

LATIN AMERICAN YOUTH:
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION, PANDEMIC,
AND FUTURE SCENARIOS

*JUVENTUDES LATINO-AMERICANAS:
PARTICIPAÇÃO POLÍTICA, PANDEMIA
E CENÁRIOS FUTUROS*

*JUVENIL LATINOAMERICANO:
PARTICIPACIÓN POLÍTICA, PANDEMIA
Y ESCENARIOS FUTUROS*

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RESUMO: O dossiê tem como objetivo analisar a participação política das juventudes na América Latina, abordando sua diversidade e papel na construção de uma democracia inclusiva. Os artigos reunidos exploram a participação em protestos e eleições até as disputas educacionais. Os estudos destacam tanto a atuação de juventudes progressistas quanto conservadoras, analisando a ascensão da direita e seu impacto nas democracias. Os trabalhos mostram que, apesar da sub-representação no Congresso e das desigualdades acentuadas pela pandemia, as juventudes permanecem atores centrais na transformação política, com potencial para enfrentar os desafios contemporâneos e promover uma democracia capaz de reduzir as desigualdades sociais.

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ABSTRACT: *This dossier aims to analyze the political participation of youth in Latin America, addressing their diversity and role in the construction of an inclusive democracy. The collected articles explore participation in protests, elections, and educational disputes. The studies highlight the actions of both progressive and conservative youth, examining the rise of the right wing and its impact on democracies. The papers show that, despite underrepresentation in Congress and inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic, youth remain central actors in political transformation, with the potential to confront contemporary challenges and promote a democracy capable of reducing social inequalities.*

There is a common perception that young people do not engage politically and are not interested in politics. This, however, is not substantiated when we analyze the role of youth in political change across various regions, nor when we examine the current political landscape (Perez; Vommaro, 2023).

These perceptions are partly related to the fact that political participation is often associated with actions taken in parliamentary arenas through political parties. Indeed, these spaces are predominantly created by and for adults, making it more difficult for young people to gain access, as well as for other marginalized groups in society, such as women, Black people, and the LGBTQIA+ population (the acronym for lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transvestite, travestis, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and more, encompassing a wide range of sexual orientations and gender variations).

However, when we broaden our understanding of political participation to include mobilizations through digital social networks, protests, and struggles within the school environment, the perception that youth are uninterested in politics disappears.

This dossier is based on the premise that youth political participation is substantial, diverse, and central to understanding contemporary democratic regimes. Studies show that while overall interest in politics is low among young Brazilians, there is greater affinity with social and environmental movements and less identification with institutional politics (Vazquez; Pereira, 2020). Therefore, this volume's subject is youth's political participation in its broadest sense.

Youth has been a subject of study since the last century, generating conflicting approaches regarding the definition of what it means to be young and the age range to which youth extends. We understand youth as a social and political category, thus a product of social construction. It is important to emphasize that we do not consider it as a homogeneous block—hence, we refer to youth in the plural form, highlighting how distinct they are from one another. More specifically, social cleavages such as income, gender, race, sexuality, and region impact how young people access rights and construct their identities.

Studies on youth have proliferated, especially following the recent wave of protests in Latin America. A landmark event in Brazil was the June Journeys of 2013, where protesters expressed dissatisfaction with the government and the political system, while also advocating for the expansion of rights for women, Black people, and the LGBTQIA+ population (Perez, 2019). In Chile, as early as 2006, high school students took to the streets to demand free school passes and lower fees for the University Selection Test (PSU) in protests known as the “Penguin March.” In Argentina, the 2015 mobilizations organized by the *NiUnaMenos* collective, formed by young activists, led to a wave of protests that brought attention to the grave issue of violence against women.

The recurrence and significance of these protests highlight youth’s prominent role in Latin America’s contemporary political landscape. More recently, attention has been drawn to protests organized by youth segments that could be considered conservative and/or right-wing on the political and ideological spectrum, as they oppose the expansion of rights, such as access to health care. For example, several protests around the world questioned social isolation measures and the use of the COVID-19 vaccine (Vázquez *et al.*, 2021).

Many studies on youth political participation are being conducted in Brazil, but they are scattered across various fields of study. Furthermore, research on youth is generally concentrated in the fields of health and education. As a result, there is still no well-established field of reflection regarding youth political participation, especially in Brazil.

The field of reflection on youth political participation in Latin America has been gathered and structured by the Childhood and Youth Working Group of the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (Clacso). Recognizing the importance of this network for the field, many of its researchers contribute to the present dossier. Through this collaboration, two works by Argentine researchers were included.

To contribute to the field of youth political participation in Brazil, the initial idea of this dossier was to compile analyses on the subject. We hoped that the dossier would become a milestone in the study of political participation, focusing on the various ways in which youth engage and reshape power relations. It was, initially, an academic proposal. However, by the end of the work, we realized that the dossier underscores the importance of youth in building an inclusive democracy.

The works presented in this dossier approach political participation from different perspectives. Some focus on youth participation in elections, protests, and collectives. The studies address both left-wing and right-wing youth movements. Central issues affecting youth, such as the pandemic and educational reforms, are also discussed. In sum, the articles highlight the diverse forms of oppression faced by youth, as well as their potential in constructing an inclusive democratic regime. A common theme across all the articles in this dossier is a

concern for the future of democracy and a belief in youth as central actors in forging more inclusive paths.

Moving on to the detailed discussion of each paper, Olivia Cristina Perez, in her work “The importance of diversities in analyses of youth and political participation” compiles data from documentary and empirical research to demonstrate that youth do not form a homogeneous group; rather, they are marked by significant variations in terms of race, gender, social class, sexual orientation, and other social cleavages. Perez argues that these diversities are essential for understanding how young people engage in politics, whether through protests, elections, or participation in collectives. She emphasizes that the inclusion of these diverse voices in collective decision-making not only enriches the democratic process but is also vital for constructing a more substantive and inclusive democracy.

