Abstract
The main ambition of this thesis is to challenge the predominant approaches towards the ‘legitimacy deficit’ of the European Union. The turn of the new millennium has brought about a cascading set of events that marked a turning point for the future stability of the EU. Notable instances include the rejection of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe in 2005; the rise of the euro-sceptic voices in the European Parliament; and United Kingdom's withdrawal that followed the ‘Brexit’ referendum of June 2016. This research adopts a multidisciplinary approach for analysing one of the main strategies of the EU to strengthen its democratic governance. It presents a social sciences’ research that combine elements of political science and data science to critically unpack the notion of ‘citizen participation’ as EU institutions describe it.

The dissertation scrutinizes the EU’s youth policy field. In doing so, it tests the relevance of EU’s ‘participatory turn’ within an area of political action that appears crucial for addressing the ‘legitimacy crisis’ of the Union. The fissure between high political expectations and low satisfaction distinguishes the European youth as the paradigm of the ‘democratic deficit’. The EU launched in 2001 a new framework for European cooperation in the field of youth with the commitment to empower young people and give recognition and visibility to their concerns. This thesis disentangles what model of participatory governance has the EU applied to its youth strategy.

The ‘legitimacy trilemma’ of the European Union provides the normative bases to adopt a ‘new institutionalism’ perspective for explaining policy change. The results show that the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) in the youth policy field has generated a new (micro)system of multilevel governance revolving around the policy contributions of a wide constellation of actors. While ‘youth participation’ appears as a preferential element within the whole EU’s youth programme, the study confirms that framing a governance principle as such is dependent on the subjectivities of each policy actor. While the European Commission advocates for a utilitarian and political conception of ‘youth participation’, the Council endorses a more decentralized vision based on youth empowerment in local communities. The European Parliament has not been able to establish interinstitutional synergies around ‘electoral participation’.

Finally, the limited visibility of ‘digital participation’ within the Youth OMC indicate that the answers provided by the EU do not fully resonate within the needs and demands of the European ‘critical youth’.