

Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth



EUROPEAN UNION

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CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Symposium "The future of young people's political participation: questions, challenges and opportunities"

18-20 September, Strasbourg

Visions of the future – selection of participants' hopes and expectations

What is youth political participation?

Political participation is considered to be any activity that shapes, involves or affects political sphere (EU-CoE youth partnership 2019). More broadly, it would be every opportunity and space where young people have influence on anything that affects their lives- politics, decisions, relationships, or active engagement of young people in their communities.

Political participation may be institutional/formal or informal/non-institutional. Institutional participation includes elections and voting, while non-formal concerns all other forms of political involvement, protests, political boycotts, petitions, leaflets, writing letters to politicians, civil disobedience, and the use of violence for political purposes. All of these activities are aimed at influencing political decisions.

What do the participants say?

"Political participation does not only mean to identify with certain political parties or to form an opinion on political matters, but also to internalize the basic concept of democracy in everyday life offline and online", educator, Germany.

“Youth political participation means a constant engagement of the younger generation in a myriad of activities that have or may lead to a policy impact at the community, national or regional level. It can take many forms, beginning from voting, protesting, staying informed about latest political developments, writing articles, making studies, and making our voices heard”, member of a civil society organisation, Albania.

“When a young person has a desire to change something, political participation is a means to make that happen. It can take many forms such as dialogue with decision makers, protest or civic actions and many others but they are all equally as important and valid”, youth activist, England, UK.

“By youth political participation I understand the presence of young people in political parties and decision-making positions along with their willingness to promote Democracy and freedom of choice”, youth political leader and activist, Kazakhstan.

“I understand political participation as an individual or collective (set of) actions taken to influence the governance in a broad sense. A repertoire of political participation is wide from classical voting in elections to boycotting by not buying unethical products and being a member of local youth council to presiding a political party”, policy-maker, Estonia.

“Political participation is every form of actions that young people do to influence society on a small or large level. This can be through individual manners such as writing an article for the local newspaper or through participating in mass strikes”, youth activist, Belgium.

“By youth political participation I understand the engagement of young people in any activity that influences or impacts directly or indirectly the policy making processes in their community, country or other entity that they belong to”, member of civil society organisation, North Macedonia.

“Political participation is embracing responsibility for the political developments happening around you and searching for ways to improve the situation and make sure that you are not just a spectator of your own life. Youth political participation is about developing critical thinking, taking an independent political stand, and influencing the political decision-making process to make sure your opinion is heard and considered”, member of a youth political organisation, Ukraine.

Why do young people engage?

Young people engage when they feel concerned or outraged about a certain issue. They feel compelled to act on a certain issue in order to influence and change something in their society or their wider environment. Their feelings are influenced by their values, character or personality.



Life is life. Image by [Coline Robin](#)¹

"I think young people are becoming more involved in politics online and through social media and this is a really positive step. I also think that a lot of young people are realising that in order to change policy, they have to make a bold stand against the status quo", youth political activist, Scotland, UK.

Challenges for political participation of young people

Although young people make up large percentage of population in many countries, they are still largely marginalized from mainstream political processes. The main challenges to political participation which have been identified by participants include:

- There are limited opportunities for young people to engage – youth are marginalised from political processes, and particularly under-18 who have no right to vote.
- Young people are disillusioned by traditional politics and feel their voice is not heard in decision-making processes, and that they are not represented. Representation is often in the form of tokenism and manipulation, and not meaningful participation.
- Young people are perceived as indifferent and disinterested.
- Young people feel that "political world" is reserved for politicians (men/women in suits).
- Lack of trust in political parties and political decision-making processes and cynicism towards politics.

