

Trust in Institutions and Political Engagement Among Students: a Quantitative Research

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Abstract

Establishing a relation based on trust between citizens and institutions leads to a good functioning of society and a legitimation of the political system. According to previous research (IRES, 2010, 2012, 2016, IMAS, 2011), Romanians – particularly youth, show low confidence in institutions, especially in politics. Why does this generate negative effects? If citizens have confidence in institutions, they can give a meaning to their civic and political involvement. When level of trust tends to be negative, the motivations to engage in civic or political actions will decrease based on the presumption that even if change is desired, the institutions will not allow it to happen. Thus, the paper aims to analyse the degree of students' trust in public institutions and their civic/ political behaviour, in the context in which these indicators can influence – on medium and long term -, the type of political culture and the relationship between government and citizens. The study is based on a quantitative research conducted between December 2019 – January 2020 among students from three specializations within the Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi, Romania on a sample of 433 subjects, and had as main directions of analysis: the level of trust in public institutions, the forms of civic/ political involvement practiced by students, the ability to effect changes at high level. The results bring into attention that youth have limited trust in institutions and this fact can justify an apathy condition and insecurity regarding social and political change. At the same time, most students are unsatisfied by the Romanian democracy regime. The most common forms of civic and political involvement over the last year have been voting, signing petitions and participating in volunteer oriented work.

Keywords: political culture, public institutions, voting, democracy, civic and political engagement

Rezumat

Stabilirea unui raport de încredere între cetățeni și instituții conduce la o bună funcționare a societății și la o legitimare a sistemului politic. Potrivit cercetărilor anterioare (IRES, 2010, 2012, 2016, IMAS, 2011), românii – și mai ales tinerii -, manifestă o încredere scăzută în instituții, în special în cele politice. De ce acest

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lucru generează efecte negative? Dacă cetățenii au încredere în instituții, aceștia pot da un sens implicării lor civice și politice. Atunci când nivelul de încredere este scăzut, motivațiile care stau la baza implicării se vor diminua, plecând de la premisa că deși se dorește o schimbare, instituțiile nu o vor permite. Astfel, lucrarea își propune o analiză privind gradul de încredere manifestat de studenți în instituțiile publice și comportamentul civic/ politic al acestora, în contextul în care acești indicatori pot influența – pe termen mediu și lung -, tipul de cultură politică din societate și relația guvernați – guvernanți. Studiul are la bază o cercetare cantitativă derulată în perioada decembrie 2019-ianuarie 2020 în rândul studenților de la trei specializări din cadrul Facultății de Filosofie și Științe Social-Politice, pe un eșantion de 433 subiecți, și a avut ca principale direcții de analiză: nivelul de încredere în instituțiile publice, formele de implicare civică/ politică practicate de tineri, capacitatea cetățenilor de a genera schimbări la nivel înalt. Rezultatele aduc în atenție faptul că tinerii au încredere limitată în instituții și acest lucru poate genera o stare de apatie și insecuritate privind schimbările sociale și politice. Totodată, majoritatea studenților sunt nemulțumiți de democrația din România. Cele mai frecvente forme de implicare civică și politică din ultimul an au fost: votul, semnarea unei petiții și participarea la o acțiune de voluntariat.

Cuvinte-cheie: cultură politică, instituții publice, vot, democrație, implicare civică și politică

Résumé

Etablir un rapport de confiance entre citoyens et institutions conduit à un fonctionnement plus efficace de la société et à la légitimation du système politique. Selon les recherches antérieures (IRES, 2010, 2012, 2016, IMAS, 2011), les Roumains – et surtout les jeunes, témoignent une faible confiance aux institutions, en particulier aux institutions politiques. Pourquoi cela entraîne des effets négatifs ? Si les citoyens font confiance aux institutions, ceux-ci peuvent donner un sens à leur implication civique et politique. Lorsque le niveau de confiance est réduit, les motivations en qui réside le fondement de l'implication, diminueront, en partant de la prémisse que, bien qu'un changement soit souhaitable, les institutions ne le permettront pas. Ainsi, l'ouvrage ci-dessous propose une analyse du degré de confiance aux institutions publiques manifesté par les étudiants et le comportement civique/ politique de ceux-ci, dans le contexte où ces indicateurs peuvent influencer – à moyen et long terme – le type de culture politique de la société et la relation entre les gouvernants et les gouvernés. L'étude réside sur une recherche quantitative déroulée entre décembre 2019 et janvier 2020, parmi les étudiants de trois spécialisations de la Faculté de Philosophie et Sciences Social-Politiques, sur un échantillon de 433 sujets et elle a eu, comme principales directions d'analyse : le niveau de confiance aux institutions publiques, les formes d'implication civique/ politique pratiquées par des jeunes et la capacité des citoyens à générer des changements à un haut niveau. Les résultats attirent l'attention sur le fait que les jeunes ont une confiance limitée dans les institutions et cela peut générer un état d'apathie et d'insécurité concernant les changements sociaux et politique. La majorité des étudiants, également, sont insatisfaits de la démocratie de la Roumanie. Les plus fréquentes formes d'implication civique et politique de leur dernière année ont été : le vote, la signature d'une pétition et la participation à une action de volontariat.

