



COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Study Guide

For

The Council of Europe

Topic Area: Generational Participation: Strengthening Youth Engagement in Democratic Processes

Table of Contents

1. Welcoming Letter	3
2. Introduction to the Committee	4
3. Introduction to the Topic Area	5
4. Glossary.....	7
5. Legal framework.....	9
5.1 Statute of the Council of Europe	9
5.2 Council of Europe Conventions	9
5.3 Council of Europe Recommendations and Policy Instruments.....	10
6. Main discussion of the topic.....	12
6.1 The state of Youth Participation in Europe	12
6.1.1 Forms of Youth democratic engagement.....	14
6.1.2 Voter activism and the role of NGOs.....	16
6.1.3 Youth participation in e-democracy.....	17
6.2 Economic, social, geographical and institutional barriers against youth involvement in democracy	20
6.2.1 Meaningful Participation vs. Tokenism in Youth Engagement	23
6.2.2 Limited representation, misinformation and propaganda among youth	24
6.2.3 Voting age gap and marginalized groups inside the political scenery	25
6.3 Past actions and current developments.....	26
6.4 Key stakeholders	28
7. Conclusion	29
8. Points to be addressed.....	30
9. Bibliography	31
10. Further reading.....	35

1. Welcoming Letter

Honorable Ministers,

It is our utmost pleasure to welcome you to the Council of Europe at the Rhodes Model Regional Cooperation of 2026. Serving as your Board, we are truly honored to guide you through this journey, which we truly believe will be unforgettable for all of us.

Throughout this conference, you will have the opportunity to improve your public speaking, develop your negotiation skills, learn about organizations that have a global impact and connect with others in a diplomatic way. All these skills and experiences will accompany you throughout your life, in this complex and demanding modern world, where expressing your opinion is of utmost importance.

The Council of Europe plays a vital role in protecting democracy, the rule of law and human rights. Our topic, “Generational Participation: How can Europe foster youth involvement in democratic processes?” is both challenging and demanding. Therefore, during your preparation and throughout the sessions, we encourage you to approach this topic with enthusiasm, an open mind, willingness to listen and commitment to engage in meaningful discussions. We also ask you to think carefully about the issues we will discuss and come up with creative yet feasible ideas. It really goes without saying that the success of our sessions heavily relies on your active participation and thoughtful contributions.

We are confident that you will bring a unique perspective that will enrich the discussions within the Committee and lead to productive outcomes. Feel free to reach out to us with any questions or clarifications during your preparation. Our goal is to make sure that this MUN experience is not only memorable but also genuinely engaging and impactful for everyone involved. We look forward to meeting you all in the committee and hearing your ideas and insights. Once again, we warmly welcome you to the Council of Europe and wish you the best of luck in your preparations.

Eirini Tsopanoglou, Chairperson

Myrto Pantazopoulou, Secretary-General

2. Introduction to the Committee

For over seventy years, the Council of Europe has been one of the main international organizations focused on protecting democracy, human rights and the rule of law across Europe. Founded in 1949 after the Second World War, the organization came from the shared commitment of European nations to prevent future conflicts and authoritarian regimes by creating a system that represents democratic values.¹ Today, the Council of Europe unites 46 member states and continues to be an important forum for cooperation and dialogue on topics related to democratic governance and the protection of basic rights.

One of the Council of Europe's major achievements is the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)². Initiatives like the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life³ emphasizes the importance of involving young citizens in decision-making. This engagement is crucial for the sustainability and resilience of democratic societies.

At the institutional level, the Committee of Ministers⁴ is the main decision-making body of the organization. It consists of the Foreign Ministers from all member states, who are represented in daily work by their Permanent Representatives in Strasbourg. The Committee of Ministers has two main roles within the Council of Europe. First, it serves as a place for political dialogue among member states. Second, it oversees the implementation of the organization's conventions and the execution of judgments made by the European Court of Human Rights.⁵

Monitoring the implementation of ECHR judgments is one of the Committee's most important tasks. Through this, the Committee ensures that member states follow the Court's rulings and take the necessary actions to fix human rights violations. By doing this, the Committee of Ministers directly

¹ Council of Europe. 2014. "Who We Are." The Council of Europe in Brief. 2014. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/about-us/who-we-are>.

² Council of Europe. 1950. "European Convention on Human Rights." European Convention on Human Rights. https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention_ENG.pdf.

³ Council of Europe. "Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life". <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/-/revised-european-charter-on-the-participation-of-young-people-in-local-and-regional-life>

⁴ About the Committee of Ministers - Committee of Ministers - Ww.coe.int." n.d. Committee of Ministers. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cm/about-cm>.

⁵ Ibid

supports the rule of law and strengthens the credibility of the European human rights protection system.⁶

In addition to the Committee of Ministers, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)⁷ plays a key role in promoting democratic dialogue. PACE is a deliberative forum made up of parliamentarians from member states. The Assembly discusses urgent political and social issues, makes recommendations and encourages cooperation between national parliaments. Through its debates and committees, PACE helps shape the Council's broader agenda and ensures that new challenges to democracy are addressed promptly and inclusively.⁸

Overall, the Council of Europe remains a foundational element of democratic governance in Europe. Through its legal tools, monitoring systems and institutional structures, it continues to advocate for human rights protection and the strengthening of democratic institutions. In a time of political division, rapid technological changes and evolving social challenges, the Council's role in promoting cooperation and upholding shared democratic values is more important than ever.

3. Introduction to the Topic Area

Democratic systems worldwide rely fundamentally on the active participation of citizens in all aspects of political life.⁹ The Council of Europe has long emphasized the importance of democratic participation and civic engagement as key elements for maintaining inclusive and resilient democratic societies. However, in recent years, concerns have emerged regarding the level of engagement, especially among younger generations in democratic processes, which seems to be continuously lower.

While young people actually remain highly aware of social issues and frequently express strong opinions on political matters, their involvement in formal democratic processes has often been

⁶ Ibid, CoE, ECHR

⁷ MyAssembly/PACE. "Parliamentary Assembly," n.d. <https://pace.coe.int/en/pages/-myassembly>.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Council of Europe, "Democracy," Council of Europe, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/democracy>

more limited than expected.¹⁰ Lower electoral participation rates among young people and reduced engagement with traditional political institutions have raised concerns about how effectively democratic systems include younger citizens¹¹. Recognizing the importance of youth engagement, the Council of Europe has promoted initiatives aimed at strengthening youth participation in democratic life, most notably through the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life, which encourages member states to actively involve young citizens in decision-making processes.¹²

Youth engagement in public life though has never completely disappeared. Throughout modern European history, young people have often been at the forefront of social and political change, contributing to movements that shaped democratic values, human rights protections and broader societal reforms. In recent years however, the ways in which young people choose to participate in politics have gradually evolved and altered. Rather than relying solely on traditional political structures, many young citizens increasingly show the presence through community initiatives, advocacy campaigns and digital platforms that allow them to express their views and mobilize support more directly.¹³

Despite all these new forms of participation, several factors continue to limit how easily young people can engage in democratic processes. Economic uncertainty, unequal access to opportunities and limited representation within political institutions often discourage their participation.¹⁴ In many cases, young individuals feel that their perspectives are not sufficiently reflected in public decision-making, that their voices often remain unheard and that their ambitions for the future are not taken into consideration. All these can create a sense of distance from political institutions and reduce their motivation for political engagement.

