1
Conceptualising Young Citizens

Questions of youth participation are fundamentally about citizenship. Yet, both the statutory and discursive markers of youth citizenship in the UK and Australia are ambiguous and young people receive mixed messages about their rights, responsibilities and opportunities to exercise citizenship. In the context of an apparent decline in formal political engagement in advanced democracies, increased dissatisfaction with the institutions and mechanisms of democracy and limited development of democratic society and polity associated with social and economic inequality, there has been a renewed interest in theorising citizenship (for example, Turner, 1990). This has led to: claims that citizenship should play an independent normative role in political theory; renewed emphasis on the Aristotelian ‘good citizen’; and renewed emphasis on concepts of ‘active citizenship’ and ‘responsible citizenship’ in theory and public policy (for example, Kymlicka and Norman, 1994; Marsh et al., 2007: 33; Stokes, 2002: 24). As such, policy and research in the area of youth citizenship take place in the context of broader debates on democracy, the role of citizens, forms of participation and the ways in which these are being configured in a networked society. How are these to be read in the context of changes in modern nation states as a result of globalisation and changing systems of governance at the local and national levels? What kinds of political identities and civic cultures might be emerging under the conditions of late modernity and are these evident among young people? How are youthful political identities influenced by policies aimed at young people which are opening up new opportunities to connect into policy networks? How might institutions and traditional political elites respond to meet the emerging expectations and civic cultures of young citizens?
Normative ideas about what constitute ‘good’ or ‘active’ citizens vary amongst different democratic theories. So too is there variance in the policies and approaches to youth participation. This chapter begins by exploring how participation is conceptualised in citizenship theory and in relation to young people. It then considers new understandings and ways of researching youthful political participation in the context of digital media and builds a framework for studying managed, top-down youth participation policies alongside the ‘bottom-up’ networked, collaborative and often youth-driven activities associated with many youth-serving and youth-led NGOs.

The participation of ‘good’ citizens

The question of what youth political participation is – or should be – how it can be fostered and what relationship it has to the state and other social institutions and actors depends on which theory of citizenship is drawn upon. While citizenship is a highly contested concept, the literature can be broadly summarised according to how different theories grant citizenship status and what participatory acts are thought to be indicative of a ‘good’ citizen, according to the relative emphasis that they place on ‘rights’, ‘responsibilities’ and ‘difference’.

‘Good citizenship’ as the exercise of rights

Social policy in advanced democracies typically reflects liberal conceptualisations of citizenship whereby young people are constructed as apprentice citizens emphasising the need to socialise young people for ‘minimal’ (Evans, 1995: 16), or ‘thin’ citizenship (Marsh et al., 2007). As liberal theory views democracy primarily as an institutional arrangement designed to protect the legal and political rights of individuals (from arbitrary or oppressive acts by government or individuals), ‘rights’ are privileged as the regulating mechanism of democracy (Habermas, 1996; Stokes, 2002). These rights are pursued in the ‘public sphere’ by individuals acting autonomously and according to relatively narrow definitions of the ‘politics’, arenas and targets of political action. The ‘good young citizen’ successfully transitions to adulthood by achieving educational and employment status, becoming an economically independent and productive member of society who is law abiding and votes in elections. Socialisation is typically assessed by measuring young people’s participation in political parties, voting in elections, political attitudes and literacy (Civics Expert Group, 1994; Lean, 1996; Martin, 2012). The normative