Mots-clés: culture politique, institutions publiques, vote, démocratie, implication civique et politique

1. Introduction. General considerations

Youth perceptions regarding the political system generates different types of civic and political behaviours and – in time, reflects on the political culture of the society and the relation between citizens and government. As Dogan and Pelassy show (1996, p. 34), political culture refers to „a set of political beliefs, feelings and values that are specific to a nation at a given time”. Also, political culture expresses „the level of knowledge in the field of political organization and leadership, becoming a *sin qua non* condition for an effective policy” (Pripp, 2002, p. 210). From Almond and Verba perspective (1996, p. 44), people are enlisted in political culture as they are socialized in non-political roles and social systems. In order to have a participant culture (specific to a democratic system), citizens must be oriented towards the input and output aspects of the political system, and embrace a pro-active attitude. There are different types of citizen activism: „individualistic-based activities, contacts with those in authority and collective action” (Pattie & Seyd, 2003, p. 465). But in order to act, people need to have trust in authorities and the capacity of public contestation.

When it comes to youth, research studies (IMAS, 2011, IRES, 2010, 2012, TNS Political & Social, 2013, 2018) bring into attention that Romanian young people have a low trust in institutions by comparison with other age categories, are not satisfied by the political system, and are not interested to a great extent about politics. The lack of involvement can be a barometer of the public’s trust in the political process and in government. For instance, the mains reasons invoked by European youth regarding the lack of interest to participate at European elections were: the believe that the vote will not change anything, the fact that they are not sufficiently informed to vote, the perception that the European Parliament does not sufficiently deal with problems that concern them and that they are not interested in European politics and elections (TNS Political & Social, 2013). On the other hand, according to the life-cycle argument:

Young people participate less in politics given their low attachment to civic life, a characteristic that is fuelled by young people still going through education, being occupied with finding a partner, establishing a career, having higher mobility, dealing with the psychological transformation into adulthood, and so forth (Neundorf & Smets, 2017, p. 11).

Overall, there are different and complex approaches in specialty literature regarding civic and political engagement of young people. The paper focused on the relation between trust in institutions and civic/ political involvement, based on the presumption that if citizens have confidence in institutions, they can give a meaning to their civic and political involvement.

2. Research method and objectives

This paper presents some findings of a quantitative survey that has been conducted on a sample of 433 students from the following educational programs: Sociology, Social Work and Human Resources - Department of Sociology and Social Work, Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi. The survey was carried out within December 2019 – January 2020, as a practical application for the discipline Applied Sociology (Training) under my supervision, by a group of undergraduate students in Sociology. Their involvement and dedication to the project is appreciated, as this article was possible with their commitment and effort too. We used self-administered questionnaires, distributed by field operators before the beginning of lectures and seminars, in order to ensure a possible large participation rate. The criteria used in constructing the sample are the educational program and the year of study.

Table 1. Sample design (N=433)

Specialization	Percentage	Residence environment	Percentage
Social Work	52%	Urban	44%
Human Resources	33%	Rural	46%
Sociology	15%	Don't answer	10%
Year of study	Percentage	Gender	Percentage
First Year	62%	Female	85%
Second Year	11%	Male	15%
Third Year	27%		

Objectives: (1) To establish the level of students' trust in public institutions; (2) To identify most frequented ways of civic/ political engagement among students; (3) To highlight students' perceptions regarding democracy in Romania, (4) To identify students' perceptions regarding their ability to effect change through the political process by acting against an unfair law.

