliberation to solve social problems, a meaningful characteristic of democracy¹⁹.

In contrast, countries such as Mongolia, Chile or Brazil, have young people that seem more skeptical of their government and tend to justify cheating in taxes more. In terms of violence justification, Tunisia is among the countries that rejected this behavior the most, while Mongolia, Cyprus and Canada expressed a larger justification of it. Therefore, the consolidation of democratic values and the concern of antisocial behavior should not be only attributed to young democracies but further explored in a case-to-case analysis.

¹⁸ Howe, P. (2017). "Eroding Norms and Democratic Deconsolidation". *Journal of Democracy* 28(4), 15-29. doi:10.1353/jod.2017.0061.

¹⁹ Klint Jensen, K. (2015), Op. Cit.

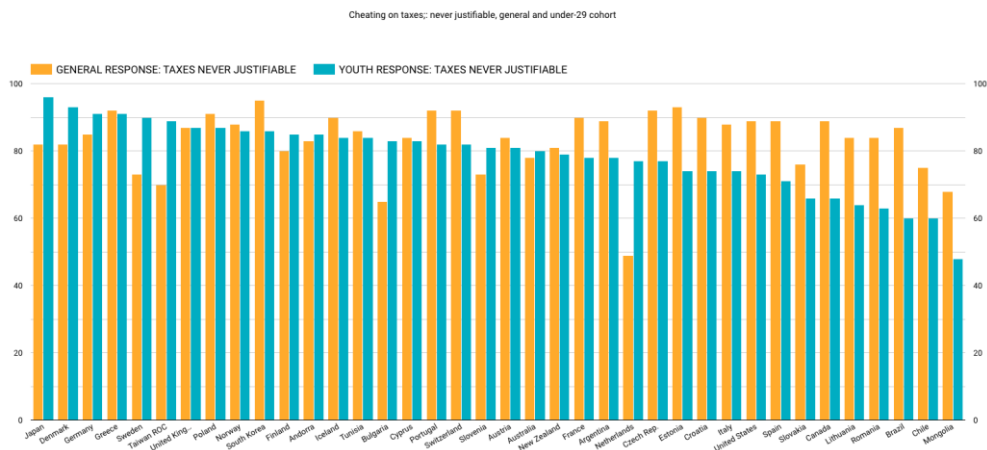


Figure 2 WVS Q. 180, comparison between “Never justifiable“ (1-3 pt), of the country’s average and the under-29 average. Built with Data Studio. S. Hanniq Nuñez, 2022.

Finally, as shown on figure 3, political violence varies a lot between nations and does not seem to respond to the nature of the analyzed democracy or regional trends, but to case-to-case causality. In Mongolia, though the one in which violence seems more justified, did not exhibit a large difference between young people and the general population’s opinion, which could be due to internal events in the countries. Other cases, as the US, Canada or Cyprus, showed developed between the average sample and the sub-29-year-old group. Chile, another recently reestablished democracy, also ranked low in this measure, as it did in other analyzed variables.

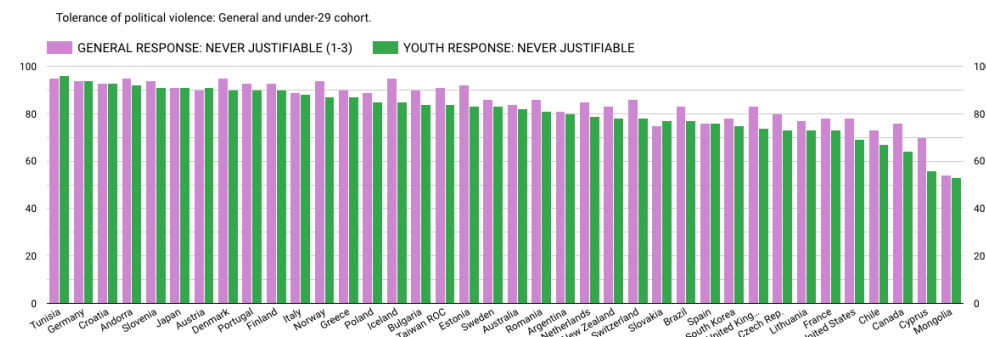


Figure 3 WVS Q. 194, comparison between “Never justifiable“ (1-3 pt), of the country’s average and the under-29 average. Built with Data Studio. S. Hanniq Nuñez, 2022.

