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YOUTH DEMOCRACY COHORT

Democratic Catalyst:

# How Young People Are Redefining Political Participation

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# Introduction

– ANA MOSIASHVILI AND SARA CANALI

Young people are mobilising more than ever before for democracy. Hopes are high that the young can act as a democratic catalyst to turn back the powerful wave of authoritarianism across the world. But is this really possible? This report examines what is driving young people to mobilise, how powerful their engagement is, and what kinds of political participation they are developing. Much is written about youth participation; this report gives the word to young people from around the world to let them speak on these issues. They correct some of the conventional wisdom about youth political participation and reveal the complex dynamics of young people's role in and for democracy today.

The issue has become vitally important. The year 2025 witnessed a surge in youth-led protests, mainly associated with Gen Z, and many revolts have continued into 2026. The large-scale mobilisation of young people has reignited debates on political representation, participation, resilience, and democratic renewal. Common patterns emerge across countries that have witnessed youth-led mobilisations over the past year, despite the diversity of the contexts. Limited economic opportunities, persistent inequalities, restrictions on civic freedoms and expression, and entrenched political elitism all contribute to mounting frustration among young people.

Despite much comment and analysis, the critical question remains insufficiently explored: are current political systems, institutions, and governance models open and responsive to youth participation?

There might be no single answer as to whether increased youth political participation directly strengthens and sustains democracies. But one principle stands firm: inclusive democracy depends on broad societal engagement, including from the largest age cohort globally – young people.[1] Yet political representation of the younger generation remains disproportionately low, and not just because of increasing disillusionment with politics among young people. Despite the youth's demographic strength, political systems are often closed, exclusionary, and at times openly resistant to meaningful youth participation.

Entering political spaces can be extremely challenging for young people, who face a range of structural and cultural barriers. These include the high costs, both monetary and non-monetary, of running for office; age-related eligibility restrictions; closed or unfair electoral processes; gender inequality; and sociopolitical environments that are often unsupportive of or discouraging to youth leadership.[2] These intersecting obstacles significantly reduce young people's motivation and the appeal of formal political engagement.[3]

This report dissects the different ways in which young civic and political actors are responding to these challenges. It offers an unprecedented range of case studies from all world regions, undertaken by young experts close to these debates. The report challenges the view of young

people as a homogeneous group of disillusioned and disengaged citizens. It points instead to a variety of forms of youth-led political participation and explores the implications of these strategies for democratic change. Young people emerge as a democratic catalyst, but not necessarily in the ways often assumed to be the case.

## The power of data: the Global Youth Participation Index

This report flows from a new index designed to highlight trends in youth participation. Recognising the essential value of research and data for driving change for youth participation, the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD) launched the first-ever Global Youth Participation Index (GYPI) in 2025. The GYPI tracks and compares data on youth participation from 141 countries across four dimensions: political affairs, the socioeconomic context, elections, and civic space. According to the index, low scores, particularly on the political affairs dimension, are not limited to regions where democracy is new or fragile but are a global phenomenon.[4]

The GYPI does not show uniform disengagement, which is often assumed to be the main feature of young people's attitudes to politics. Rather, the trends are nuanced and varied across contexts. In many places, apparent disengagement from traditional forms of politics has been challenged by other forms of participation whose democratic potential has been ignored or undermined.

Across these alternative forms, many turn to informal spaces, particularly social media and other digital platforms, to express their views, organise, and mobilise. Online engagement has significantly expanded the opportunities for youth participation, but it also poses considerable risks and threats. Digital spaces are not safe from the rapid spread of radical, extremist, and populist narratives, many of which deliberately target young people's vulnerabilities.

All of this is happening in the context of rapidly shrinking and even closing civic space. Another important finding of the GYPI is that civic space tends to be more open to youth participation than do political affairs or elections. Research also shows that young people have been experiencing a move from apathy to antipathy, as the young seem to be increasingly embracing illiberal preferences and hostility towards democratic institutions whose structures and performance are no longer deemed adequate to respond to young citizens' needs.[5]

## Lessons and insights

To complement the GYPI with qualitative research, the EPD commissioned case studies from members of our Young Researchers' Network. Their 12 chapters provide a rich breadth and depth of information and examples that shed new light on youth participation.[6]

The following studies weave together research and policy findings on youth engagement. They lay out recommendations to promote and sustain a meaningful and transformative approach to youth participation in both formal and informal decision-making. The case studies offer diverse, thought-provoking, and timely reflections on the challenges and opportunities of youth engagement in different contexts. From the studies, five key messages and insights emerge.

First, all contributions point to the need to move beyond the simple question of whether young people engage, and instead to focus on how youth engagement takes place and why it assumes particular forms. This shift in perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of the drivers, modalities, and motivations that underlie youth participation.

Second, the contributions suggest a mixed picture with regard to the claim that young people prefer informal forms of engagement over mainstream political participation. While some authors do highlight this tendency, others reveal an increasing willingness among young people to challenge the status quo by seeking to transform political channels and institutional structures from within.

Third, several of the challenges identified in the contributions operate at the macro level, whereas others are rooted in the micro-context of specific national settings. This duality underscores the importance of engaging simultaneously with broad, structural trends and specific local realities.

Fourth, the case studies demonstrate that the role of a specific regime – or the broader political context under analysis – is more significant in explaining variations in outcomes than are the differences between young people and other segments of the population. In other words, contextual political factors often outweigh generational divides in shaping patterns of engagement.

Last but not least, an in-depth reading of the contributions highlights a paradox. On the one hand, survey data indicates that a growing number of young people are drawn towards illiberal values, parties, and/or regimes. On the other hand, illiberal regimes often impose such restrictions on youth engagement that they push young people towards more radical positions in defence of fundamental liberal rights. These two dynamics coexist and interact, dispelling an overly simplistic narrative that portrays young people as moving inexorably and uniformly closer to authoritarianism.

## Case studies

The report presents the following 12 case studies, which explore the diverse layers and angles of youth participation.

Dércio Tsandzana analyses Mozambique's #PovoNoPoder movement and its online engagement to challenge the narrative of the country's young people as passive, instead portraying them as closely involved outside the traditional political system. However, Tsandzana also highlights the contradictions and non-linear evolution of this youth engagement, bringing to the fore the valuable contributions of young Mozambicans through digital activism.

Mehmet İlhanlı discusses how the securitisation of young people in Türkiye, which intensified after the 2013 Gezi Park protests, has constrained and reshaped their political engagement. According to İlhanlı, young people are the demographic most affected by the country's democratic decline, as they are being excluded, stigmatised, and securitised. Despite young people's efforts to seek alternative spaces for political expression and activism, their continued stigmatisation by the

government will have a profound negative impact on Türkiye's democratisation.

Obaa Akua Konadu-Osei writes about the cost of politics in Ghana, with a particular focus on the intersection between youth and gender as well as the way in which access to financial resources creates a barrier to parliamentary aspirations. The case study highlights the fundamental challenges young Ghanaians face in fully entering democratic channels, even when they are highly engaged and mobilised in the country's political landscape. Such obstacles, according to Konadu-Osei, are similar for women and youth, implying a need to rethink political-party funding to give young people fairer access to the political system.

Ajda Hedžet investigates the Free El Hiblu 3 campaign to explore how young migrant men claim their voice from the margins of systems that often silence them. The case highlights the limits of institutional recognition, the criminalisation of young migrants, and the digital struggle for justice. It illustrates how political agency and demands for justice are enacted outside formal institutions. The campaign underscores that Europe's migration governance is both a site of contestation and a front line for democratic renewal.

Olga Paredes Brítez carries out a comparative analysis of municipal youth policies in Buenos Aires (Argentina) and Asunción (Paraguay). Both municipalities have adopted a vision of young people as "adults in the making" – an adult-centric approach that hinders the recognition and empowerment of young people as full political subjects. The case study provides an additional layer of analysis through the perspective of municipal-level youth engagement and discusses the decentralisation and municipalisation processes in the two countries.

Oripha Chimwara explores the impact of Zimbabwe's quota system of reserved parliamentary seats for young candidates in creating positive ripple effects for youth engagement in the country. Chimwara also analyses the obstacles to young Zimbabweans' political participation that remain despite this positive step: administrative hurdles, the cost of politics, and a pervasive patronage system.

Mark Ortiz examines intergenerational politics through the 1970 United Nations (UN) World Youth Assembly, highlighting the complexities of youth representation and the lessons for multilateral engagement today. Ortiz compares this gathering with the UN's 2024 Summit of the Future, where meaningful youth participation was central in reflecting commitments in the UN's Youth2030 strategy. The two cases illustrate the enduring impact of youth leadership on the ethos and practice of multilateralism.