3. Data analysis and findings

3.1. Trust in institutions

Establishing a relation based on trust between citizens and institutions leads to a good functioning of society and a legitimation of the political system. If the youth have confidence in institutions, they can give a meaning to their civic and political involvement. When level of trust tends to be negative, the motivations to engage in civic or political actions will decrease based on the presumption that even if change is desired, the institutions will not allow it to happen. As the **Table 2** shows, students assign the highest level of trust to the National Army, three quarters of respondents said that they have very much and fairly much trust in this institution. The European Union has a significant level of confidence among students: 69 percent – very much and fairly much, while 66

percent of young people have express confidence in a great extent towards NATO. As the results show, the only three institutions that are invested with a high degree of trust are those that students have little or no daily contact.

When it comes to nongovernmental associations, 56 percent of respondents declared that they have very much and fairly much trust, while 37 percent mentioned a contrary position (fairly and very little), and seven percent did not express a point of view. By comparison, half of the subjects have trust in students' associations, 48 percent – fairly little and very little, and two percent did not answer. Students have a greater level of trust in Church (45 percent) rather than banks (43 percent), or Police (40 percent). On the other hand, although the sample includes socio sciences students, it is noteworthy that only 35 percent of them trust (very and fairly much) *public opinion surveys*, while 61 percent declared that have low trust in them (very and fairly little), and four percent didn't answer.

The number of students who have very and fairly much trust in Romanian Justice System amounts to 32 percent, slightly higher than the score obtained by Presidency (30 percent). In the last part of the ranking is also placed Romanian educational system – in which only 26 percent of respondents trust (very and fairly much), at a three points difference of Mass media, in which three quarters of students have less and fairly less trust. On the last three positions, with the lowest figures are the Parliament (15 percent), Government (10 percent) and Political parties (9 percent). Thus, overall, students have limited trust in institutions and this fact can justify an apathy condition and insecurity regarding social and political change.

Table 2. Students' trust in institutions

	Very much+ Fairly much	Fairly little+Very little	DK/DA		Very much+Fairly much	Fairly little+Very little	DK/DA
Army	75%	21%	3%	Surveys	35%	61%	4%
European Union	69%	26%	4%	Justice system	32%	66%	2%
NATO	66%	27%	7%	Presidency	30%	67%	3%
NGO's	56%	37%	7%	Romanian educational system	26%	72%	2%
Students associations	50%	48%	2%	Mass media	23%	75%	2%
Church	45%	53%	2%	Parliament	15%	82%	3%
Banks	43%	54%	3%	Government	10%	87%	3%
Police	40%	59%	1%	Political parties	9%	88%	3%

As regards the data analysis depending on certain socio-demographical characteristics, in general there are no significant differences depending on residence environment or the year of study regarding the institutions presented above. However, there are some differences based on gender, as the results point

out that females tend to have a higher level of trust in regards to institutions, but also based on the educational specialities:

- Women have more confidence in National Army than men: 76 percent of female students have very and fairly much trust, while the same position is supported by 63 percent of male students.

- A decrease in trust level regarding students' associations based on the year of study. A higher year of study showed a decrease in trust levels in comparison to first year students: from 56 percent of the first year students (fairly and very much trust), to 54 percent of the second year' students and 35% of the third year. As regards of respondents' gender, a slight difference can be observed toward females: 51 percent of them trust in a great extent (very much + fairly much) students' association versus 42 percent of males.

- Women tend to have more trust in the Church by comparison to men – this is the most significant difference based on gender. Thus, 49 percent of females have a high level of trust (very much and fairly much) in church, while only 22 percent of males share the same perspective. There is also a slight difference regarding specialization: 48 percent of Social Work students versus 40 percent of Human Resources students have a high level of trust in the Church.

- The Justice System is more trusted by students from Sociology (40 percent - very much and fairly much) compared to those from Social Work and Human Resources (30 percent). In addition, there is a significant difference gender wise: 33 percent of women have confidence in Romanian Justice System, while the same opinion is supported by 23 percent of men.

- Four out of ten female subjects have very and fairly much trust in Police versus three in ten male subjects.

- As data above show, women are more confident in some institutions than men. However, men respondents have trust to a greater extent in Presidency (40 percent of them) compared to women respondents (28 percent). An analysis depending on respondents' field of study shows a 16 points difference between students from Sociology and Social Work. Thus, while 41 percent of Sociology students trust the Presidency (fairly and very much), a third of Human Resources students share a similar point of view, and 25 percent of Social Work students.