Focusing on one form of political participation by youth—protests—Marcos Aurélio Freire da Silva Júnior, Joana Tereza Vaz de Moura, and Pedro Henrique Correia do Nascimento de Oliveira analyze, in the article “Youth, protests and collective action: an protest event analysis in Brazil” the mobilizations and protests carried out by Brazilian youth between January 2022 and January 2024, using the Protest Event Analysis (PEA) methodology. The study reveals that most of the protests occurred in the Southeast region and were focused on education issues, with the State being the main target of the demands. Additionally, the study notes that, beyond traditional tactics such as marches and road blockages, youth have used new forms of protest, often without the mediation of other organizations.

Turning to political disputes in schools, the article “Sociology and life project as expressions of contradictions: disputes over curriculum, conceptions of school and youth”, by Rodolfo Soares Moimaz and André da Rocha Santos explores the contradictions present in the inclusion of Sociology and Life Project disciplines in the São Paulo State High School Curriculum. They argue that these disciplines reflect disputes between different models of education and schooling, with Sociology historically linked to democratic mobilizations, while Life Project serves as a key component of neoliberal reforms influenced by private institutions.

Education, like many aspects of youth life, was affected by the pandemic. This issue is explored in the paper “Is there still hope? The future expectations of young people from Guarulhos-SP at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic”, written by Daniel Arias Vazquez, Heber Silveira Rocha, Lígia Gonçalves Dall’Occo, and Alexandre Barbosa Pereira. The authors analyze the expectations of young people in Guarulhos regarding the end of the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on a survey of 843 young people, the study reveals that only 20% were optimistic about Brazil’s post-pandemic future. Pessimism was more pronounced among youth over 18 years old, from families with incomes greater than three minimum wages, and those who showed a decline in emotional well-being. Religious practice was identified as the only factor that kept a minority optimistic during the health crisis.

Recent years have also been marked by the rise of right-wing ideologies among youth, both in Brazil and other regions. Two Argentine papers explore this theme. In the article “Radicalisation and fusionism in Argentinean right-wing youth activism after 2001: a history in the present day”, Matías Grinchpun, Sergio Morresi, Ezequiel Saferstein, and Martín Vicente explore the various forms of right-wing youth activism in Argentina. The study offers a historical analysis of right-wing youth activism in the 20th century, highlighting two main currents: the liberal-conservative and the nationalist-reactionary. The authors argue that after 2001, there was a significant transformation in Argentine politics, allowing the emergence of a new radical right-wing expression that criticized the existing political system.

In dialogue with the previous text, Pablo Vommaro analyzes the reactions and debates generated by the election of Javier Milei as President of Argentina in 2023 in his work “Political expressions of youth discontent: exploratory approaches to the situation in Argentina in recent years”. Vommaro argues that the pandemic and the post-pandemic economic crisis exacerbated youth discontent, leading them to support political figures such as Milei. He concludes that new right-wing movements have appropriated the discourse of change, and it is crucial to understand and intervene in the cultural and political disputes surrounding these issues in Argentina and the region.

The right-wing theme is also addressed in the work of Elisa Guaraná de Castro, titled “Political representation of youth in Brazil: young candidates and elected to the chamber of deputies 2014 – 2022”. Castro analyzes the profiles and trajectories of young candidates and elected officials for the Chamber of Deputies in Brazil between 2014 and 2022. The study highlights the low representation of youth in Congress, with less than 4% of federal deputies being under the age of 29. Despite this underrepresentation, the elected young parliamentarians often achieve high voting rates, and there is a growing diversity among the candidates. The article also discusses the tensions between new and traditional forms of political participation, emphasizing how youth combine traditional processes with new identities and political practices.

A common thread throughout all the works is the concern for the maintenance and deepening of democracies. This topic is elaborated in the article “Youth and adherence to democracy in the south of Minas Gerais”, by Marcelo Rodrigues Conceição, Luís Antonio Groppo, and Odair Sass. In this paper, the authors explore how young people in Southern Minas Gerais demonstrate adherence to democracy compared to other age groups. The research suggests that, although the youth in this region may have a greater inclination to support democracy, there is a profound distrust of traditional institutions, such as political parties and elections. The analysis highlights that the distrust of the more traditional institutions of democracy is sig-

nificant, and the lack of understanding regarding the difference between politics and governance appears to limit greater possibilities for engagement with the authorities.

In conclusion to the dossier and highlighting the connection between youth and democracy through political participation, we are pleased to present an interview with Maria da Glória Gohn, in which she discusses her pioneering trajectory in sociological research on youth in Brazil. She emphasizes that youth is a social construct, influenced by historical and cultural factors. Gohn addresses the participation of young people in social movements and the changes in public policies aimed at youth, underscoring the importance of youth autonomy and active participation in society. The pandemic and the high school reform are cited as factors that have significantly impacted young people, revealing inequalities and educational challenges. Gohn concludes that youth play a crucial role in building a democratic system but warns of the need for new approaches and instruments to address contemporary challenges.

The present dossier aims precisely to present new approaches and tools to tackle contemporary challenges, particularly in light of the threat posed by the far-right to the democratic system. We are committed to the political engagement of youth, as they have the potential to create ideas and pathways that are more promising for a system that is genuinely inclusive and capable of reducing social inequalities.

We invite researchers from all fields, especially those interested in the political participation of youth, to read and disseminate the excellent works compiled in this volume.

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