Ellie Catherall analyses how and to what extent young people's voices were represented and included in the drafting of Chile's 2023 proposed constitution. The analysis shows that despite young people's view that a new constitution should be representative of Chilean society, the dominance of right-wing parties in the drafting process meant the status quo was maintained. Besides this exclusion of youth voices, young Chileans also felt increasingly detached from the process because of a lack of reliable and impartial information.

Wasal Naser Faqiryar describes how young people in Afghanistan are finding alternative channels to express their grievances, ideas, and dreams to counter the oppressive grip of the Taliban regime. Faqiryar identifies art and other creative forms of expression as fundamental avenues that remain possible, as they pass under the radar of the regime's control. The chapter also discusses social media as an important platform for the amplification and diffusion of the concerns, needs, and desires of young Afghans.

Ambar Kumar Ghosh presents the importance of youth representation in the democratic life of India, a country with a large young population. The analysis looks at the most significant challenges for young Indians in engaging in parliamentary politics: the cost of politics, the role of established parties in nominating young candidates, disillusionment about political careers, the pervasiveness of dynastic politics, and gender disparities. Ghosh argues that granting young people access to legislative politics would have a positive impact on India's governance structures.

Dechen Rabgyal explains the minimal engagement of Bhutan's young people in traditional politics through the lens of democratic elitism. Rabgyal shows how despite civil and democratic programmes equipping young Bhutanese to run for office, a requirement for parliamentary candidates to have at least 10 years' professional experience reproduces inequalities and excludes a significant portion of Bhutan's young people from the country's legislature. The case study highlights the importance of adopting a more realistic approach to ensuring youth engagement.

Finally, Intifar Chowdhury writes about the evolving political relevance of mainstream parties in Australia, analysing how younger generations, disillusioned with traditional parties, are moving away from them. Chowdhury highlights a disconnect between the political priorities of younger voters and traditional political parties, which creates a risk of dealignment. In addition, the chapter examines how young Australians are more closely linked to issue-based politics, on topics such as climate change, education, and housing, than to traditional party-political divisions.

These case studies aim to spark important discussions of the multiple layers and dimensions of youth political participation. Beyond highlighting diverse experiences and approaches, they provide insights that can inform research and advocacy for more meaningful youth involvement. We encourage readers to engage with these studies, which can support efforts to strengthen young people's agency and influence. In an age when so much hinges on youth participation, this report gives a voice to a unique range of young writers from around the world to shape these debates.

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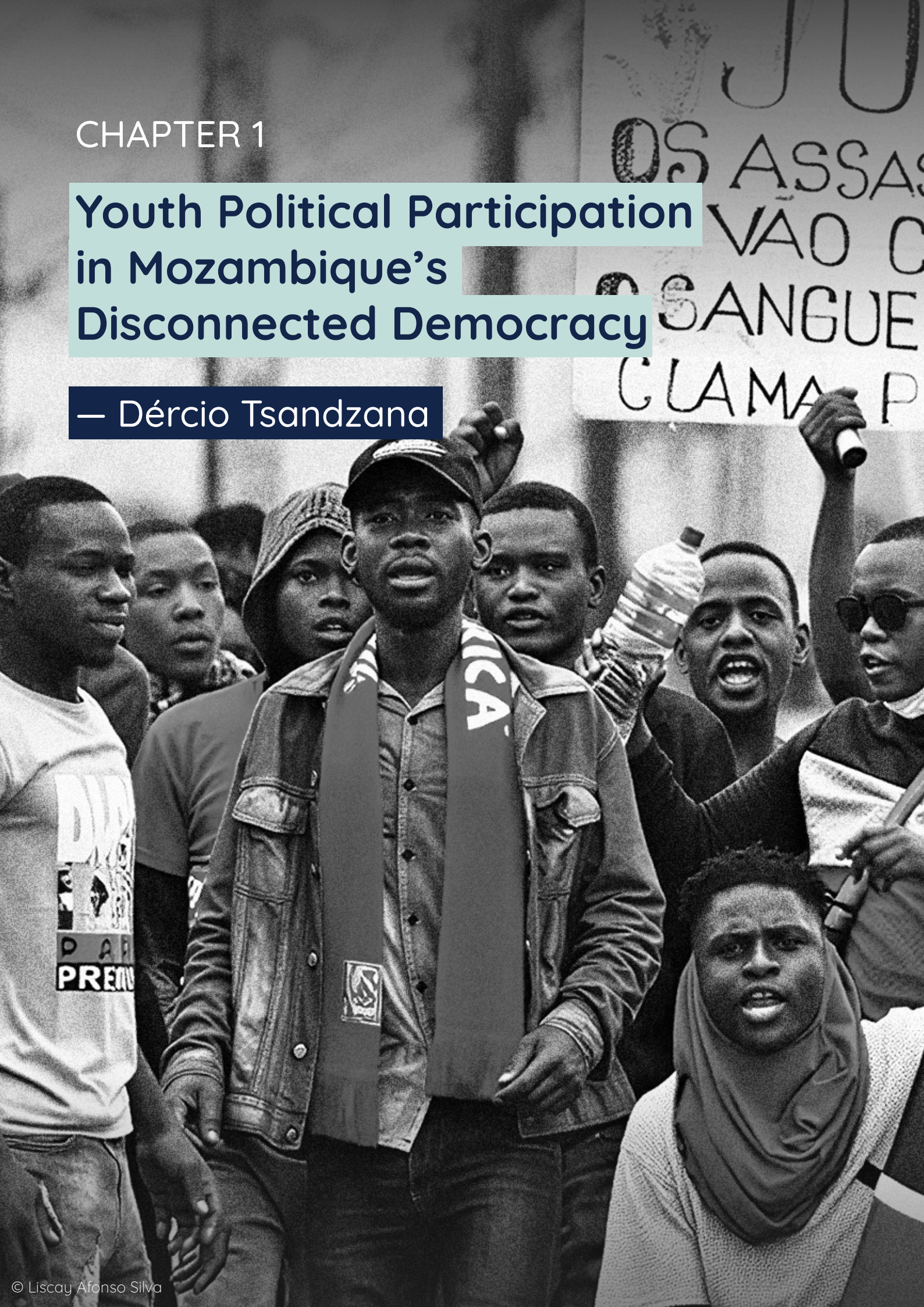
CHAPTER 1

# Youth Political Participation in Mozambique's Disconnected Democracy

— Dércio Tsandzana



# Youth Political Participation in Mozambique's Disconnected Democracy

— DÉRCIO TSANDZANA

In recent years, social media have become an integral part of young people's daily lives. Giving users the ability to connect with others and access information quickly and easily, social media have become a powerful tool for political expression and engagement.[7] As the largest generation in history, today's young people increasingly use social media to participate in political discourse, share their opinions, and mobilise others to take action.[8] However, the impacts of social media on youth political participation are not entirely clear, and there is still much debate about whether social media are a force for good or bad in the political sphere.[9]

On the one hand, social media have enabled young people to take part in political discussions and movements in ways that were previously impossible.[10] Social media have made it easier for young people to organise and take part in protests, rallies, and other forms of activism.[11] On the other hand, there are concerns about the effects of social media, such as the potential to create echo chambers, in which young people interact only with those who share their views.[12] Social media can also be used to spread misinformation and propaganda, which can undermine the quality of political discourse and democratic processes.[13]

Taking Mozambique as a case study, this research investigates the impact of social media on the political participation of young people in the country, including their levels of engagement in political discussions, their attitudes towards political issues, and their participation in campaigns and social movements.[14] Specifically, the chapter analyses the potential benefits and drawbacks of social media for youth political participation in Mozambique's 2024 general elections.

## Methodology

The methodology for this research is based on virtual ethnography – or, more precisely, netnography – which is ideal for researching online communities, cultures, and behaviours.[15] Without the need for direct contact with participants, netnography enables the collection and interpretation of existing digital data. This study concentrated on online discussions and interactions related to Mozambique's 2024 general elections, paying special attention to the growing political activism linked to the hashtag #PovoNoPoder (People in Power). This digital movement offered a distinct perspective for examining how young people express their political demands, grievances, and activities online.

The study observed a variety of social media platforms, including Facebook, X (previously Twitter), public WhatsApp groups, and TikTok. Over six months from October 2024 to March 2025,

observations were made of online conversations, blogs, memes, videos, and comment threads. Relevant posts were identified using the platforms' own search engines, drawing on hashtags such as #PovoNoPoder, #Moçambique (Mozambique), and #Eleições (Elections). As a researcher and digital media user from Mozambique, this author was able to analyse content in its original linguistic and cultural setting while being mindful of the dangers of personal bias.