- Based on specialization, the results show that students from Sociology have a higher level of trust in nongovernmental associations (63 percent) compared to Social Work students (52 percent), and have a slight difference to Human Resources students (57 percent). Also, Sociology students trust Public opinion surveys (52%) more compared to students from Human Resources (37 percent) and Social Work (29 percent).

- Nevertheless, analysis bring into attention another difference between academic program: Sociology students trust the educational system more (35 percent of them) compared to Social Work students (26 percent) and Human Resources students (20 percent).

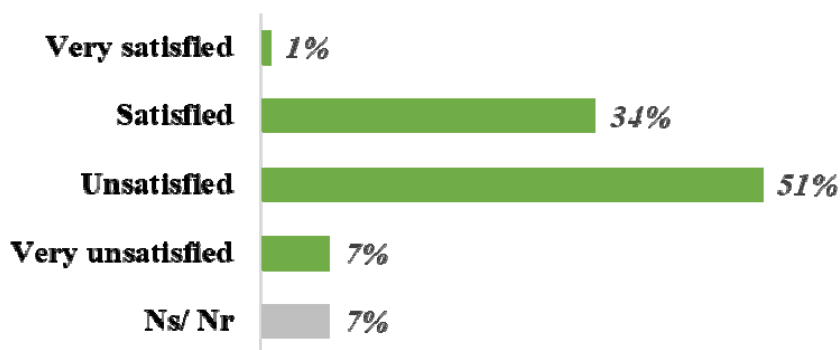


Figure 1. Are you satisfied by the democracy in Romania?

The opinions of youth regarding political system have a direct impact on civic and political engagement. A lack of trust in public institutions or a negative attitude towards the relationship between government and citizens may generate political and civic apathy.

Results stressed out (**Figure 1**) that a significant percentage of students are unsatisfied by the Romanian democracy regime (51 percent - unsatisfied and seven percent - very unsatisfied), while a positive opinion is supported by 35 percent of the students that were involved in the study (only one percent of them declared very satisfied). The analysis shows no significant differences based on gender, residence environment or academic program. When it comes to the perceptions related to the direction taken by things in Romania, 55 percent of those who think that the direction is good are satisfied about the way democracy is happening in Romania, while a similar position is taken by 24 percent of those who believe that we are going into a wrong direction. Data analysis also highlighted that people are less satisfied by democracy if they do not believe that citizens can influence decisions making processes. Thus, 45 percent of the students that agreed to a very great extent that citizens can influence important decisions at national level are satisfied and very satisfied about the particularities of our democracy, whilst the same position is maintained by 20 percent of those who think that citizens can influence to a very little extent important decisions.

3.2. Civic practices among students

Table 3. Civic practices among students

Over the last year, have you ...			
	Yes	No	DA
Voted	97%	2%	1%
Signed a petition	67%	32%	1%
Participated on a volunteer work	63%	35%	2%
Joined a protest/	31%	68%	1%

Over the last year, have you ...			
	Yes	No	DA
demonstration			
Joined an electoral meeting	16%	83%	1%
Participated on a Public consultation meeting	14%	84%	2%
Contacted a politician	13%	85%	2%

Civic participation is a mandatory condition in order to make changes at societal level. When it comes to students' behaviour, the results show (**Table 3**) that over the last year a significant percentage of the youth have voted in a political election (97 percent), while almost 7 in 10 students signed a petition (67 percent) and 63 percent of respondents have been involved in voluntary activities in the last 12 months. These are the most common civic practices among young people. On the other hand, students have not been very involved in protests, electoral or public consultation meetings: less than a third joined a protest/demonstration over the last year, 16 percent participated at an electoral meeting, 14 percent went to a public consultation meeting and 13 percent have contacted a politician.