¹⁰ Council of Europe, “Youth Participation,” Council of Europe Youth Department, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/youth-participation>

¹¹ Council of Europe, “Council of Europe Youth Policy,” Council of Europe Youth Department, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/council-of-europe-youth-policy>

¹² Council of Europe. “Revised European Charter”

¹³ European Commission, “EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027,” European Union, https://youth.europa.eu/strategy_en

¹⁴ Tomaž DEŽELAN, “Young People’s Participation in European Democratic Processes How to Improve and Facilitate Youth Involvement Policy Department for Citizens’ Rights and Constitutional Affairs Directorate-General for Internal Policies PE 745.820 -Mars 2023 EN STUDY,” March 2023, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/745820/IPOL_STU\(2023\)745820_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/745820/IPOL_STU(2023)745820_EN.pdf).

At the same time, youth engagement in public life is gradually evolving.¹⁵ The expansion of digital communication and online platforms has created new opportunities for civic participation, allowing young people to raise awareness, organize initiatives and contribute to political discussions in new ways. These developments suggest that youth participation is not necessarily disappearing, but rather transforming alongside broader social and technological changes. Strengthening generational participation therefore remains an important priority for democratic societies, as ensuring that younger generations can meaningfully contribute to democratic processes is closely linked to the long-term legitimacy and resilience of democratic governance.

4. Glossary

Youth Participation: The active involvement of young people in democratic life, including expressing opinions, taking part in discussions, influencing policies and contributing to decision-making processes at local, national and international level. It goes beyond voting and also includes everyday civic engagement.¹⁶

Meaningful Participation: A form of participation in which young people are able to influence decisions and where their views are taken seriously, leading to real and visible outcomes rather than just a symbolic inclusion.¹⁷

Tokenism: The inclusion of young people in participatory processes only on a superficial level, without giving them power for real influence over decisions. This phenomenon often creates the appearance of participation without substance.¹⁸

¹⁵ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. “Youth Participation in Public Life.” <https://www.oecd.org/governance/youth-participation-in-public-life.htm>

¹⁶ Council of Europe. Youth Participation.

¹⁷ Council of Europe. Have Your Say! Manual on the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life. <https://rm.coe.int/have-your-say-manual-on-the-revised-european-charter-on-the-p/168071b4d2>

¹⁸ UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre. Children’s Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship. https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/childrens_participation.pdf

Democratic Engagement: The broader involvement of individuals in political and civic life, including voting, participating in public debates and contributing to shaping policies and decisions that affect society.¹⁹

Co-management: A governance model where young people and public authorities share responsibilities in decision-making processes, especially in youth related policies, promoting equal dialogue and cooperation.²⁰

Local Governance: Decision-making processes at the municipal or regional level, where policies directly affect communities and where participation is often more accessible for young people.²¹

Digital Participation: The use of digital tools and online platforms to engage in democratic processes, such as public consultations, campaigns and discussions.²²

Digital Divide: The gap between individuals who have access to digital technologies and those who do not, including differences in connectivity, skills and resources, affecting equal participation.²³

Misinformation: False or misleading information that spreads unintentionally and can influence public opinion and democratic processes, especially in digital environments.²⁴

Disinformation: Information that is deliberately created and shared in a biased or misleading way in order to influence opinions or behaviors, often for political purposes.²⁵

Civil Society: A range of organizations and groups operating outside government structures, such as NGOs and community groups, which contribute to public participation and democratic life.²⁶

¹⁹ OECD. Civic Engagement and Participation.

<https://www.oecd.org>

²⁰ Council of Europe. Youth Department – Co-management System.

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth>

²¹ Council of Europe. European Charter of Local Self-Government (ETS No. 122).

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/122>

²² European Commission. Digital Participation and Civic Engagement.

<https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu>

²³ OECD. Bridging the Digital Divide.

<https://www.oecd.org>

²⁴ European Commission. Tackling Disinformation.

<https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu>

²⁵ European Parliament. Disinformation and Propaganda.

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu>

²⁶ Council of Europe. Civil Society and Participation.

E-democracy: The use of digital technologies and online platforms to support and empower democratic processes, including participation in decision making, public consultations and political engagement.²⁷

5. Legal framework

5.1 Statute of the Council of Europe

Article 1 of the Statute defines promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law as important goals. It highlights democratic participation as a fundamental principle. Under Article 15b, the Committee of Ministers (CM), which established in the Statute of the Council of Europe²⁸, and serves as the organisation's decision-making body, can adopt recommendations for member states. While these recommendations set common standards, they are not legally binding. This means their implementation depends on the political will of member states. In this context, promoting youth participation is a crucial part of democratic governance. It helps ensure that younger generations are included in decision-making processes.

5.2 Council of Europe Conventions

European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)

The European Convention on Human Rights²⁹ provides the basis for democracy within Europe. Though the document does not directly refer to youth, it creates the essential freedoms that are needed by them to participate. Article 10 ensures freedom of expression and allows them to engage in discussions about politics.³⁰ Article 11 ensures freedom of assembly and association and is an

<https://www.coe.int>

²⁷ Council of Europe, "Recommendation CM/Rec(2009) of the Committee of Ministers to member states on electronic democracy (e-democracy)," eDemocracy Projects https://www.coe.int/t/dgap/goodgovernance/activities/key-texts/recommendations/Recommendation_CM_Rec2009_1_en.asp

²⁸ Council of Europe. Statute of the Council of Europe (ETS No. 1). <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/001>

²⁹ Council of Europe. European Convention on Human Rights.

³⁰ Council of Europe. 1950. "European Convention on Human Rights. Article 10

enabling factor to participate in demonstrations and movements.³¹ Lastly, Article 3 of Protocol No. 1 provides the right to vote freely.³²

European Social Charter (revised)

The Revised European Social Charter³³ extends the range of civil and political rights through socio-economic rights, which create the necessary conditions for participation. In particular, socio-economic rights concerning education, work, and social inclusion play an important role, as they have a direct impact on participation. Indeed, socio-economic issues such as economic instability, unemployment, and discrimination prevent individuals from participating effectively in democratic processes.

5.3 Council of Europe Recommendations and Policy Instruments

Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life

The charter offers a solid framework for the participation of youth within their community and region.³⁴ The document promotes participatory approaches by developing youth councils and co-management structures. They are continually being reminded that their youths should be involved as participants in the process rather than being consulted alone. However, despite all this, because of the fact that it is a soft law, its impact will be dependent on implementation.

Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)2

The recommendation³⁵ emphasizes the need for youth participation by recommending that member states provide an environment conducive to access to information, freedom of expression, and participation in the decision-making process. However, while these recommendations may guide the practice of youth participation, implementation remains inconsistent.

