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What citizens? Political Life and Experiences of Young, Long-term Unemployed People, Based on Qualitative Interviews

Long-term unemployment is often regarded as a cause of economic and social exclusion. The main question addressed in this article is whether the experience of lasting joblessness may also lead to political exclusion. The analysis was based on a qualitative study (23 IDIs) conducted in a typical mid-sized Polish town; however, survey data documenting Poles' interest (or lack of interest) in politics and their trust (or lack of trust) in politicians served as an important point of reference.

The main conclusion of the paper is that the young participants in the study partly contradicted stereotypes about the unemployed and appeared to be a rather atypical part of the population, e.g., by being better informed than a significant portion of it. Their generous budget of spare time was to a large extent filled by watching TV and browsing the Internet. By consuming infotainment-type content, however, these young people had developed—among other things—their political competences. Participants in the study under analysis not only followed current events and the political news but also discussed these issues with their families and friends and were often able to locate their personal views on the political spectrum.

The question of participation in elections was a separate issue. Despite quite enthusiastic initial reactions to the idea of voting (with the emphasis on “civic duty”), unemployed young people seemed to be selective (with a preference for presidential over local elections or elections to the EU parliament) and thereby rather “typical” compared with the general population.

Key words: unemployment, political exclusion, political participation, social trust