How many students are involved in volunteer activities? According to the quantitative study (**Figure 2**), 25 percent of the respondents were involved – during the study period, in volunteer activities, and 21 percent were former volunteers. A significant part of the sample expresses their intentions to get involved in volunteer work in the future (is it a prestige reaction or a sincere intention?), and five percent of the respondents are not interested in this type of activities

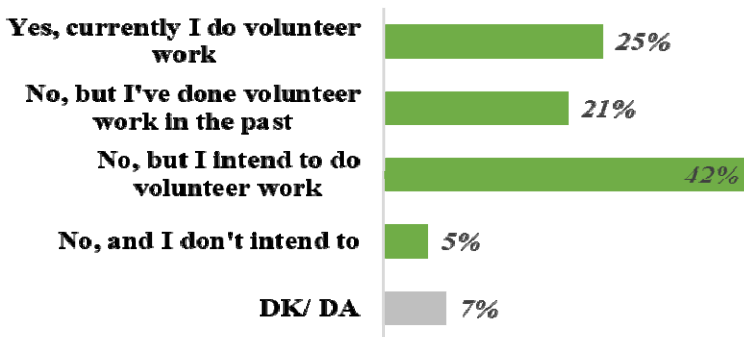


Figure 2. Are you currently involved in volunteer work?

As regards the data analysis depending in certain socio-demographical characteristics, results show that are more students from Social Work specialization (29 percent) involved in volunteer work compared to Sociology (22 percent) and Human Resources (21 percent). Also, 46 percent of the students from Social Work express their interest to make volunteer work in the future, while

the same intention was manifested by 37 percent of the respondents from Human Resources. Regarding gender, females are more active: 27 percent of them were involved by the time of the study in volunteer work, compared to 15 percent of males. There is no difference based on residence environment.

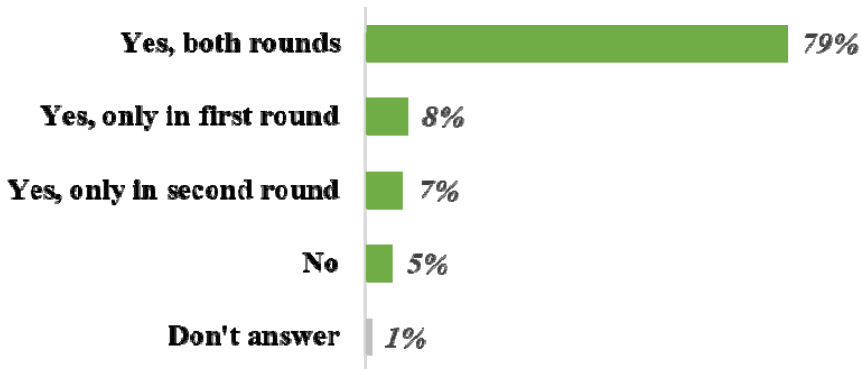


Figure 3. Have you voted on Presidential elections held on November 2019?

Voting can be perceived as a tool to generate change or to express trust in government and the political process. As it can be seen from **Figure 3**, a significant percent of the undergraduate students voted on both rounds of Presidential elections (79 percent), eight percent of respondents voted only in first round (10th of November 2019), and seven percent went to vote on the second round of the elections (24th of November 2019). The number of students who did not participate at presidential elections represents five percent and the main reasons invoked by those who did not express the right to vote in November are: lack of time, lack of desire (*I did not wanted to*), not having the right to vote, lack of options or trust in candidates. The results show no significant difference of the voting behaviour based on gender, residence environment, undergraduate program or year of study.

3.3. Citizens – government relation

In a participatory culture, citizens have strong confidence in their ability to effect change through the political processes via different types of actions. A large majority of respondents consider that voting makes a difference: 60 percent of the subjects declared that a person's vote matter to a very great extent, and 29 percent to a great extent. One in ten students consider that someone's vote cannot make a difference overall (**Figure 4**).

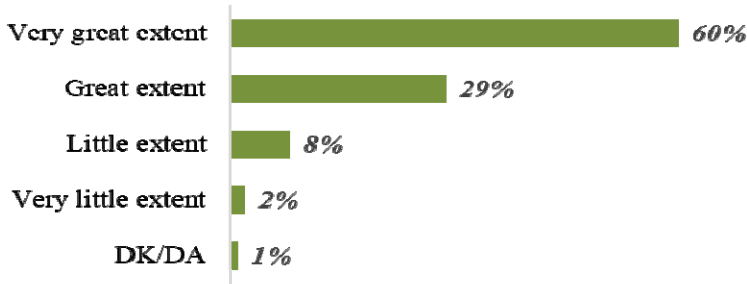


Figure 4. In your opinion, to what extent does a person's vote matter?