³¹ Article 11, Ibid

³² Council of Europe. Protocol No. 1 to the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 9).
<https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/009>

³³ Council of Europe. European Social Charter (Revised) (ETS No. 163).
<https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/163>

³⁴ Council of Europe. “Revised European Charter”

³⁵ Council of Europe. Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)2 on the participation of children and young people.
<https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/-/recommendation-cm-rec-2012-2-of-the-committee-of-ministers-to-member-states-on-the-participation-of-children-and-young-people>

Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents (CETS No. 205)

The Council of Europe's Convention on Access to Official Documents³⁶, commonly referred to as the Tromso Convention, guarantees an individual's right to have access to information held by any authority that is considered official. In relation to the youth participation process, this is essential since one has to have access to information for him/her to participate actively in any democratic process. With the help of this Convention, youths will be able to stay abreast of any developments within policies.

European Charter of Local Self-Government

The European Charter on Local Self-Government establishes principles regarding democratic decentralization.³⁷ Local self-government makes sure that local governments are capable of handling public affairs effectively. Participation of youth is facilitated by such a system because it promotes the involvement of youth in governance in places that matter to them. Youth councils and community based projects are examples of mechanisms that are created through local participatory governance.

Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data (Convention 108+)

The Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data (Convention 108+)³⁸ plays an essential role in the development of data protection standards and privacy in cyberspace. As young people become more involved in the democratic process through online activities, it becomes vital to protect their personal data in order to ensure trust in democracy. Such protection, provided by the convention, will enable more reliable involvement in the political process through online activities.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

³⁶ Council of Europe. (CETS No. 205).

³⁷ Council of Europe. (ETS No. 122).

³⁸ Council of Europe. Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data (CETS No. 108).

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/108>

The covenant is adopted by the United Nations as a means of securing fundamental rights without which there cannot be democracy.³⁹ According to Article 19 of the Covenant, individuals have the right to express themselves freely. The article further ensures that individuals have a right to peaceful assembly, which is provided for in Article 21. Additionally, Article 25 guarantees the right to participate in public affairs.

United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, Aarhus Convention

The Aarhus convention⁴⁰ establishes an environmental governance system that connects three elements: public information access, public participation rights and environmental governance accountability. The system requires people to have the right to access information and participate in decision-making processes while also having the ability to pursue justice when their rights are violated. The growing number of youth-led environmental initiatives demonstrates the importance of youth participation in this context. The Convention combines transparency with its public participation requirement, which creates better conditions for people to engage in civic activities.

6. Main discussion of the topic

6.1 The state of Youth Participation in Europe

Across Europe, youth participation in democratic life presents a dynamic and evolving landscape⁴¹. Many young people demonstrate awareness of political and social issues but their involvement in traditional democratic mechanisms often remains lower, compared to older generations. Electoral turnout among younger voters tends to be more limited in several European countries and membership in political parties or institutional political organizations has gradually declined over

³⁹ United Nations. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>

⁴⁰ United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention).

<https://unece.org/environment-policy/public-participation/aarhus-convention>

⁴¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Youth Participation in Public Life. Paris: OECD Publishing.

<https://www.oecd.org/governance/youth-participation-in-public-life.htm>

time.⁴² Statistical evidence further confirms this statement. Surveys conducted through Eurobarometer⁴³ indicate that younger Europeans vote less frequently than older age groups and often feel underrepresented in political deliberations⁴⁴. Simultaneously, many young citizens remain engaged in public life through alternative forms of participation such as volunteering, civic activism and online political discussions. This particular phenomenon will be thoroughly analysed in later sections of the study guide.

Q1 In your opinion what are the most effective actions for making young people's voice heard by decision makers? [MULTIPLE ANSWERS]



45

Despite these patterns, lower participation in traditional institutions does not necessarily indicate political disengagement. On the contrary, youth engagement in Europe increasingly takes new forms. Youth-led initiatives, social movements and advocacy campaigns have become important actors in public debate, especially in areas such as climate change, social justice and human rights⁴⁶. These developments illustrate that most of youth's political actions happen outside conventional political structures.

⁴² Matteo Dressler, "Youth Turnout in the 2024 European Elections: A Closer Look at the Under-25 Vote - Foundation for European Progressive Studies," Foundation for European Progressive Studies, October 15, 2024, <https://feps-europe.eu/youth-turnout-in-the-2024-european-elections-a-closer-look-at-the-under-25-vote/>.

⁴³ European Commission. Eurobarometer Survey: Youth and Democracy. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3181>

⁴⁴ European Commission. Flash Eurobarometer: European Youth. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2282>

⁴⁵ "Eurobarometer," europa.eu, n.d., <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3181>.

⁴⁶ Theocharis, Yannis, and Jan W. van Deth. "The Continuous Expansion of Citizen Participation: A New Typology." *European Political Science Review* 10, no. 1 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773916000230>

Several European states have introduced initiatives aimed at strengthening youth participation and reducing the generational gap in democratic engagement. For instance, Austria⁴⁷ lowered the voting age to sixteen years for national elections in order to encourage earlier political participation. In Estonia⁴⁸, digital governance and online voting systems have created additional opportunities for young voters to engage in electoral processes. Similarly, countries such as Finland and Germany⁴⁹ have supported youth councils and participatory platforms that allow young citizens to contribute to local decision-making. Comparable efforts can also be observed in European countries outside the European Union. In Norway and Iceland, for instance, youth councils⁵⁰ and consultation mechanisms have been developed to ensure that young people's perspectives are considered in local governance and policy discussions.

Digital technologies have also played a crucial role in reshaping youth participation across Europe. Social media platforms⁵¹ and online networks increasingly function as spaces for political dialogue, mobilisation and information sharing. Live examples, youth movements such as "the Fridays for Future climate" movement, which practically mobilized large numbers of young people across European cities, demonstrate how digital tools can support collective political action.⁵²

6.1.1 Forms of Youth democratic engagement

Youth participation is vital for a sustainable democracy, Thus, their involvement is crucial to Europe's democratic growth⁵³. Due to the 21st century's intense and rapid digitalization, young

⁴⁷ Zeglovits, Eva, and Julian Aichholzer. "Are People More Inclined to Vote at 16 Than at 18? Evidence for the First-Time Voting Boost Among 16- to 25-Year-Olds in Austria." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 24, no. 3 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2013.872652>

⁴⁸ Trechsel, Alexander H. *Internet Voting and the European Experience: Estonia as a Case Study*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/electoral-assistance>

⁴⁹ Council of Europe. *Youth Participation in Local and Regional Life*.