This study was influenced by ethical considerations. Although the data was derived from publicly accessible digital content, anonymity and privacy were meticulously maintained. Quotes and posts were gathered exclusively from open forums; closed or private conversations were not included. The visible online political activity is likely to have been skewed towards more connected youth from the urban areas of Maputo and Matola, because internet access is still unequal in Mozambique, especially outside towns and cities.[16]

The study was also limited by the transient nature of digital content, which makes verification and archiving difficult. Posts, accounts, and entire narratives can be erased over time. Because there was no direct connection with the content's authors, interpretation depends largely on contextual reading, which is perceptive but may miss offline context. This research was also subject to the possible presence of bot accounts and the constraints of limited internet connectivity in Mozambique. These factors may have influenced patterns of online engagement and, consequently, the conclusions drawn from the study.

## Mozambique's internet landscape

The internet has significantly transformed the way people communicate and participate in politics globally. According to data-tracking website DataReportal, in early 2025 there were 17.7 million active mobile phone connections in Mozambique, equating to 50.4% of the country's total population.[17]

Some of these connections might not offer internet access, while others might only have phone and text-messaging services. Still, at the start of 2025, Mozambique's internet penetration rate was 19.8%, with 6.96 million people using the web. Mozambique had 3.7 million social media user identities, representing 10.5% of the country's population. Of these users, 58.7% were male and 41.3% were female.

Data from Meta's advertising resources indicates that Facebook is the most popular social media platform in Mozambique. Facebook's potential ad reach in the country grew by 500,000 (15.6%) between January 2024 and January 2025, according to Meta's data. In the three months between October 2024 and January 2025, the number of Mozambicans whom marketers could contact via Facebook advertising rose by 400,000, or 12.1%.[18]

## Barriers to youth political participation

Making up more than 60% of Mozambique's population, people under 25 are undoubtedly a large constituency, yet historically they have had low levels of formal political participation.[19] Many young Mozambicans express a sense of disengagement from electoral politics, citing a lack of faith in political parties, scarce economic opportunities, and an absence of meaningful representation. However, young people have embraced new forms of participation, especially online.[20] Political content, memes, satire, and unplanned conversations have exploded on platforms including Facebook, X, and TikTok.

On the European Partnership for Democracy's Global Youth Participation Index, Mozambique scored 45 out of 100, reflecting a country with immense demographic potential but persistent structural barriers to youth participation.[21] Young people are a powerful force for political and economic change, yet this potential remains largely untapped. On the index's political affairs dimension, Mozambique scored 41 out of 100, reflecting young people's low representation in the country's parliament, an absence of formal advisory mechanisms, and a lack of youth quotas.

Young people's involvement in Mozambique's elections is similarly constrained. On the index's elections dimension, the country scored 43 out of 100, revealing logistical difficulties, distrust in electoral institutions, and widespread voter apathy. While a national youth policy exists and efforts have been made to strengthen youth inclusion frameworks, the implementation of these measures has been slow. Political parties offer few meaningful entry points for young leaders, and the provision of civic education is inconsistent across the country. Youth political engagement became both a crucial problem and a significant uncertainty in Mozambique's general elections held on 9 October 2024.

## Mozambique's 2024 general elections

The conduct of the 2024 elections was widely criticised. The late opening of polling stations, irregularities in voter lists, and instances of ballot stuffing in strategic districts were among the numerous problems recorded during the registration and voting stages of the election process.[22] International observers and local civil society organisations like Sala da Paz documented and condemned multiple cases of malpractice.

The official results showed that the ruling FRELIMO party retained a majority in parliament, although the election procedure was widely viewed as defective and opaque. This outcome reinforced many young Mozambicans' feelings of political futility, as their online involvement did not translate into institutional change.[23]

The gap between official institutions and the lived realities of the population, especially young people, has become a more prominent topic of discussion since the elections. Although government officials have recognised the significance of youth inclusion, there are still few real mechanisms for engagement. As a result, digital platforms have evolved into venues for identity creation, resistance, and informal political education as well as expression.[24]

The 2024 elections therefore provide a critical lens through which to view Mozambique's changing political landscape, in which young people are establishing alternative forms of engagement, often with humour, defiance, and inventiveness, and traditional channels are increasingly mistrusted.

### Case study: #PovoNoPoder

The grassroots slogan-turned-movement #PovoNoPoder rose to prominence in Mozambique's online public domain ahead of the 2024 elections. #PovoNoPoder is best understood as a symbolic and dispersed form of digital resistance, rather than a formal civil society campaign or an organised political organisation. It acted as a rallying cry for the populace, especially the young, who were fed up with the nation's established political class, an unreliable electoral system, and institutions' inability to address the public's issues. Instead of using traditional modes of protest, the hashtag accompanied humour, memes, slogans, and impromptu commentary to convey a desire for radical political change.

The main players behind #PovoNoPoder were young people with digital connections, many of whom live in metropolitan and peri-urban areas like Maputo, Beira, and Nampula, although the movement lacked official leaders. Among the main actors were university students, rappers, digital artists, meme curators, amateur critics, and anonymous netizens. Crucially, the movement also struck a chord with members of the Mozambican diaspora, who amplified criticism and expressed their solidarity using the hashtag. It was challenging for the government to repress or co-opt #PovoNoPoder, since it functioned in a fluid, decentralised manner, in contrast to typical political groups.

No official political-party plan or civic campaign served as the inspiration for #PovoNoPoder. Rather, it developed organically in mid-2024 on sites like Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, and X as online grievances about pre-election anomalies started to flare up. Memes and short videos began to use the phrase while ridiculing the political establishment, particularly FRELIMO's power and the alleged appropriation of electoral institutions.

The emergence of #PovoNoPoder, which reached its zenith around polling day on 9 October, accompanied a broad public outcry against election irregularities, such as problems with voter registration, claims of intimidation, and erratic correspondence from electoral authorities. Long-standing complaints, like elite impunity, urban inequality, and youth unemployment, added to these annoyances, fostering an environment that was conducive to a digital rupture. Particularly after photos and videos of alleged ballot fraud and disturbances at polling stations went viral, the hashtag's popularity skyrocketed. The hashtag evolved into a vehicle for political storytelling and internet mobilisation, offering immediate criticism and emotional support at a turbulent moment.

## Social media as a political forum

Online discontent continued after the elections. Between October 2024 and March 2025, numerous posts were published on X with the hashtag #PovoNoPoder. Most users, primarily young people, used the hashtag to express their frustration with the ruling party.

In one example, a video clip shows police using tear gas and fighting with teenage protesters on the street.[25] The excerpt reveals how internet platforms have evolved into venues for recording and challenging state violence in Mozambique. The post highlights the harsh methods used to quell dissent, especially among young people who want to express themselves politically outside established channels. The post serves as both evidence and testimony, turning regular social media use into a political act of resistance and witness.

This example shows how digital media can act as a virtual forum in which young people can reveal abuses and spark public anger. Such videos inspire, motivate, and emotionally energise viewers in addition to providing information. In this way, digital engagement becomes embodied in real feelings of dread, danger, and confrontation, rather than being restricted to hashtags or abstract criticism. Outrage, sadness, and solidarity are key components of the way young people interact with politics in constricted and monitored political environments. In short, social media enable a new kind of affective political participation.

In other posts on X, users, again mainly young people, shared messages with revolutionary undertones, expressing a belief that the time for change had arrived. One such post (translated from Portuguese) read as follows:

> This is the best moment to be Mozambican … I am EXTREMELY PROUD of the UNITY we are showing as a people. We are the most united 20% in all of history.
> LET'S SAVE MOZAMBIQUE
> THE REVOLUTION HAS ALREADY ARRIVED … !!
> #SaveMozambique #ThisCountryIsOurs #7November #POVONOPODER[26]

This post demonstrates the affective and symbolic aspect of young people's digital political participation in Mozambique. Social media sites like X are used for more than just criticism or satire; they are also employed to create shared feelings, validate identities, and envisage different political futures. The message above uses urgency and an emotionally charged vernacular, rather than formal political language or institutional speech, to evoke a sense of resistance and affiliation. It also illustrates how #PovoNoPoder serves as a discursive forum in which demands for civic unity, national redemption, and dignity come together.

Meanwhile on Facebook, the hashtag #PovoNoPoder was widely shared by young people as a form of support for presidential candidate Venâncio Mondlane, who appropriated the youth protest movement to gain sympathisers and build a political challenge to FRELIMO. Several pages were created with the aim of amplifying the voice of #PovoNoPoder, always in connection with the 2024 elections. This approach was in contrast to the use of the hashtag on X, where the movement appeared less directly tied to the electoral process.