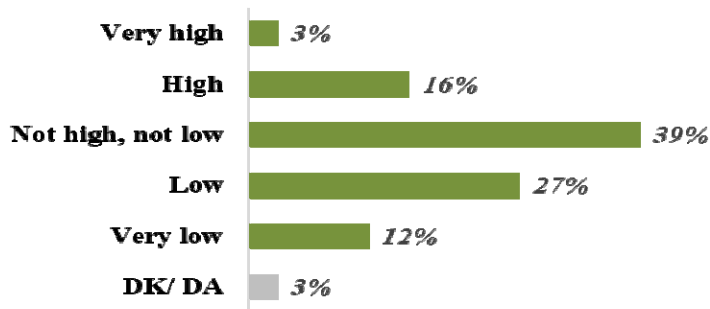


Figure 5. Which are the chances for citizens to succeed when they try to stay against an unfair law project?

The capacity of public contestation is one of the dimensions of democracy and participant culture. One of the research objectives was to highlight students' perceptions regarding their ability to effect change through the political process by acting against an unfair law. Results show that most of the respondents are sceptical or undecided about citizens' capacity to fight against an unfair law: 39 percent - *not high, not low*, 27 percent - *low*, 12 percent - *very low*). Only three percent of the subjects are optimistic about people's power to confront and succeed in this case, and 16 percent believe that the chances to oppose are high (Figure 5). The opinions are homogeneous, there are no important differences based on gender, residence environment, specialty or year of study.

Overall, there is a lack of trust in institutions' capacity to act for the well-being of the citizens. Students' consider to a great extent that political parties are more interested in gaining elections rather than solving citizens' issues – 96 percent of the respondents stated that this assessment is true and rather true. On the other hand, only 23 percent of the respondents consider that members of Romanian Parliament stand for the interest of the citizens who voted them (true + rather true), while an opposite opinion is supported by almost three quarters (74 percent – rather false + false).

Students are not really satisfied when it comes to elections' candidates: 43 percent of them pointed out that the statement „At Romanian elections, voters

have options” is rather false and 22 percent that is false. One third of the students thought that citizens have enough options to elect. In order for a society to function normally, it is important for the crowds to feel that they have the opportunity to elect a representative to defend their interests. According to this research, students are unsatisfied by the choices they have in electoral candidates, and this fact can lead to a crisis regarding civic/ political engagement.

In this context, it is interesting to observe not only the way that students perceive the functioning of government and political process, but also to underline the manner in which young people invest in developing a civic and political background. When it comes to access to information, a quarter of respondents highlighted that are better informed than most of the people (true + rather true – 26 percent), 65 percent supported a contrary opinion (false + rather false), and nine percent did not give an answer regarding this issue. 39 percent of the respondents declared that are *civic involved* (true and rather true) and more than a half (51 percent) consider that this is not an adequate label for them (false and rather false) – **Table 4**.

Table 4. Government versus citizens

What's your opinion regarding the following statements:					
	True	Rather true	Rather false	False	DK/DA
Political parties are more interested in gaining elections rather than solving citizens' issues	72%	24%	3%	1%	-
Members of Parliament stand for the interests of the citizens who voted them	7%	16%	53%	21%	3%
At Romanian elections, voters have options	10%	23%	43%	22%	2%
I'm better informed than most of the people	6%	20%	35%	30%	9%
I'm a civic involved person	8%	31%	32%	19%	10%

Conclusions

The results show that in general, young students from Sociology, Social Work and Human Resources (Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, UAIC) have a low level of trust in public institutions and the capacity of public contestation. The new generation of undergraduates is not highly optimistic about citizens – governmental structure relationship. On this line, students consider that the members of the government limited citizens' involvement in decision making process and the term *democracy* does not fully express the current political reality. Overall, there is a lack of trust in institutions' capacity to act for the well-being of the citizens. Students' consider to a great extent that

political parties are more interested in gaining elections rather than solving citizens' issues and that they don't have enough options to elect. The most common forms of students' civic and political involvement over the last year have been: voting, signing petitions and participating in volunteer oriented work.

Study concludes that as long as the citizen shows low trust in institutions, the act of public contestation loses its value and utility, not being an effective tool for political change because its meaning is distorted within the institution. Therefore, there is an interdependence relationship: the higher is the level of trust in institutions, the more is considered to be real the possibility to respond to unfavourable decisions.

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