⁵⁰ OECD. *Youth Participation in Public Life*. Paris

⁵¹ Boulianne, Shelley. "Social Media Use and Participation: A Meta-Analysis of Current Research." *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 5 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1008542>

⁵² Fridays for Future. *Fridays for Future Movement*. <https://fridaysforfuture.org>

⁵³ Council of Europe. *Youth Democratic Participation at Local Level*. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/congress/-/youth-democratic-participation-especially-at-local-level-essential-in-times-of-stability-and-crisis-alike>

people, nowadays, have the ability to participate and engage more directly and in more ways on local and regional democratic processes, decision-making and community rebuilding.⁵⁴

On an institutional level, youth democratic engagement is active, first and foremost, through voting in local, regional, national and European elections. Other ways for them to be more active and try inherent change in the system, are by joining political parties and participating in political branches of political organizations.⁵⁵ Through these mechanisms, young citizens are able to either participate in the representation of the youth's mind and beliefs or directly influence the policy-making process.⁵⁶

On a non-institutional level, and specifically, the way that young people can engage in democracy outside of formal political structures, the youth makes its presence known by participating in civil society organized protests, grassroots movements, online campaigns, volunteering, petitions and advocacy initiatives.⁵⁷

However, studies indicate that there has been a decline, as of lately, among younger generations of participation in traditional institutional channels, in terms of political party membership and electoral turnout. On the contrary, a rise in non-institutional participation has been noticed, especially in the expansion of transnational activism networks.⁵⁸ That is why many young people perceive formal political institutions as slow-moving, unresponsive to their concerns or difficult to connect with. Despite these challenges, institutional participation remains essential for the legitimacy and sustainability of democratic systems, as it provides structured avenues for policy influence and long-term political engagement.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ European Commission - Council of Europe, "Youth Political Participation," Youth Partnership <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/youth-political-participation>

⁵⁵ European Parliament. Young People's Participation in European Democratic Processes. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/745820/IPOL_STU\(2023\)745820_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/745820/IPOL_STU(2023)745820_EN.pdf)

⁵⁶ European Commission - Council of Europe, "A Spotlight on How EU Institutions Are Fostering Youth Participation in Democracy," Coyote Magazine <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/coyote-magazine/base>

⁵⁷ Open Government Partnership. The Youth Participation Crisis. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/stories/the-youth-participation-crisis/>

⁵⁸ Council of Europe. New and Innovative Forms of Youth Participation in Decision-Making Processes. <https://edoc.coe.int/en/youth-in-europe/7625-new-and-innovative-forms-of-youth-participation-in-decision-making-processes.html>

⁵⁹ Council of Europe. New and Innovative Forms of Youth Participation.

While young people are increasingly active in alternative forms of participation, this difference becomes particularly noticeable in traditional electoral participation. It has been noted that across Europe, youth voter turnout has consistently been declining in comparison with older generations, raising concerns about the long-term vitality and legitimacy of democratic systems.⁶⁰ Specifically, many young citizens express feelings of political inefficacy based on several stands. For instance, that their voices have limited impact on decision-making processes, that there is dissatisfaction with traditional party structures and no trust in political institutions, because they do not adequately address the younger generation's issues of concern, and finally, that the youth are not enough politically represented. For these reasons younger voters tend to abstain from voting, a matter that needs to be addressed and remains a priority for the Council of Europe, as sustained disengagement may weaken democratic legitimacy and representation even more.⁶¹ At the same time, it is essential to remember that lower youth voter turnout does not necessarily mean that younger generations are indifferent in political life and responsibilities.

6.1.2 Voter activism and the role of NGOs

Youth-led activism has grown significantly throughout Europe in recent years, particularly in relation to climate action, human rights and gender equality advocacy and anti-corruption efforts. Instead of associating with traditional party structures, many young individuals prefer direct and issue-oriented participation, engaging through protests, awareness campaigns and grassroots movements.⁶² Such forms of activism allow youth to express their political preferences freely, in a more immediate, visible and unrestricted manner to voice their political opinions, which frequently spark public discussion and influence legislative agendas.⁶³ This shift of focus, from participating into already existing political structures, to initiating change by raising awareness and

⁶⁰ Lavizzari, Anna. Young People's Participation in the 2024 European Elections. <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261884/Young%20people%E2%80%99s%20participation%20in%20the%202024%20European%20elections.pdf>

⁶¹ Council of Europe, "European Countries Reaffirm Importance of European Social Charter at Conference in Chişinău," Council of Europe <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/european-countries-reaffirm-importance-of-european-social-charter-at-conference-in-chi%C8%99in%C4%83u?p%20fen%2Fweb%2Fportal%2Fnewsroom%3Fq%3Dyouth%2Bvoter%2Bturnout>

⁶² Hub, European Democracy, "Misunderstanding Youth Activism: How Young People Are Rewriting Democracy," European Democracy Hub <https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/misunderstanding-youth-activism/>

⁶³ UNICEF. Youth, Protests and the Polycrisis. <https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/media/7761/file/UNICEF-Innocenti-Youth-Protests-and-the-Polycrisis-report.pdf>

conceptualizing democratic participation, is happening due to young people prioritizing impact, visibility and value-driven engagement.⁶⁴

Additionally, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) prove to play a crucial role in facilitating youth participation in democracy by providing platforms for civic engagement, political education and advocacy opportunities.⁶⁵ Specifically, NGOs' contribution in the youth political growth is shown through workshops, training courses, conferences, seminars, consultative meetings, youth peace camps, policy initiatives and more.⁶⁶ Through this series of various activities and initiatives, such as the Council of Europe's Youth Department's "Democracy here.⁶⁷ Democracy now." and "Enter!" projects⁶⁸, or the European Youth forum's "EU Youth Dialogue"⁶⁹ and the various Erasmus+ youth participation activities⁷⁰, NGOs assist with strengthening democratic culture, targeting youth participation among disadvantaged groups in urban areas and exposing the youth to it, empowering them to become active citizens. They often function as intermediaries between institutions and young citizens, helping translate youth concepts into concrete policy proposals, fostering, this way, trust in democratic processes.⁷¹

6.1.3 Youth participation in e-democracy

A whole new democracy model appears to parallel the youth's innovative engagement ways. E-democracy refers to the use of digital technologies and online platforms to enable and facilitate the exchange of information and deliberation that will enhance civic participation, in order to broaden

⁶⁴ European Union - Council of Europe, "Breaking Barriers: Stories of Youth Activism and Inclusive Participation," Coyote Magazine <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/coyote-magazine/breaking-barriers-stories-of-youth-activism-and-inclusive-participation>

⁶⁵ Council of Europe, "Priorities - Youth - Ww.coe.int," Youth <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/priorities#%22264978127%22>

⁶⁶ Council of Europe. Youth for Democracy Programme. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/programme>

⁶⁷ Council of Europe. About the Project: Democracy Here. Democracy Now. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/democracy-here-now/about-the-project>

⁶⁸ Council of Europe, "Enter! - Youth - Ww.coe.int," Youth <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/enter>

⁶⁹ European Youth Portal. What Is the EU Youth Dialogue?. https://youth.europa.eu/get-involved/eu-youth-dialogue/what-eu-youth-dialogue_en

⁷⁰ European Commission. Erasmus+ and the EU's Priorities. <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/projects/erasmus-and-the-eus-priorities#democracy>

⁷¹ United Nations Development Programme. Enhancing Youth Political Participation. https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/ENG_UN-Youth_Guide-LR.pdf

political debate and promote democratic and more legitimate political decisions.⁷² E-democracy can attract young people more easily to governance, democratic institutions and politics in general, as digital spaces have become central arenas for the youth to politically express themselves, deliberate and mobilize.