¹ Nico, M. 2019. *What do I care for? Social Values of Young People Compared*. Available at: <https://medium.com/@youth.partnership.eu.coe/what-do-i-care-for-social-values-of-young-people-compared-be4bdd30fb9d>

- Politicians perceive young people as numbers/voters and not take them seriously, fearing new ideas.
- Social taboos about youth - young people are seen as lacking skills and experience to engage in politics.
- There is limited information and awareness regarding opportunities for political engagement, rights and opportunities.
- Young people with fewer opportunities may have limited access to information on how to engage in politics due to poverty, inequality and social exclusion.
- Those from remote areas have additional geographic challenges to political participation.
- Young people lack self-confidence to engage in politics.
- Formal education system does not encourage participation, or citizenship education and training.
- There is a gap between the generations when it comes to use of technology - youth prefer different type of engagement e.g. online activism, as opposed to physical participation.
- Young people have no time to engage due to education/work/family/friends commitments.
- There is a shrinking space for political participation in general, which also affects youth.

*“Challenge I faced was **age-discrimination** because young people are not expected to be in leading positions due to their lack of experience. The second challenge was **gender inequality** when I first started my political activity at the Youth Wing” - Kazakhstan*

*“Even while being affiliated, **political figures are so quick to dismiss young people’s thoughts** and opinions and put it down to lack of experience. This is incredibly frustrating. We young people are not consulted enough on issues that affect us, and I think this is the biggest challenge” – member of a civil society organisation, Ireland.*

“Politics should not only be youth-friendly, but it should also become more appealing and approachable to youth” – representative of civil society organisation, Serbia.

“Some of the challenges relate to the difficulties to measure the impact of participation and ensuring that participation is inclusive and can influence policy making and that it can operate at a scale significant enough to influence societal challenges.” -researcher and youth worker, UK

Opportunities for political participation

The work with young people has shown that when they have opportunity and space to organise, they can make meaningful positive impact on politics and their immediate and wider environment. The opportunities for political participation of young people are increasing, due to:

- Imminent issues on the political agenda (e.g. climate change) motivate young people to become more engaged in politics and influence the decisions. The phenomenon of global social movements, such as Strike 4 Climate and associated use of online tools present a new potential for enhancing political participation of young people.

- Young people have better education opportunities and better understanding of rights and responsibilities and power relations, thus they are more likely to be engaged.
- There are opportunities for engagement at various levels – local, national, regional, European, thus there are also specific opportunities for influencing the policy-making at each of these levels.
- Digital opportunities – social media and media offer ways to be informed and directly involved, and to raise awareness of political issues.
- Young people have more opportunities for political participation within the system, not only through elections, but also through access to youth-specific funding opportunities (Erasmus+, European Solidarity Corps).

“There are many opportunities for youth political participation. First of all, for the ones who have reached the right age, there is the possibility of voting during local, national and European elections to make their voice heard by institutions and politicians. Then there is the possibility of joining a political party, a political organisation or a civil movement to support local and national campaign. Moreover, it is possible to organise petitions to support specific struggles”, youth activist, Italy.

“I think that the new EU Youth Strategy, together with the increased funding of the Erasmus+ program and the European Solidarity Corps can give more tools to young people to participate and deal with community problems. For me, this is the first step to increase political participation among youth”, youth activist and researcher, Greece.

“In my opinion the best way to make young people interested in political participation is by presenting them projects and activities they can be part of on local, national or international level”, youth activist, representative of political party, Slovenia.

Motivation and expected learning from the Symposium

Participants of the Symposium hope to:

- Explore more in depth the effective strategies and tools on empowerment
- Learn innovative approaches how to educate youth about politics and involve young people in political decision-making
- Discuss how to motivate young people to participate more, particularly those not interested in politics
- Explore how to engage young people in “difficult topics” e.g. radicalisation, populism, authoritarianism, migration, brain drain
- Develop youth-friendly tools for political participation
- Exchange on good practices of political participation – learn what others are doing to support young people to become politically engaged
- Find inspiration and new ideas for projects
- Learn how others have overcome obstacles to political participation

- Learn about how different cultures define democracy and impacts of pluralism
- Connect, enlarge their network and start building partnerships
- Look beyond online participation
- Exchange on how to deal with political repression, shrinking space for civil society and democratic expression
- Strengthen the role of youth work for the political empowerment of all young people
- Share learning from the symposium with local organisations at home.