Decision making and performance are the key issues to understand centennials.

Along with the antisocial behavior review, the performance and decision-making preference of countries also shows interesting characteristics of young people’s relation with democracy. In a 2019 study about democratic values, *Fondation pour l’innovation politique* found that 48% of younger citizens (under 35 years old) in the were keen to support an educational census-vote over participatory democracy. Epistocracy among this age cohort has also been detected by other studies, specially related to decision making mechanisms, which is sometimes related with technocracy²⁰. WVS data does not have questions on censitary vote

²⁰ Chiru, M., & Enyedi, Z. (2022). Review attitudes towards technocracy in developing countries and find that technocracy and civil political participation are not exclusive on one another.

preference, but it does review young people’s support for experts -and not the government-taking decisions of national importance.

Interestingly, the largest gap in young support for expert decision making appears in more consolidated western democracies, such as the Netherlands, New Zealand, or Canada. This might indicate that young people in these countries are likely to stay disengaged with traditional institutions compared with their predecessors and look for technical input to take decisions rather than elected leaders. Asian democracies, such as Japan or Taiwan follow this same trend, while South Korea youth is slightly less supportive of technocracy than the average. On top of the list, countries like Croatia, Slovenia, Romania, or Slovakia have a large share of their population supporting this mechanism (+70%), nevertheless, the gaps between generations vary, and is not as wide as in the formerly mentioned examples. Therefore, historic, and cultural reasons might have an impact on those results.

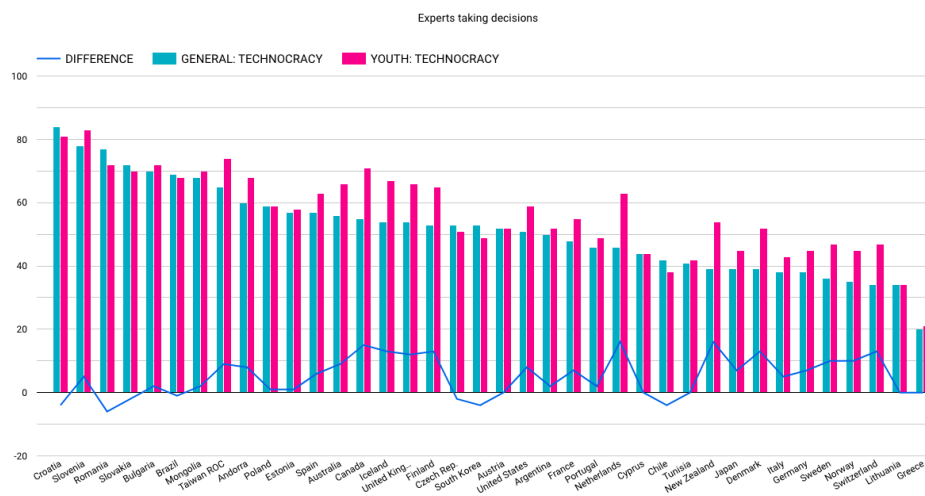


Figure 4 WVS Q. 236. Having experts, not government, making decisions (...) Built with Data Studio. S. Hannig Nuñez, 2022.

One explanation for this is that, in an era of highly polarized societies, decision-making is sometimes judged as a mere political interpretation of reality (and ideological struggles) rather than facts²¹. On top of that, disinformation and fake news inject more uncertainty and doubt which might influence a generation that is highly aware of these methods of deception and how some politicians have fallen into them. The recent experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic-policy might provide an example to this. Some societies were flooded with fake news and provided unscientific responses, while other governments abused their power taking advantage of the sanitary emergency or interpreting only one aspect of reality. Therefore, so support for technical expertise could serve as a hypercorrection of these trends in which distrust for polarized views makes people look for the opposite alternative.