Forms of e-democracy may vary from e-voting, online petitions and digital public consultations, to participating in digital political platforms, crowdsourcing policy ideas and using social media to engage with political representatives.⁷³ Some prominent examples of e-democracy implementation by either states or organizations are Estonia's e-Governance system⁷⁴, which includes i-Voting and digital public services⁷⁵, Barcelona City Council's "Decidim Barcelona" platform⁷⁶, the "EU Youth Dialogue"⁷⁷ digital consultations organized with support from the European Commission and the European Youth Forum⁷⁸, but also the "European Citizens' Initiative" online system managed by the European Commission.⁷⁹

More and more organizations and governments are offering citizens access to digital tools so that they have the opportunity to contribute more actively to policymaking. Firstly, these online tools increase accessibility by lowering practical barriers such as time constraints, mobility limitations, or geographical distance, enabling broader and more flexible youth participation in consultations, debates and decision-making processes, promoting inclusivity by welcoming individuals who may feel excluded from traditional political spaces and supporting more direct interaction between

⁷² Council of Europe. Recommendation 263 (2009) on the Digital Divide and E-Inclusion.

<https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=0900001680719544>

⁷³ European Movement. Citizens' Participation in the Digital Age: E-Democracy.

<https://europeanmovement.eu/policy/citizens-participation-in-the-digital-age-e-democracy/>

⁷⁴ e-Estonia, "E-Estonia," e-Estonia, 2012, <https://e-estonia.com/>.

⁷⁵ European Commission. Estonian Internet Voting. <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-building-blocks/sites/spaces/DIGITAL/blog/2019/07/29/533365949/Estonian+Internet+voting>

⁷⁶ Barcelona City Council. Decidim Barcelona. <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/digital/en/technology-accessible-everyone/accessible-and-participatory/accessible-and-participatory-5>

⁷⁷ "Get Involved | European Youth Portal," Europa.eu, 2024, https://youth.europa.eu/eu-youth-dialogue_en.

⁷⁸ Cities of Learning. Join the Conversation: Get Involved in the EU Youth Dialogue. <https://youthgoalshub.eu/hy/activities/19581>

⁷⁹ European Union, "Sign or start an initiative," European Citizens' Initiative. https://citizens-initiative.europa.eu/index_el

policymakers⁸⁰ and young citizens.⁸¹ Furthermore, digital platforms can initiate discussion on issues that are more relevant and of concern to younger generations, since youth are constantly active in the digital nexus, meaning they can be easier informed on such matters.⁸²

Even though such forms of participation can enhance inclusivity and amplify the voices of under-represented groups, unequal access to digital technologies may lead to new forms of exclusion⁸³, like the “under-connected” trap, exclusion from civic and administrative services, misinformation, and amplify existing inequalities.⁸⁴ Additionally, young people who use social media extensively are also exposed to misinformation, disinformation and propaganda.⁸⁵ Echo chambers, created by algorithm-driven content distribution, reinforce already existing opinions and limit exposure to diverse perspectives.⁸⁶ Lastly, concerns regarding data protection, privacy and online manipulation add to the policymakers and institutions’ increasing challenges to recognize and integrate digital tools into democratic systems, fearing the potential backlash. Accordingly, efforts such as the establishment of the Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data (Convention 108+)⁸⁷, try to ensure that youth online engagement can translate into tangible political outcomes and will not risk undermining human dignity.⁸⁸

⁸⁰ Council of Europe, “Recommendation 263 (2009) The digital divide and e-inclusion in the regions - Congress of Local and Regional Authorities

<https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=0900001680719544>

⁸¹ Council of Europe. E-Democracy. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/congress/e-democracy>

⁸² Official Journal of the European Union, “European Parliament resolution of 16 March 2017 on e-democracy in the European Union: potential and challenges (2016/2008(INI)),” <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52017IP0095>

⁸³ Council of Europe. Recommendation 263 (2009) on the Digital Divide and E-Inclusion.

<https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=0900001680719544>

⁸⁴ “Why Digital Inclusion Is a Social Issue in 2026,” Enterprise Evolution, May 13, 2026, <https://enterpriseevolution.eu/2026/05/13/why-digital-inclusion-is-a-social-issue-in-2026/>.

⁸⁵ Council of Europe. Council of Europe Launches the E-Democracy Lab Online Learning Platform.

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/-/council-of-europe-launches-the-e-democracy-lab-online-learning-platform>

⁸⁶ European Commission. Defending Democratic Values in the Digital Age. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/democracy-digital>

⁸⁷ Ibid, Legal Framework, 5.5

⁸⁸ Council of Europe. E-Democracy. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/congress/e-democracy>

6.2 Economic, social, geographical and institutional barriers against youth involvement in democracy

All of the above suggest that youth participation in democratic processes across Europe is not evenly distributed, but instead reflects on deeper structural inequalities that shape access to political life.⁸⁹ Economic vulnerability, unequal access to education, regional differences and institutional design, all play a major role in whether young people can actually engage meaningfully in democratic processes or not.⁹⁰

Economic vulnerability stemming from the polycrises of the past decades, is a key barrier as it directly impacts political efficacy and the ability to participate. Young people across Europe are overrepresented among Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEETs), a group linked to lower political participation and trust in institutions. In countries like Italy, Greece and Spain high NEET rates relate to reduced electoral turnout among younger voters and lower engagement with formal political structures. Economic insecurity limits participation both materially and psychologically. Individuals facing unstable employment often feel that their participation cannot influence political outcomes, this sense of powerlessness is driven by economic insecurity, leading to lower trust in institutions and a feeling that democratic systems do not represent their interests.⁹¹

Thus low wages and ongoing youth unemployment make these challenges even worse, especially for those entering the job market under unstable conditions.⁹² Even when they are employed, many young professionals deal with insecure contracts, limited stability, limited opportunities for career advancement and low pay. This restricts their ability to invest time and resources in political or civic activities. In such situations, engaging in democratic life becomes less important than addressing immediate economic needs for survival. This was particularly evident in Spain during the aftermath

⁸⁹ Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady. *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
<https://www.hup.harvard.edu/books/9780674942934>

⁹⁰ Checkoway, Barry. "What Is Youth Participation?" *Children and Youth Services Review* 33, no. 2 (2011).
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilcyouth.2010.09.017>

⁹¹ European Commission. *Youth Employment and NEET Statistics*.
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Young_people_-_social_inclusion

⁹² International Labour Organization. *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2023*.
<https://www.ilo.org/publications/flagship-reports/global-employment-trends-youth-2023>

of the 2008 financial crisis, where high youth unemployment contributed to the emergence of the Indignados⁹³ movement, reflecting frustration with institutional political structures.