“My motivation to participate in the symposium is to share experience and learn new thing that I can implement in my organization in order to optimize the working process and our way of connecting young people. It will be great if I find new partners for future projects”, youth worker, Bulgaria.

“I want to establish new connections with ambitious young people who are ready to initiate new ideas and solutions, share their experience and knowledge to achieve better results. I want to share the information about youth political participation in my country and share the methods we are trying to influence political life of the government,” youth activist, Belarus.

“Participation in Symposium will inspire me to find new ways and opportunities to promote democratic values among young people. It will provide me with a chance of mutual learning and sharing of best practices”, member of a civil society organisation, Armenia.

“This symposium is a brilliant chance to meet with other bright minds to discuss the issue of youth political engagement. As I am an educator, it is crucial for me to expand my knowledge in relation to young people's political activities in order to encourage my students to play more of a role in political life. Thanks for this event, I can experience intercultural diversity in political views meeting with young leaders and representatives of different youth organizations around the world”, educator and researcher, Kazakhstan.

“As a young political leader I would like to get more prepared for political life of my country”, youth activist, Kosovo.

“I would like to meet young activists with inspiring stories about how they practice active citizenship. I would also like to learn about good practices from the ground on how young people can be inspired to engage in political advocacy and the extent to which their education and training - and importantly which type - assists or hinders them in this process”, member of a civil society organisation, Belgium.

“I would like to gain more insight into political participation of young people in different contexts, hear more from different actors relevant to the topic and meet people who work and will be working toward better political participation of young people,” researcher, Croatia.

“I will gain insight into how other cultures view youth political participation. I would, above all else, like to gain an understanding of what youth political participation means for people from different countries and cultures, to understand how I can change the way I participate for the better moving forward”, influencer and youth activist, UK.

Visions of the future...?

*“In my vision of the future, the youth acts as a serious and active participant in the debate about our common future. **The youth are the powerhouse of innovative and forward thinking ideas** that set aside the past and fight racism, fascism, nazism, homophobia, islamophobia etc. With increasing inequalities, the issues of universal equality among youth are once again at the forefront of public debates. We have to be aware that **the corner stone of democracy should be feminism** which does not only address women, but combats poverty, violence, exclusion of the weaker, advocates the right for free education, health care and strives to strengthen the welfare state, as well as seeks solutions in structural changes, beginning with sustainability and sustainable well-being for all. We can see that current issues are emphasising the importance of the self-organization of the youth”, youth political leader, Slovenia.*

*“I think that it's important that **youth political participation should start with education**, as it is the main foundation of our society. If elements of global citizenship education are implemented in our education systems, and the key principles of democracy and activism are covered in schools and universities, youth participation would naturally increase over time”, youth worker Lithuania.*

*“I see young people inspiring other young people to become engaged in society. I think this will be done in many ways including both traditional and creative ways and everything else in between. I really think this is an exciting time for youth political participation as actions are being taken by young people and they are being globally acknowledged. **The use of platforms such as social media make political actions much more accessible to young people** and I see this is a positive move, but also a little scary. It is important we make our young people politically aware so that they engage effectively and safely in things that have such huge potential”, youth worker and youth activist, England, UK.*

*“Youth political participation can only increase from here. Through international, national and local leaders such as Greta Thunberg, David Hogg and Sam Rumens, young people are becoming inspired to strive and act upon the issues that they care about. There has been no other period in history where young people have been driving forward and controlling the conversation like we are today, which means that **future leaders will be experienced and engaged like never before**. I see this generation of engaged young people leading the next generation into being even more engaged which can only do promising things for communities and countries”, influencer and youth activist England, UK.*

*“Young people have much to offer societies, from **innovation to creativity to new thinking**. Their participation in democracy promotes active citizenship, strengthens social responsibility and can enhance democratic processes and institutions”, member of a civil society organisation, Armenia.*

*“I believe that through different **local and European opportunities** youth political participation will be increased and more people will be engaged in 20 years from now”, youth worker and educator, Cyprus.*