In one Facebook post, for example, a video shows young people protesting in the streets of Maputo and driving the police away from a meeting point.[27] The police, who are typically the aggressors, are shown as being pushed back by the very young people they are trying to suppress. In the post,

the video is accompanied by Mondlane's name and the hashtag #PovoNoPoder.

The way that digital platforms are used to combine informal activism with official political processes is one example of how youth political participation and social media in Mozambique are changing. Facebook has become a platform on which symbolic opposition is more overtly translated into electoral engagement, in contrast to X, where the hashtag #PovoNoPoder often functioned as a more general symbol of resistance and collective frustration. In another post on Facebook, a call to action urges young people to act for change and stop the violence.[28] Much of the youth-led digital mobilisation during Mozambique's 2024 elections was marked by emotion and urgency for change.

It is worth noting that the durability of young Mozambicans' digital political involvement is also impacted by the cyclical nature of elections and the volatility of online attention. Digital movements often pick up steam during political crises or election contests, but once the current event is over, this intensity usually fades.

This transience raises fundamental questions about whether online energy is being channelled into longer-term forms of civic participation, institution building, or community organising. Young activists often find it difficult to sustain their projects because of inadequate civic infrastructure, scarce resources, and a lack of supportive institutional processes. Consequently, postelection periods are marked by declines in digital engagement, highlighting the challenges of converting episodic online mobilisation into sustained political influence within Mozambique's evolving democratic landscape.

## Conclusion

More than just a political struggle, Mozambique's 2024 general elections revealed how youth political participation in the digital age is changing and often conflictual. Social media platforms have emerged as crucial forums for the expression of dissatisfaction, the formation of identities, and alternative conceptions of power, even though many young people have lost faith in traditional politics.[29] Movements like #PovoNoPoder show that young people in Mozambique are not passive; rather, they are actively involved, albeit often outside established political systems. Their involvement is multifaceted, ranging from confrontational to symbolic to increasingly digital. But there are conflicts in these interactions, too.

Youth engagement runs the risk of losing its transformative and moral force when it becomes enmeshed with party-political objectives or reflects the violence it aims to oppose. These inconsistencies highlight Mozambique's larger fight to democratise public space, both real and virtual, as well as institutions. In Mozambique, youth political engagement follows nonlinear and ill-defined paths. These are full of opportunity, innovation, and resistance, but they are also shaped by history and limited by systemic injustices.

The challenge is not to ask whether young Mozambicans are political but to acknowledge and support the various complicated and sometimes unsettling ways in which they are already changing the political landscape – post by post, hashtag by hashtag, and, when necessary, voice by voice in the streets.

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CHAPTER 2

# The Impact of Young People's Securitisation on Youth Activism in Türkiye

— Mehmet İlhanlı

# The Impact of Young People's Securitisation on Youth Activism in Türkiye

– MEHMET İLHANLI

Türkiye has a long tradition of youth activism, in which student movements have historically played a pivotal role in shaping the country's political landscape. While such activism has often faced challenges from the state, the 2013 Gezi Park protests marked a turning point in Turkish political history. In the aftermath of these youth-led demonstrations, which directly confronted the government's authority, the Turkish state increasingly began to securitise politically active young people.

By framing these young citizens as a threat to national stability, the government justified the use of extraordinary security measures, heightened surveillance, and criminalising narratives. This process of securitisation has effectively marginalised young people's activism and systematically excluded them from political participation. This study investigates how such securitisation strategies have transformed the nature of youth political engagement in the country.

Türkiye currently has the largest youth population in the country's history, yet this demographic's potential to influence democratic processes is overlooked and often suppressed.[30] Recent research, including a 2022 report by KONDA Research & Consultancy, reveals strikingly low levels of youth political involvement, with only 4% engaged in civil society organisations and just 5% registered as members of political parties.[31] These findings are underscored by the European Partnership for Democracy's 2025 Global Youth Participation Index, in which Türkiye scored only 55 out of 100.[32]

Rather than signalling political apathy, this trend points to a deeper sense of alienation produced by the systemic exclusion and repression of Türkiye's young people. The resulting marginalisation constrains youth participation in political processes and decision-making while accelerating democratic erosion and weakening political resilience, as reflected in Türkiye's declining scores in major global democracy indices.[33]

Through in-depth interviews and focus groups, this study foregrounds the lived experiences of young people in Türkiye. Drawing on participants' accounts, the research examines how securitisation processes have shaped young people's political engagement and constrained their modes of participation.

## Methodology

This qualitative research draws on 10 semistructured interviews with youth activists and policy experts aged 18–35 as well as four focus group discussions with participants in recent youth-led

movements. Each focus group included between three and five people. Data was collected online and face to face from February to November 2025. Fieldwork took place in Ankara, Istanbul, Izmir, and Diyarbakır, cities chosen for their political diversity and histories of youth mobilisation.

The findings of this study are not intended to be generalised. This limitation stems from two main factors. First, the interviewees and focus group participants constitute a relatively visible circle of youth activism, selected specifically because of the state's repression of them. While these cases are not representative of all young people, they are analytically significant in that they exemplify broader patterns of youth securitisation in Türkiye. Second, all participants were based in urban settings, so the experiences and impacts discussed cannot be directly extended to rural youth populations. Within this scope, the data reveals experiences of criminalisation, perceptions of political participation and activism, and the impact of securitised political spaces on young people in urban settings.

All conversations were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, transcribed, translated, and thematically analysed. Ethical principles were clearly communicated orally before and at the end of each interview and were strictly observed throughout the research process. To ensure confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonyms.

## The context of youth activism in Türkiye

In 2021, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan delivered these words to a youth event in Ankara:

> The youth we need is one that, just like we see here today, is wholeheartedly devoted to their country and nation, equipped with all the capabilities of the modern age, guided by a strong sense of direction, and fully aware of where they are headed. We do not divide our youth into letters or generations. From A to Z, we embrace all of them through works, services, and initiatives that unite rather than separate.[34]

In another statement in 2012, shared on Twitter (now X), he said: "The goal is 2071, young people. God willing, we will build 2023, and hopefully, you will build 2071."[35] These remarks referred to Türkiye's official vision projects for 2071, which the ruling Justice and Development Party has promoted as milestones for shaping the nation's future. In this framework, young people are seen as key actors in building a "new Türkiye", but only if they conform to the vision defined by the state.

Erdoğan's frequent emphasis on young people as bearers of "national ideals" constructs a selective vision of this demographic. Young people are perceived not just as individuals with agency, but as vessels of a particular ideological mission. Ideal young people in this context are described as pious, nationalist, technologically competent, and obedient to the state's moral and political values. While Erdoğan claims to embrace all young people "from A to Z", in practice there is a deep division between those who align with this vision and those who do not.

This division produces two opposing models of young people. On the one hand are those who

are loyal to the government's religious and nationalist values. On the other hand, any youth group that expresses dissent, adopts opposition ideologies, or engages in political activism outside state-sanctioned channels is portrayed as a threat to the national order.

Such youth groups are often subjected to various forms of securitisation. This concept refers to a process in which political actors frame particular issues or groups as security threats to justify extraordinary measures beyond normal political procedures.[36] While securitisation is primarily a discursive act, scholars have emphasised that the context in which it unfolds, as well as the power dynamics that shape it, must also be taken into account.[37]

These dynamics help explain how securitising moves not only rely on speech acts but also permeate institutions, bureaucracies, and practices. It can therefore be argued that the success of an attempt at securitisation depends on its discursive acceptance as well as how embedded it is in institutions and how it is enacted in practice.[38]

Youth securitisation has been widely discussed in the context of global and regional peace and security.[39] Recent research has expanded to examine youth-led dissident movements and state responses at the national level.[40] In the Turkish case, youth securitisation involves the discursive construction of particular dissident groups of young people as "unstable, deviant [and] potentially degenerate" figures who are perceived as a threat to the stability of the state and the social order.[41] At the same time, it encompasses institutional practices, from policing to legal restrictions, that translate these discourses into security-oriented constraints on youth political participation.

Although securitising narratives against young people have intensified in recent years, they are not unique to the current government. Throughout the second half of the 20th century, young people in Türkiye were labelled as foreign agents, deviants, or tools of western influence and subjected to state violence and repression.[42] Viewed through this lens, there is continuity in youth securitisation over time.