Another undoubtedly major factor to take into consideration when dealing with youth electoral turnout, are the social inequalities, which actually shape access to political knowledge and networks for participation. Civic education is uneven across European education systems, leading to significant differences in political literacy among young people. Those with higher educational attainment are more likely to grasp institutional processes, access diverse information and participate in democratic discussions. On the contrary, early school leavers and individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds often show lower political knowledge and engagement.

Additionally, migrants, minorities and in general marginalized groups frequently encounter structural barriers to participation, including underrepresentation and limited access to institutional channels. In European Capitals like Paris or Brussels this creates a paradox where politically active youth are highly visible in protests, yet enjoy limited participation in formal decision making.⁹⁴ Particularly, in France, youth from immigrant backgrounds in suburban areas (banlieues)⁹⁵ have been shown to participate actively in protests, while remaining significantly underrepresented in formal political institutions.

Geographical differences add another layer of inequality by limiting physical and structural access to democracy. In rural and peripheral regions⁹⁶ young people generally have fewer opportunities to engage with political institutions, civil society groups and participatory initiatives. This is showcased specifically in parts of Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans where outreach and youth focus programs are very limited. Even in the European Union, in member-states like Romania and Bulgaria, rural youth face challenges related to mobility, access to education and digital

⁹³ Castells, Manuel. Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age. Cambridge: Polity Press. <https://politybooks.com/bookdetail/?isbn=9780745662853>

⁹⁴ European Democracy Hub, "Misunderstanding Youth Activism: How Young People Are Rewriting Democracy," European Democracy Hub, September 11, 2025, <https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/misunderstanding-youth-activism/>.

⁹⁵ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey. <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2017/eumidis-ii-main-results>

⁹⁶ OECD. Rural Well-being: Geography of Opportunities for Youth. <https://www.oecd.org/regional/rural-well-being.htm>

infrastructure.⁹⁷ These conditions reduce both exposure to political process and opportunities for ongoing engagement, contributing to lower participatory levels compared to urban peers.

Attention now shifts to the institutional design itself, which is a critical but often overlooked barrier. Democratic systems across Europe are typically structured around participation models that do not reflect younger generations' realities. Nonetheless systems in Europe do not engage youth needfully or effectively. Democratic countries generally place power within traditional representations of the electorate and ignore a significant segment of future voters and modern identities, which can contribute to alienation. Furthermore, the average age of elected representatives in many European parliaments⁹⁸ is significantly higher than the average age of the population creating a perception gap between institutions and youth. In countries like Germany and France discussions on lowering the voting age or increasing youth representation can be considered ongoing efforts to address it but implementation is still uneven.

Moreover participatory mechanisms designed specifically for young people often have limited impact.⁹⁹ Youth councils and advisory bodies, found in countries like Finland, Norway and Germany etc., provide formal channels for youth consultation. However their recommendations are not always binding and their influence on final policy decisions is often limited.¹⁰⁰ This can lead to “symbolic participation” where engagement exists in form but not in substance, risking trust and democratic institutions over time.

Additionally, the digital divide¹⁰¹ is particularly relevant in rural areas and among socio-economically disadvantaged groups, where stable internet access and digital skills are not guaranteed. Moreover digital participation often favors short-term, issue-based engagement instead of sustained

⁹⁷ World Bank. Being Young in Romania: Challenges and Opportunities.

<https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099848104122228877/p1717620c1c5a500d0b8c0d0f0c9f3d5a6d>

⁹⁸ Inter-Parliamentary Union. Youth Participation in National Parliaments.

<https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2018-12/youth-participation-in-national-parliaments>

⁹⁹ Katarzyna Radzik-Maruszak et al., “Youth Empowered or Just Involved? Exploring Youth Participatory Budgeting in Finland and Poland,” *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 30, no. 1 (October 23, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2025.2570232>.

¹⁰⁰ OECD. Trust in Government: Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions.

<https://www.oecd.org/gov/trust-in-government/>

¹⁰¹ European Commission. Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI).

<https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/desi>

involvement in institutional processes raising concerns about its long-term effect on democratic participation.

6.2.1 Meaningful Participation vs. Tokenism in Youth Engagement

While examining the extent and the means youth utilizes in order to participate in democratic processes, it is of the essence to keep in mind the great contradiction between meaningful participation and the phenomenon of tokenism.

Meaningful participation signifies that young people are not just present, but have the ability to actively shape outcomes with their contributions. It includes three key elements, and specifically access to information, the freedom to express perspectives and a clear impact on decision-making.¹⁰² In contrast, tokenism¹⁰³ refers to situations where young people are formally included in participatory processes but have no real influence over the outcomes. In these cases, participation becomes a symbolic act, often meant to show inclusiveness, while decision-making power stays the same.¹⁰⁴

Youth dialogue mechanisms at the European level, such as the EU Youth Dialogue¹⁰⁵, can occasionally incorporate youth viewpoints into policy frameworks. When implemented well, these processes allow young participants to collaborate with policymakers through several rounds of consultation, with results contributing to Council's conclusions and EU youth strategies.¹⁰⁶ However, their effectiveness relies heavily on how deeply and correctly recommendations are included in policy decisions. A primary example of youth viewpoints being incorporated into European policy, are the European Youth Goals, which were the outcome of the 6th Cycle of the EU Youth Dialogue.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² "Meaningful Youth Participation | Youth Affairs," Youth Affairs, 2023, <https://www.un.org/youthaffairs/en/meaningful-youth-participation>.

¹⁰³ Ibid, Glossary, Tokenism

¹⁰⁴ Hart, Roger A. Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre. https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/childrens_participation.pdf

¹⁰⁵ European Commission. EU Youth Dialogue. https://youth.europa.eu/eu-youth-dialogue_en

¹⁰⁶ Council of Europe. Youth Participation. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/youth-participation>

¹⁰⁷ "European Youth Goals | European Youth Portal," youth.europa.eu, n.d., https://youth.europa.eu/strategy/european-youth-goals_en.

Conversely, tokenistic participation frequently occurs in institutional settings where youth involvement is only advisory. Youth councils allow young people to express their views on local or national issues. As a result, participation may happen on paper, but without any real policy impact.¹⁰⁸

Another example of tokenism appears in consultation processes that occur afterwards in the governance cycle.¹⁰⁹ Young people may be invited to give feedback on policies that are already set, limiting their ability to influence key decisions. This approach turns involvement into a reactive activity instead of a proactive one, reducing its real values.

6.2.2 Limited representation, misinformation and propaganda among youth

In order to guarantee that decision-making and democratic processes reflect the needs, priorities and experiences of all generations, youth representation in politics is essential. Despite representing a substantial portion of the population, though, young people remain underrepresented in political institutions, such as national parliaments, local councils, executive bodies and organizations¹¹⁰.