On the other end of the spectrum, Greece appears again as an outlier, as its youth is the one with the lowest support for this kind of practice. This does not mean that these young citizens trust their current government more, but they think experts should have a less power. In authoritarianisms, technocrats are sometimes used as “shields” to justify unilateral actions from the government. Examples of this are industrialism in the Soviet Union, cases of

²¹ Hakobyan Z. et. al., Populism and Polarization in Social Media Without Fake News: The Vicious Circle of Biases, Beliefs and Network Homophily (August 11, 2019). CFS Working Paper, No. 626, 2019, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3435817> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3435817>

populist technocracy in Latin America²², trends in current Russia²³ or what is currently happening in the People's Republic of China^{24 25}.

Countries that had an authoritarian past know about this better than consolidated ones, and thus might be less inclined to support technocrats. For example, in Chile, a *rather technocratic* country in practice, expert decision-making support is low on average and even lower across centennials. The country has recently experienced political unrest and demands to finish “Pinochet’s dictatorship legacy”, but the new constitution that was a supposed to challenge this, was rejected by 62% of the population and most new proposals include consulting and giving power to experts²⁶, so current events might have shift general opinion on this issue.

Conclusions.

Differences across countries (in stated values’ review) indicate that age-cohort is not enough to generalize behavior in a democratic environment, and even less when trying to establish global trends. Elements such as the nature of the democracy, internal affairs, history, and their economic performance also affect both generational perceptions, social behavior, and differences between nations.

Despite the above-mentioned gaps, support for technocracy and expert decision making seems to be a strong characteristic among the sub-29-generation in democracies, in comparison with the general population. The former, from consolidated ones such as Canada, the Netherlands, or the United Kingdom to developing nations such as Argentina or Bulgaria. It is important to mention that a country’s population can exhibit both strong democratic values and preference for technocracy, and it is the case for many of the countries that show this phenomenon. Nevertheless, this also indicates a lack of trust in conventional democratic mechanisms for policy making and could foster future support for other paths to elite-democracy or even authoritarianism. This is a critical time to discuss this issue, especially considering the dramatic changes in governance that some societies undertook during the recent Covid-19 pandemic, when incorporating “scientific-based-policies in people’s daily life.

Even though there is room for researching the reasons for this change in preference, policy makers should not ignore this reality, and should interact with the youth, accordingly, avoiding the antagonization of experts and politicians. A way to do this is considering and publicizing specialized arguments and figures in the decision-making process, to enhance trust of this new generation towards an efficient and fact-based democracy. Providing tools to the new generation to expand the support for liberal democracies internally and through the international community may help to counter illiberal trends that have endangered the future

²² De la Torre, C. (2013). Latin America’s Authoritarian Drift: Technocratic Populism in Ecuador. *Journal of Democracy* 24(3), 33-46. [doi:10.1353/jod.2013.0047](https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2013.0047).

²³ Schleiter, P. (2013) Democracy, Authoritarianism, and Ministerial Selection in Russia: How Presidential Preferences Shape Technocratic Cabinets, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 29:1, 31-55, DOI: 10.1080/1060586X.2013.778544

²⁴ Xiao, G. (2003). China’s Changing of the Guard: The Rise of the Technocrats. *Journal of Democracy* 14(1), 60-65. [doi:10.1353/jod.2003.0023](https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2003.0023).

²⁵ Froissart, C. (2019) From outsiders to insiders: the rise of China ENGOs as new experts in the law-making process and the building of a technocratic representation, *Journal of Chinese Governance*, 4:3, 207-232, DOI: 10.1080/23812346.2019.1638686

²⁶Ex Ante (2022) 40% prefiere expertos para redactar nueva constitución. [40% prefers experts to write the new constitution] (2022, September 8). *Ex-Ante*. <https://www.ex-ante.cl/encuesta-udd-40-cree-que-especialistas-y-expertos-designados-debieran-redactar-nueva-constitucion/>

of democracies. The sub-29 voters **can be an asset for democratic consolidation if their concerns are internalized. Raising awareness of the benefits of a democratic system and reforming its fundamental flaws, as well as**

Finally, updating and enlarging the scope of the data and sample can help better understanding how to interpret these results. It is important to consider that WVS data was gathered shortly before the Covid-19 pandemic caused an unprecedented disruption in governance, so reassessing is necessary to see if these trends were dissolved or enhanced by the societal changes of the last years. Moreover, research should include profiling of what does each country perceive as democracy, its values and expectations, especially among the most-concerning countries.

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