However, the 2013 Gezi Park protests marked a significant turning point. According to several polls, most of the protesters were young people.[43] In response to the demonstrations, the Turkish government began to frame the protests not as a social movement but as an attempted coup. As a result, securitising narratives intensified, and young people were cast as agents of chaos and moral decay. One example of this discourse can be seen in the following government-aligned statement:

> We did not see the youth of the Gezi Park violent protests out on the streets … Amid all this diversity, everyone was there, but the violent children of Gezi, the vulgar revolutionaries, were not. Because they were never truly part of this society. They were always marginal, always incidental, always troublemakers … They didn't just loot cash machines and shops; they also burned, destroyed, and looted the sanctities, common ground, and shared values of this country and society.[44]

In the years after the Gezi Park protests, this framing was repeatedly invoked to criminalise youth-led activism. Many participants were arrested and imprisoned. Subsequent youth movements – such as the Boğaziçi University Student Protests, the Barınamıyoruz Movement, 1,000 Youth for Palestine, and, most recently, the 19 March Protests – have also been criminalised and their young participants targeted with similar securitising narratives.[45] Government figures often portray these movements as renewed Gezi Park–style attempts, reinforcing the notion that youth activism that challenges the government threatens national unity.

The impact of this securitisation has been profound. Many young people, in the face of criminalisation, legal risks, and shrinking civic space, have retreated from formal avenues of political participation. In 2022, only 4% of young people in Türkiye took part in civil society organisations, and approximately 80% were neither affiliated with a political party nor considered joining one.[46]

## Experiences of youth securitisation

This section examines how youth securitisation was experienced and interpreted by the research participants, with particular attention on state discourses, institutional practices, and their consequences for youth political engagement. The findings are organised around key thematic patterns that illustrate the multifaceted impact of securitisation on youth activism.

### "Acceptable" versus "unacceptable" youth activism

A significant majority of participants agreed that the Turkish state increasingly perceives youth movements that are not pro-government as potential security threats, rather than as democratic and legal actors. This perception is often tied to the duality of "our youth" (that is, the government's) versus "not our youth".[47]

This duality refers to the boundaries set by the government: as long as youth activism remains outside the government's threat perception, it is considered acceptable. However, once this boundary is crossed, youth activism becomes a matter of security. One interviewee illustrated this point with an example from his own life:

> We were holding a small youth gathering somewhere. Outside the door, there were three anti-riot water cannon vehicles, five armoured vehicles, 50 riot police, and maybe 10 undercover officers. There was always this constant sense of being perceived as a security threat.[48]

### Tactics to prevent youth activism

Youth is a transitional period from puberty to adulthood, during which young people prepare for the responsibilities of adult life. For this transition to be healthy, young people's economic, social, and political needs must be fulfilled. When these needs are not met, young people begin to demand them through various mechanisms, particularly activism.

In Türkiye, once the government perceives these demands as a threat, it employs certain tactics and measures to suppress them. One of the most apparent tactics, mentioned by several participants, is economic sanctions:

> Participant 1: So even if you don't think like them, you're forced to stay on their side. Because they put you under economic pressure.
>
> Participant 2: For example, I know from my friends, some of them are very oppositional, but at the end of the day, because they're unemployed, it is turned into a kind of joke. Like, "I am going to close my Instagram account and open a new one, with a suit, a Turkish flag, and references to the presidency." It's a joke, but it's based on reality.
>
> Participant 1: Yes, definitely, the first layer of pressure is economic sanctions.[49]

In addition to the state, the family is also considered to hold authority over young people in Türkiye. To suppress youth movements, the state seeks to collaborate with families and uses them as a means to control the young. One participant emphasised that families are often mobilised to prevent young people from engaging in activism:

> What they [the authorities] do is very concrete – for example, they call the families first and tell them their children are involved with terrorist organisations. By creating distance between the youth and their families and triggering a reaction from the parents, they aim to push young people away from these movements.[50]

Another tactic highlighted in interviews was to threaten young people with consequences that affect their future. The government attempts to discourage young people from engaging in activism by restricting their access to public-sector jobs:

> Once your photo or video is taken, you're done. You won't be able to work in any government institution. That's the kind of message they're trying to send. Naturally, this creates a sense of fear among young people.[51]

### The impact of securitisation on youth activism

Youth securitisation in Türkiye has had a profound effect on how young people perceive and engage with political life. Based on the interviews and focus groups analysed in this study, five key patterns emerge: fear, political disengagement, re-engagement with the far right, fragmentation, and emotional fatigue.

Across all interviews and focus groups, the most consistent theme was the internalisation of fear. Participants described a political climate in which even attending a peaceful protest could have long-term professional and legal consequences.

Another dominant theme was disengagement from conventional politics. This retreat is rooted not in apathy but in distrust with systems that are perceived as exclusionary and unresponsive. As civic space narrows and repression increases, young people tend to distance themselves from conventional avenues and seek alternative forms of politics:

> So, after the Gezi [Park] protests in 2013, many more young people got involved [in politics and activism]. During that period, youth participation increased significantly, with some youth organisations growing from 50 to 500 members. But after 2015, this trend reversed dramatically … Now, even joining a youth association or political party makes people hesitate and overthink their decisions.[52]

In some cases, youth disengagement from traditional politics leads not to apathy but to a turn towards radical far-right ideologies. Frustrated by economic and social insecurities, some young people seek a sense of safety and belonging in nationalist or exclusionary movements.[53] According to the participants in one of the focus groups, this shift reflects a broader crisis caused by youth securitisation:

> In general, young people are searching for political alternatives. And this search is not limited to Türkiye. It is part of a global trend where [the system] is pushing young people towards more antidemocratic alternatives and right-wing discourse.[54]

According to another respondent, the repression of youth activism creates a duality in which those already involved become radicalised, while potential young activists are driven by fear and gradually withdraw:

> Participation in those protests and interest in these issues tend to deepen the political engagement of young people already involved. But at the same time, it pushes away those who are politically interested but remain distant. In other words, it radicalises those on the inside while deradicalising and distancing those observing from the outside.[55]

The government's securitisation of young people not only suppresses dissent but also actively works to divide the youth population. By labelling some young people as acceptable and others as threats, according to one respondent, the government fractures solidarity and prevents collective political action:

> During the Gezi [Park] protests, people from all political parties were present and everyone was united under a common language and shared cause. But now, for example, [People's Equality and Democracy] Party supporters have been beaten and excluded. This is clearly a result of deep polarisation, which itself is a consequence of the government's systematic policies.[56]

Finally, years of the state's punitive responses and increasing polarisation have left many young people emotionally exhausted. Feelings of hopelessness, frustration, and alienation are widespread, particularly among those who once believed in the transformative power of collective action:

> Young people have a good understanding of Türkiye's recent history. They see that things ended up like this because people did not speak out in the past. The young people I spoke with, those who join protests, are fully aware of all these problems. But they say: "I am afraid. I am really afraid." They are scared of becoming unemployed, of having no future.[57]

## Conclusion

As Türkiye continues to experience a democratic decline, the country's largest-ever youth population, which comprises 22.7% of the total, is feeling the impacts most acutely.[58] Young people are not disengaged from politics by nature; rather, they are systematically excluded, stigmatised, and securitised. While many continue to fight for a more democratic and just society, their activism is often met with repression, surveillance, and criminalisation. This not only weakens democratic resilience in the country but also erodes youth trust in institutions and traditional politics.

Despite these challenges, young people have not given up. They continue to seek alternative spaces for political expression. However, unless the securitising lens through which the state views young people is dismantled, true democratic inclusion will remain elusive. The de-securitisation of young people and the enabling of their meaningful participation are therefore not merely youth issues but central tasks for the future of democracy in Türkiye. Supporting young people as political agents, not as threats, is essential for any inclusive and resilient democratic transformation in the country.