Some structural barriers that often restrict opportunities for young candidates to enter decision-making environments constitute the limited access to political networks, the financial constraints and the prioritization of seniority within political parties.¹¹¹ Efforts to increase engagement often focus on strengthening youth representation in politics, through the enhancement of administrative and technical capacities, as well as the use of digital tools to improve accessibility and better alignment with young people's communication preferences.¹¹² The Council of Europe has repeatedly emphasized the importance of inclusive representation to maintain the democratic ways of politics, encouraging member states to promote youth participation, not only as voters but also

¹⁰⁸ Arnstein, Sherry R. "A Ladder of Citizen Participation." *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35, no. 4 (1969): 216–224.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225>

¹⁰⁹ European Commission. *Better Regulation Guidelines*. Brussels: European Commission. https://commission.europa.eu/law/law-making-process/better-regulation_en

¹¹⁰ European Parliament. *Young People's Participation in European Democratic Processes*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/745820/IPOL_STU\(2023\)745820_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/745820/IPOL_STU(2023)745820_EN.pdf)

¹¹¹ Council of Europe, "From Commitment to Implementation: Making Social Rights Real for Young People," Youth <https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/-/from-commitment-to-implementation-making-social-rights-real-for-young-people>

¹¹² European Parliament. *Young People's Participation in European Democratic Processes*.

as policymakers and political leaders, therefore strengthening democratic legitimacy and intergenerational dialogue.¹¹³

Misinformation and propaganda, particularly through social media platforms and online communication channels, is another great issue that polarizes young people, undermines their institutional confidence and endangers democratic values¹¹⁴. Skepticism, distortion of political understanding, disengagement, mental health problems and the incapacity of the youth to make responsible decisions, are some of the main results from the exposure to false or misleading information, algorithmically amplified content and foreign interference.¹¹⁵ This phenomenon has expanded widely because young people rely heavily on digital media¹¹⁶ as primary sources of political life and then they may encounter difficulties in distinguishing reliable sources from manipulated or biased content.¹¹⁷ In response to the strong presence of misinformation, propaganda and fake news, institutions have increasingly emphasized how important media literacy, critical thinking skills and transparent digital governance frameworks are, in order to safeguard pluralistic and informed democratic debate and briefing.¹¹⁸

6.2.3 Voting age gap and marginalized groups inside the political scenery

Except for the above, great is the debate surrounding the voting age gap, and if that should be lowered from eighteen to sixteen for all member states. While the standard voting age in most European countries remains at eighteen years, several states not only have thrown campaigns, but also explored or implemented reforms, allowing young citizens to vote from the age of sixteen,

¹¹³ The New Democratic Pact for Europe, “Building a Resilient Europe - the New Democratic Pact for Europe <https://www.coe.int/en/web/new-democratic-pact-for-europe>

¹¹⁴ Council of Europe. Protecting Democracy in the Digital Age. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/protecting-democracy-in-the-digital-age>

¹¹⁵ European Youth Portal. New Report Reveals Young People’s Solutions for Challenges to Democracy. https://youth.europa.eu/get-involved/eu-youth-dialogue/new-report-reveals-young-peoples-solutions-challenges-democracy_it

¹¹⁶ Council of Europe. European News-Media Sector Has Been Profoundly Transformed by Digital Technology. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/european-news-media-sector-has-been-profoundly-transformed-by-digital-technology>

¹¹⁷ Council of Europe. Hackathon and Democratic Debates on Outsmart Disinformation, Protect Free Speech. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/hackathon-and-democratic-debates-on-outsmart-disinformation-protect-free-speech-1>

¹¹⁸ Council of Europe. Dealing with Propaganda, Misinformation and Fake News. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/campaign-free-to-speak-safe-to-learn/dealing-with-propaganda-misinformation-and-fake-news>

particularly in local or regional elections. This model is implemented in several member- states¹¹⁹, such as Austria, Malta, Germany, Belgium and Estonia¹²⁰, or from the age of seventeen, such as in Greece.¹²¹

It is claimed that voter turnout would rise, if the voting age was to be lowered. Providing young people the opportunity to engage in democracy, while they are still in education and living in a environment free of worries and adult responsibilities, as opposed to having to vote for the first time during a transitional period in their lives, increases voter turnout among first-time voters.¹²² Young people, consequently, grow accustomed to voting rather than abstaining from a young age, which eventually results in overall increased turnout.¹²³ Lately, there is also a common argument that having the voting age match the minimum age to run for candidacy would encourage the youth to participate in the political processes and possibly increase the representation of young people in legislative bodies.¹²⁴

Lastly, certain groups of young people, such as migrant youth, ethnic minorities, young women, young people with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ individuals, face additional barriers that are responsible for their aversion to being active citizens. Marginalized youth often retreat from active participation due to systemic gatekeeping, manifested through physical inaccessibility, legal hurdles, and social hostility.¹²⁵

6.3 Past actions and current developments

The earliest roots of youth participation include the adoption of the European Convention on Human Rights (1950) which ensured essential rights to freedom of speech and assembly, thus empowering youth to participate in public life. A more specific tool was adopted in the form of the

¹¹⁹OECD. Reviewing Minimum Age Requirements to Vote and Run as Candidate in Elections. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2024/11/oecd-youth-policy-toolkit_7ae28a3d

¹²⁰ Epthinktank, "Voting Age for European Elections," Service, Members Research <https://epthinktank.eu/2023/06/07/voting-age-for-european-elections/>

¹²¹Gov.gr. Conditions to Vote. <https://www.gov.gr/en/sdg/residence/participating-in-municipal-elections-and-elections-to-european-parliament/european-elections/conditions-to-vote-None>

¹²²UNICEF. Should Children Vote?. <https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/should-children-vote>

¹²³European Youth Forum. Lower the Voting Age. <https://www.youthforum.org/topics/lower-the-voting-age>

¹²⁴European Parliament. Young People's Participation in European Democratic Processes.

¹²⁵ World Forum for Democracy. A Seat at the Table: Enhancing the Role of Marginalised Groups in Public Discourse. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/world-forum-democracy/lab-5-a-seat-at-the-table-enhancing-the-role-of-marginalised-groups-in-public-discourse>

European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life (1992) that identified young people as actors in decision-making processes. The creation of systematic approaches to youth participation through the development of youth policies and mechanisms contributed to its institutionalization in the region.

In particular, since the beginning of the 2000s, these efforts were aimed at implementing consultation schemes and participatory practices. At the European level, Erasmus+ Youth¹²⁶ (since 2014) and European Solidarity Corps¹²⁷ (started operating in 2018) aimed to promote civic engagement and international projects by youth. At the national level, initiatives were related to establishing youth councils or implementing participatory budgeting initiatives. As an example, Estonia, similarly to other countries mentioned above, implemented an online voting system (i-Voting) and other e-services. An earlier attempt at involving youth in elections included Austria's lowering of the voting age in 2007¹²⁸ and Germany's federal states in the late 1990s.¹²⁹

Building on these actions, recent approaches have become more structured and focused on policy. The EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027¹³⁰ provides a coordinated framework. Moreover, the European Youth Goals¹³¹, part of the EU Youth Strategy, serve as a policy reference for member states. Specifically, Goal 1- Connecting EU with Youth and Goal 9- Space and Participation for All, stress the importance of creating inclusive participatory environments and enhancing youth representation in democratic processes. These priorities have shaped national youth policies and funding, mainly through programs like Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps, which continue to support civic engagement projects, youth-led initiatives and cross-border cooperation¹³².