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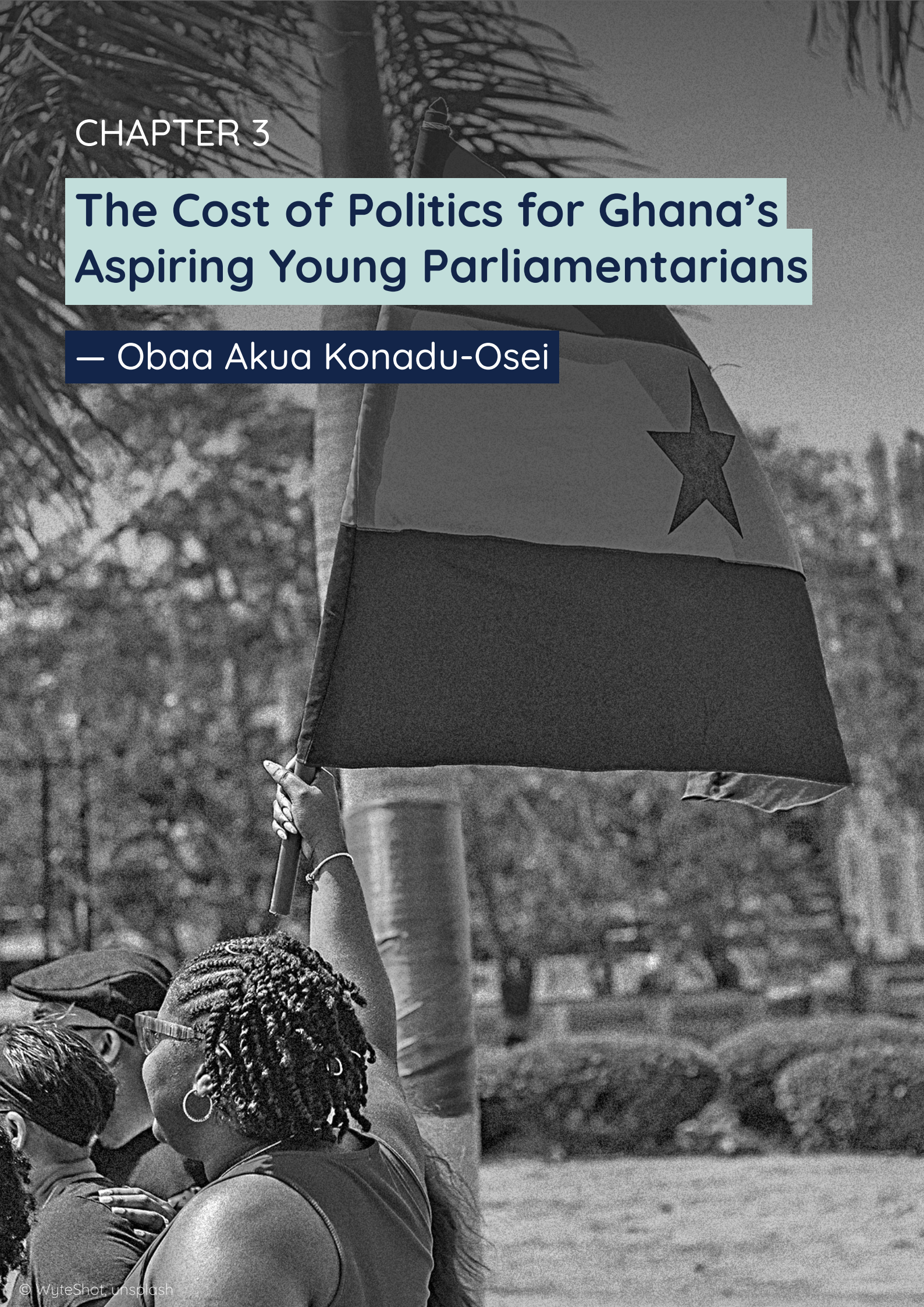
CHAPTER 3

# The Cost of Politics for Ghana's Aspiring Young Parliamentarians

— Obaa Akua Konadu-Osei



# The Cost of Politics for Ghana's Aspiring Young Parliamentarians

— OBAA AKUA KONADU-OSEI

Democracy costs money, and so does politics. Indeed, money plays a critical role in politics, elections, and democracy globally.[59] Political parties cannot function without financial resources, nor can political debates and campaigns. However, when the cost of politics is too high, it triggers concerns about exclusion.

Ghana's return to multiparty democracy in 1992 ushered in elections that enabled broad political participation. Yet limited financial resources have hindered fair engagement, creating an exclusionary barrier for groups such as women and young people. Still, Ghana's rate of youth political participation highlights notable progress and provides an opportunity to create more inclusive pathways for young people to influence policy, assume leadership roles, and shape the nation's democratic future.[60]

Through an intersectional lens that considers youth, gender, and political-party membership, this study seeks to understand the cost of politics in Ghana. Intersectionality explains how overlapping social identities interact to produce unique experiences. Applying an intersectional lens guides participant recruitment and reveals how combined identities shape the costs of politics in ways a single-axis analysis would ordinarily overlook. The study explores how young men and women affiliated with Ghana's two dominant political parties – the governing National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the opposition New Patriotic Party (NPP) – finance their parliamentary aspirations.

## Methodology

This chapter is based on an intersectional, qualitative, comparative study involving 12 Ghanaians between the ages 21 of 40 who were hoping to enter parliament: three men and three women from each of the two main parties, the NDC and the NPP. The study received ethical approval from Maastricht University's Ethical Review Committee.

Interviews were conducted remotely, and participants chose pseudonyms to conceal their identities. To maintain confidentiality, any data that could indirectly identify the participants was hidden. All interviews were conducted before Ghana's 2024 general elections.

## The costs of entering politics

The cost of politics encompasses the many expenses that aspiring candidates incur, from their initial decision to run for election through to their time in office.[61] Traditionally framed in economic

terms, this cost has been broadened in contemporary studies to emphasise non-financial aspects, such as the social, physiological, emotional, and physical costs that accompany political engagements.[62] This study considers both dimensions.

### The situation in Ghana

Since Ghana's return to multiparty democracy in 1992, power has alternated every eight years between the NDC and the NPP, with the two parties dominating the country's parliament. Party members who want to enter the legislature must first secure the votes of party delegates at primaries. If successful, members become parliamentary candidates on their party's ticket at the next general elections, which are held every four years.

A 2022 study by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy into the cost of politics in Ghana showed a 59% increase in campaign costs between 2012 and 2016, underscoring that a parliamentary hopeful's financial capacity is a crucial determinant of their success.[63]

The country's de facto two-party, winner-takes-all system concentrates patronage on the winning party, inflating costs.[64] Private financing from powerful and wealthy individuals and interest groups for political activities, while common in many democracies, has fuelled widespread dissatisfaction with the culture of money – or vote buying – in Ghana's political landscape.[65] The National Commission for Civic Education, civil society groups, think tanks, academics, and traditional and religious leaders have all warned that excessive monetisation may make politics the exclusive preserve of the wealthy, foster corruption, and undermine participatory and inclusive democratic norms.[66]

### Political costs

All research participants in this study noted the costly process of securing a spot as their party's parliamentary candidate. Expenditure can be broadly categorised as travel and transport, social interventions, filing fees, publicity materials, community entry and engagements, gifts for and demands from constituents, or general campaign costs. Community entry, a major pre-primaries expense, involves paying homage to the owners of the land, including traditional and opinion leaders – a common practice in many Ghanaian communities.

The costs of travel and transport and gifts are borne before, during, and after primaries; the other categories typically occur beforehand. All cost elements may be incurred when an individual is chosen as their party's parliamentary candidate.

Three-quarters of the research participants did not live in the constituency they were seeking to represent (although they did come from those constituencies), requiring frequent travel. Indeed, given the importance of in-person interactions with delegates during campaigns, candidates travel throughout their constituencies multiple times before and after elections. Because of the poor condition of roads in some areas, vehicle maintenance costs contribute significantly to campaign budgets.

The cost of community entry is determined by the number of communities in the candidate's constituency and the value considered acceptable – either in cash, in kind, or both. Beyond traditional and opinion leaders, delegates and community members also expect gifts and support. In the words of one interviewee: "People call on you for school fees … money to buy food … everything … even money for getting married."[67]

Candidates are expected to continually incentivise delegates and community members before, during, and after the primaries, whether they are successful or not, to maintain support for their party in current and subsequent elections. One interviewee pointed out that incentivising delegates on election day is particularly crucial:

> From the day we started the campaign, up until the eve of the elections, we were doing very well in terms of the message we sent to the people, but largely the decider was what monies were shared on the day of elections. That's what actually makes the decision … the D-day monies [are] very crucial to winning the elections. You can be the one with the best ideas, you can be the one with the best strategy; if this is not supported by money you share on D-day, you can't win.[68]

These costs can be so important that interviewees cited limited financial resources as a significant reason for party members' inability to advance as candidates. Despite the fact that equality is enshrined in Ghana's constitution, access to finances disproportionately affects women, young people, and the economically disadvantaged.[69]

Interviewees acknowledged and valued the NPP's offer of a 50% rebate on the cost of nomination forms for women, young people, and disabled people. However, overall campaign costs remain high for young people without personal or family financial resources. In particular, many candidates incur high costs in meeting constituents' demands and engaging with them. As timelines do not govern running costs, this uncertainty discourages individuals without stable finances or financial networks from entering politics.

### Sources of funding

Common funding sources for young Ghanaians hoping to enter parliament include personal savings and investments, support from friends or close associates, family support, donations from senior colleagues or party financiers, and prospective contractors. Of these sources, personal savings and investments accounted for "about 90%" of one interviewee's financing.[70]

Although not often, male research participants sometimes sought or received support from senior colleagues or party financiers. For female candidates, however, there was an undertone of the importance of acquiring funding legitimately, which meant distancing themselves from any godfather figure. This difference could be attributed to the fact that women in Ghana are subjected to public demands of higher moral standards than men.[71]

For female politicians, the adage among the Akan people that "a good name is better than riches" holds true. This forms a self-perpetuating cycle in which women are systematically denied the

support of senior (male) colleagues who could significantly boost their campaign efforts, given how monetised the process is, considerably reducing women's chances of being elected.

## Other barriers to political participation

Aside from limited financial resources, young Ghanaians seeking to enter parliament face several other barriers to their participation: the practice of vote buying, the tension between funding and independence, the strains of political engagement, and inexperience due to age.

### Pressure to accept vote buying

Interviewees alluded to an informal institutionalisation of vote buying arising from excessive monetisation during campaigns.[72] Despite expressing their dissatisfaction with the monetised electoral process, candidates have acquiesced to this practice as the norm. Many lamented the transactional nature of securing the support of delegates and criticised politicians for normalising this practice.

Although the study participants found the practice of incentivising delegates problematic, they also pointed out that money is critical in challenging candidates with existing clout and influence: "You need money to turn heads. If you don't have money, nobody listens to you. It's that bad."[73]

Interviewees argued that good ideas alone are not enough to win elections; incentivising delegates, especially on election day, is crucial. They found this practice so entrenched that refusing to do so undermined their prospects from the outset.

### Funding needs versus independence

Prospective candidates face the challenge of how to accept essential financial support from friends and family but then preserve their independence once in office. Indeed, they argued that the increasingly monetised pathway to election requires raising funds beyond personal savings.

Funds from friends and family resemble grants: they are nonrepayable, but they create obligations on the recipient. Participants expressed concerns that once elected to a position of power, they may feel beholden to donors and offer favours through procurement contracts, which fuels corruption.[74] In this way, candidates acquiesce to an inevitable cycle of corruption even before being elected.

### Financial, health, and emotional strains

An incidental finding of this study was to do with postelection loss and recovery. Research participants discussed three main strains of political engagement: financial, health, and emotional losses. Financially, candidates invest their personal savings in the nomination and election process without an immediate mechanism to recoup that investment if they lose the election. Campaign

demands also divert resources away from candidates' private businesses, stunting growth as funds that could be invested in their businesses are spent on political activities instead. Many worried even more about the losses experienced by family and friends.

Interviewees also discussed the impact of election campaigns on their overall health and well-being. Especially for the nine participants who worked and lived outside their constituencies, long and frequent journeys were necessary to maintain physical interactions with constituents, a critical component of the electoral process. One participant said that he had been involved in a car accident on a major highway during one of his trips to his constituency.

Emotionally, interviewees highlighted that recovery from loss is a process shaped by an individual's level of resilience and the support of their close circle. Consciously or unconsciously, candidates also bear the burden of the emotions of friends and family who contribute financially to their campaigns.

Regardless of the losses they experienced, participants employed various coping mechanisms. At the personal level, many reported taking a break from their routine to rest, reflect, and regain strength. Others highlighted resilience as critical to their ability to recover.

At the interpersonal level, candidates' sources of emotional support revealed gendered differences. Men credited not only family and friends but also senior political figures who offered encouragement and mentorship. In contrast, most women cited only their families and friends, underscoring subtle distinctions in the social networks that contributed to their recovery.

### The limitations of youth

Finally, the study participants recognised that their political inexperience and limited financial capacity, which contributed to their election defeats, were in part due to their young age:

> I remember this very well. A delegate told me I am young and I have more time and so I shouldn't even contest the primaries but rather throw my weight behind the incumbent … and that was disheartening.[75]

> Well, let me put it this way, no one has discouraged me, directly or indirectly, based on my gender as a woman. It's mostly about me being young and the lack of experience, honestly.[76]

Such rhetoric reflects the gerontocratic ideals that continue to place young people in subordinate political roles grounded in respect for older adults, as young people are often perceived as inexperienced or even irrational.[77] Reinforcing these stereotypes leads to disenchantment and discourages young people from actively participating in politics or vying for office.

## The way forward

The general dissatisfaction with the financing of political participation in Ghana cuts across gender and party-political divides. In response, the research participants offered a multipronged approach to reduce exclusionary barriers and excessive incentivisation.

### Curbing the monetisation of campaigns

Participants appreciated the NPP's targeted rebates for youth, women, and disabled people in reducing the cost burden for candidates and urged the NDC to adopt similar measures. Yet they recognised that this party-level support cannot offset intersectional disadvantages. For a young woman with limited financial resources who may face gendered stigma when it comes to asking for support, rebates may be necessary but insufficient to cover the high cost of other items.

To check the excessive monetisation of election campaigns, participants called for a two-tier regulatory framework. At the national level, legislation could define permissible expenses, enforce strict spending limits, and ban the use of funds for financial inducements. Complementary party-level statutes could mirror these provisions while offering matching public incentives to reduce genuine outreach costs. If implemented, both tiers must be backed by a national independent body empowered to investigate breaches and impose sanctions.

### Reimagining political-party funding

Public and transparent crowdfunding is largely unpopular in Ghana's current political landscape. However, in the run-up to the 2024 general elections, the two main parties' presidential candidates, the NDC's John Mahama and the NPP's Mahamudu Bawumia, launched digital fundraising platforms.[78] The candidate of the New Force, Nana Kwame Bediako, has argued that crowdfunding not only bolsters political integrity but also reduces politicians' burden of rewarding influential donors.[79] With crowdfunding, the scope of campaign finance is broadened, increasing the participation of party supporters while reducing politicians' susceptibility to corruption.

Some interviewees suggested that parties could establish centralised campaign pools, funded by candidates and redistributed according to transparent criteria. This collective approach could reduce participants' urge to outdo their competitors' incentivisation strategies, as a common spending envelope would guide candidates. Critical to the success of this system, the interviewees emphasised, would be substantial initial contributions backed by rigorous, publicly accessible accounting by party treasuries to ensure fairness, reinforce accountability, and strengthen intraparty cohesion.

### Replacing primaries with an electoral college

Research participants recommended replacing Ghana's delegates-only primary system with an electoral college in which every registered party member in a constituency could determine who is selected as the party's parliamentary candidate. Under the current system, delegates have become powerful kingmakers whose financial demands, depending on whether they are met or

not, can result in benevolent inclusion or punitive exclusion. Interviewees argued that introducing an electoral college would mean a larger pool of kingmakers – too many to provide sizable incentives compared with the status quo.

Political campaigns would therefore be forced to be issue based, while the electoral college would be compelled to vote for the most competent individual, not the highest spender. Even if incentivisation prevails, candidates are most likely to spread their incentives thinly. For example, providing branded T-shirts to 15,000 individuals is more economical than offering sewing machines and television sets to 1,500 delegates. Ultimately, this reform would emphasise substantive policy debates and competence rather than financial clout.

### Redefining sociocultural norms on elections

Finally, effective public-awareness campaigns are crucial in addressing Ghanaians' cultural expectations and perceptions of running for political office. When an individual declares they are competing, there is a general notion that they are financially well resourced and not necessarily that they are standing because of their intentions. Elected politicians have fuelled these perceptions. When the general public observes the significant wealth amassed by politicians in power, the population cannot be blamed for wanting their share of the national cake.

That said, the cycle of corruption can be addressed by creating a culture of shame around the giving and receiving of incentives during elections. By showing the detrimental effects of electing candidates based solely on incentives, a campaign could appeal to the consciences of voters and hopefuls when they request or offer excessive incentives. A shift in societal norms could address the exclusionary barriers faced by financially limited yet competent candidates. Changing these norms would create a new social contract for the way political campaigns are organised.

Voters desire tangible socioeconomic development, both for themselves and in their communities. National governments, through local development authorities, need to ensure such development is equitable. When individuals and communities are empowered, their reliance on incentives from political candidates may be significantly reduced. Breaking this cycle of incentivisation would dismantle the culture of perpetual dependence between delegates and candidates.