¹²⁶ “Erasmus+ – Youth and Sport,” Erasmusplusyouth.gr, 2020, <https://erasmusplusyouth.gr/en/erasmus-plus/>.

¹²⁷ “Ευρωπαϊκό Σώμα Αλληλεγγύης – European Solidarity Corps,” Europeansolidaritycorps.gr, 2020, <https://europeansolidaritycorps.gr/en/>.

¹²⁸ OECD. Reviewing Minimum Age Requirements to Vote and Run as Candidate in Elections. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2024/11/oecd-youth-policy-toolkit_7ae28a3d

¹²⁹ European Parliament. Young People’s Participation in European Democratic Processes.

¹³⁰ “EU Youth Strategy | European Youth Portal,” youth.europa.eu, n.d., https://youth.europa.eu/strategy_en.

¹³¹ Ibid, European Youth Goals

¹³² Council of Europe. Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)1 on Electronic Democracy (e-Democracy). https://www.coe.int/t/dgap/goodgovernance/activities/key-texts/recommendations/Recommendation_CM_Rec2009_1_en.asp

Within the Council of Europe, the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life comes with practical tools like the “Have Your Say!” manual.¹³³ This manual offers guidance on how to create and manage participatory structures at the local level. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities also promotes youth participation, by encouraging municipalities to establish youth councils with clearer mandates and accountability mechanisms.

Finally, especially in the last decade, digital participation¹³⁴ tools are increasingly important. Platforms like the EU Youth Portal¹³⁵ and national e-participation websites help young people access information, respond to consultations and engage with policy processes more flexibly.

6.4 Key stakeholders

Institutional stakeholders that play a critical role in fostering youth participation in Europe include the European Commission, the Council of Europe, and the European Parliament¹³⁶. Key among these organizations is the European Commission because of their policies that foster youth participation. Some of these policies include the EU Youth Strategy (2019-2027)¹³⁷ and youth-oriented projects such as Erasmus+ Youth¹³⁸ and the European Solidarity Corps. In addition to the European Commission, another institution involved is the Council of Europe. This organization works through its youth department and instruments such as the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life. By focusing on developing youth co-management and standards of youth inclusion in decision-making processes. The third institution is the European Parliament since, through legislation, the parliament focuses on youth-related issues and participates in discussions regarding youth political representation. At the national and local levels, government entities engage in youth participation through youth councils and budgeting processes.¹³⁹

¹³³ Council of Europe, “Manual on the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life,” November 2015.

¹³⁴ European Commission. Defending Democratic Values in the Digital Age.

¹³⁵ “European Youth Portal | European Youth Portal,” youth.europa.eu, n.d., https://youth.europa.eu/home_en.

¹³⁶ European Parliament. Youth participation in European democratic processes.
<https://www.europarl.europa.eu>

¹³⁷ European Commission. EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027.
https://youth.europa.eu/strategy_en

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Council of Europe. Youth for Democracy Programme.

Beyond formal institutions, intermediary actors and civil society organizations play an important role in enabling youth participation. The European Youth Forum¹⁴⁰ serves as a key representative platform, channeling the views of youth organizations into European policymaking and supporting structured dialogue processes. Organizations like Amnesty International¹⁴¹ and Transparency International EU¹⁴² contribute through advocacy, human rights education and anti-corruption initiatives, which strengthen youth political awareness and engagement. At the same time, grassroots movements and youth-led initiatives drive issue-based participation, in hot topics like climate action, social justice and human rights.

Furthermore, digital platforms and social media systems¹⁴³, including those run by companies like Meta and TikTok, have become influential by shaping access to information, political discourse and mobilization patterns. However, their role can be mixed due to the spread of misinformation and algorithmic biases. Lastly, educational institutions, research bodies and international organizations like the United Nations Development Programme¹⁴⁴ help by producing data, strengthening civic skills and supporting evidence-based policymaking. This creates a multi-level governance ecosystem that is essential for inclusive and meaningful youth participation.

7. Conclusion

Finally, considering all of the above, youth engagement in the democratic processes on the European continent becomes a multi-faceted and evolving phenomenon. The level of youth involvement grows due to the increasing usage of alternative forms of participation such as digital and issue-based ones. Nevertheless, young people have difficulties with engaging through more

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/youth/programme>

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, European Youth Forum

¹⁴¹ Amnesty International. Human Rights Education.

<https://www.amnesty.org>

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Meta Platforms Inc.

<https://about.meta.com>

¹⁴⁴ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Enhancing Youth Political Participation.

<https://www.undp.org>

conventional and institutional means of participation. The present state of affairs does not mean the absence of interest but reflects structural obstacles.

Simultaneously, the increasing use of digital participation creates both new opportunities and new challenges. While it improves accessibility and immediacy, it also increases inequalities related to digital skills, exposure to misinformation and fragmented engagement that may not lead to long-term political influence.

Another major challenge is bridging the gap between participation in form and participation in substance. It is crucial to distinguish between meaningful participation and tokenism. When young people are included without having a real impact, trust in democratic institutions weakens. On the other hand, when participation leads to real outcomes, it boosts political efficacy and long-term engagement.

To enhance youth participation, a total rethink of how democratic systems work is of the essence. This means ensuring inclusivity, improving accessibility, strengthening political education and creating ways for young people to truly shape policy, rather than just being consulted. Ultimately, the sustainability and legitimacy of democratic systems in Europe rely on their ability to meet the needs and expectations of young citizens. Investing in meaningful youth participation is not just a democratic necessity, it is also a key priority for the future of European governance and calls upon deep thinking, fruitful conversations and of course action.

8. Points to be addressed

1. What concrete measures can be taken to reduce the participation gap between urban and rural youth, particularly in terms of access to information, mobility and digital infrastructure?
2. How can civic education be strengthened to ensure that young people develop practical knowledge of democratic processes and early engagement?

3. What enhancements can be integrated into existing frameworks regarding youth participation to ensure they have a meaningful and sustainable impact for young people facing multidimensional barriers, including those from migrant and minority backgrounds?
4. How can institutional participation frameworks be redesigned to decouple socio-economic status from political agency, ensuring that young people in unstable working conditions have the same opportunities to engage compared to peers enjoying a more secure socio-economic environment?
5. What measures can be taken to ensure that digital sovereignty and access are treated as fundamental rights rather than market-driven privileges?
6. What strategies can be developed or strengthened, to reverse declining youth voter turnout, rebuild trust in democratic institutions, and ensure that young citizens perceive their political participation as meaningful and impactful?
7. Which issues affect youth participation in democratic processes, and what actions can address them?
8. What systems can be introduced to monitor and evaluate youth participation policies and ensure their effectiveness?

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