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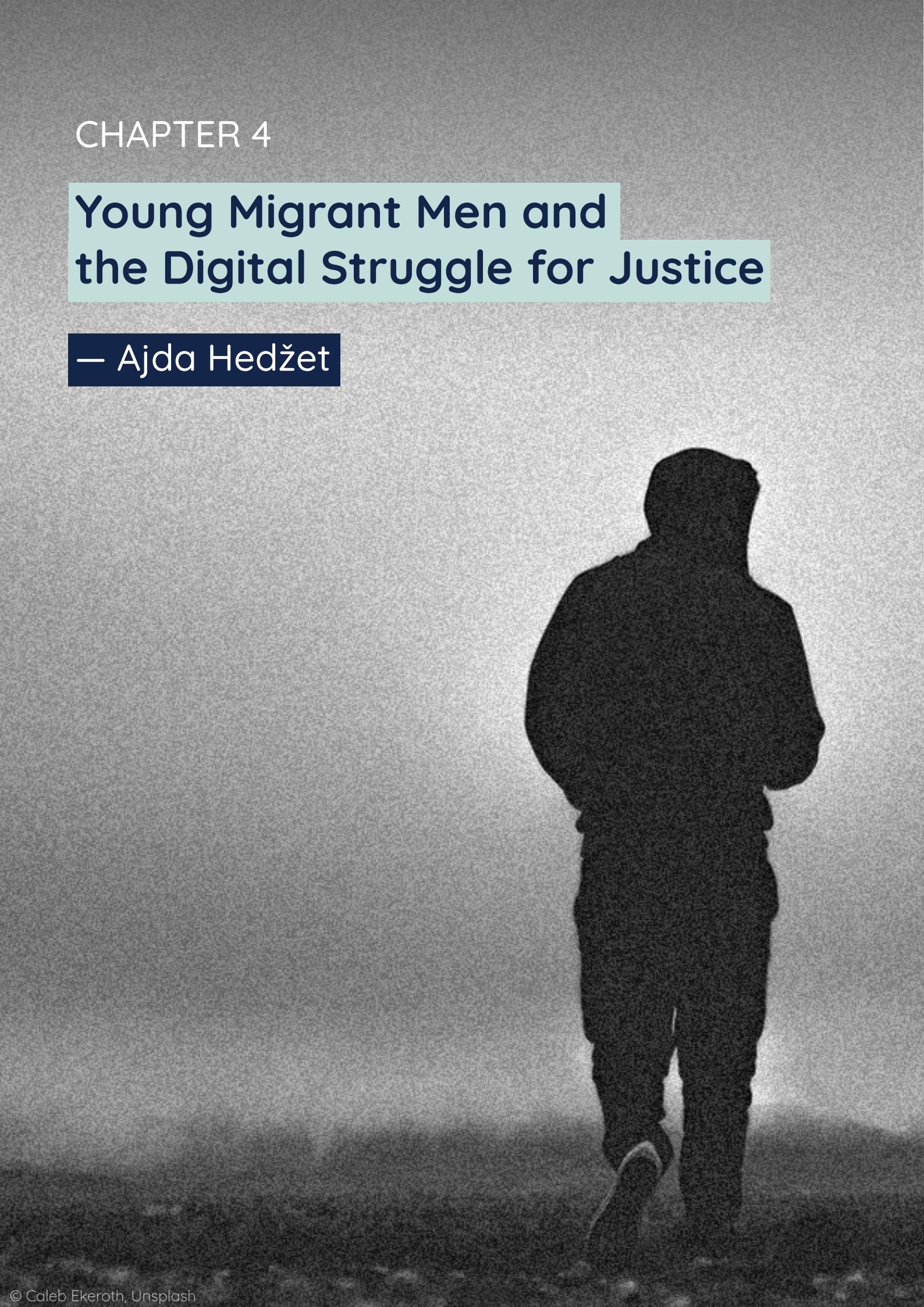
CHAPTER 4

# Young Migrant Men and the Digital Struggle for Justice

— Ajda Hedžet



# Young Migrant Men and the Digital Struggle for Justice

— AJDA HEDŽET

In March 2019, three teenagers – Abdalla Bari, Abdul Kader, and Amara Kromah – came under international scrutiny when they were prosecuted in Malta in one of the European Union's (EU's) most contentious migration-related cases. Then aged 19, 16, and 15, they were among more than 100 asylum seekers who had been rescued in the Mediterranean and taken aboard the tanker *El Hiblu 1*.[80] Acting as interpreters between the rescued and the ship's captain, the trio persuaded the crew not to return to Libya, which was deemed to be an unsafe country under international law.

However, when the teenagers arrived in Malta, they were arrested and charged with multiple offences, including terrorism. Observers condemned the charges as a politically motivated attempt to criminalise survival and deter resistance.[81] Seven years later, the young men's case remains unresolved, and they continue to live under restrictive bail conditions despite an absence of incriminating evidence.[82]

Over this period, Abdalla, Abdul, and Amara, known as the El Hiblu Three, have become the symbols of a solidarity campaign launched by a group of rescue non-governmental organisations (NGOs).[83] The campaign, Free the El Hiblu 3, unites activists, scholars, and civil society organisations that use online and offline advocacy practices to challenge the security focus of the EU's border regime and promote alternative concepts of rights and justice.

This chapter uses the case of the El Hiblu Three to examine how young migrant men assert their political agency in a European context that denies them visibility and a voice. The prosecutions of Abdalla, Abdul, and Amara exemplify a broader contradiction: while international organisations increasingly celebrate youth participation, their structures and policies often provide only limited access to decision-making and rights for young people in precarious legal and social positions – or even silence those they claim to empower.[84]

Thus, although young migrants have been recognised as political actors, this recognition is tokenistic. Yet young migrants have long mobilised against systemic injustice. Their engagement – from protests to art to online networking – reshapes dominant narratives of migration and creates digital and political spaces in which they can reclaim their rights.[85]

Focusing on the El Hiblu Three, this chapter has a twofold aim. First, it seeks to highlight the contradictory treatment of precarious young people, especially migrant men, whose claims to rights are routinely cast as illegitimate. Young people are celebrated as "actors of change for human rights", in the words of the European External Action Service.[86] Yet young men like Abdalla, Abdul, and Amara are criminalised when they exercise their agency and are reduced to security

threats. Second, the chapter aims to illustrate how online solidarity campaigns unsettle these dynamics. By amplifying excluded voices, the Free the El Hiblu 3 campaign shows how alternative concepts of justice and participation emerge from the margins of formal structures.

Digital advocacy, online publications, and collective storytelling do not merely supplement institutional mechanisms; they reconfigure the rights landscape by creating openings denied by formal institutions. This chapter approaches rights as performative acts that bring young migrant men into being as political subjects. The analysis draws on a curated set of materials from the Free the El Hiblu 3 campaign: social media posts, website content, and a co-authored publication. Rather than measuring outreach or institutional uptake, the chapter examines how such materials reframe narratives and generate new vocabularies of rights, participation, and belonging.

## Young migrants and the politics of non-recognition

Migration governance, at both the global and the regional level, is shaped largely by adult perspectives. Within these frameworks, young people who are not citizens face heightened scrutiny and diminished legitimacy, and are often treated as outsiders or potential threats. At the same time, the fragmented structure of global migration governance relies on relatively weak institutional mechanisms. This fragmentation gives regional initiatives, agencies, and intergovernmental collaborations disproportionate influence over the governance of mobility while allowing for persistent breaches of rights.

Human and children's rights frameworks often reinforce the exclusions faced by young migrants. International law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, sees children as sedentary, innocent, and in need of protection – an image that rarely matches the realities of young people on the move. Young migrants, especially those who cross borders irregularly or unaccompanied, fall outside this archetype. What is more, gendered constructions intensify this marginal status, as boys are portrayed as threatening outsiders who endanger moral and social order while girls appear as vulnerable objects of protection.[87]

This liminal positioning means that young migrant men are neither recognised as children with rights nor treated as being in need of care. Instead, they become figures to be "controlled, expelled, or legislated against", in the words of a 2018 study – framings that constrain their ability to claim political rights or asylum.[88]

Europe provides a clear illustration of these tensions. The EU coordinates asylum and migration frameworks across its member states and has some of the world's most advanced human rights protection mechanisms. Yet at the same time, the bloc enforces restrictive migration policies that enable deportations to unsafe states, normalise systemic rights violations, undermine search-and-rescue operations, and deny basic protections to those classified as outsiders. In this context, young migrants, particularly those labelled irregular or non-citizens, face a greater risk of exclusion and criminalisation and are rarely recognised as subjects with rights.[89]

The case of the El Hiblu Three illustrates this dynamic vividly. Abdalla, Abdul, and Amara were portrayed not as children or asylum seekers but as pirates and migrants, symbols of deviance and danger, and "scapegoats for Europe's search and rescue failures", according to Amnesty International.[90] Abdul and Amara's legal status as children, which should have guaranteed them special protection, was disregarded.

Media coverage amplified this narrative, describing a "pirated vessel"[91] and declaring that "rescued migrants hijack ship, demand it head towards Europe".[92] Other reports noted that police arrested "five men", while women and children were escorted off separately, reinforcing gendered distinctions of innocence and threat.[93]

The EU's own publications extended this framing. *The EU Handbook on Victims of Terrorism*, issued by the EU Centre of Expertise for Victims of Terrorism, presented the El Hiblu Three case as a textbook example of a terrorist attack: "Through coercive action, a group of men had hijacked the ship."[94] By recasting minors as "men" within counter-terrorism narratives, EU institutions erased the child status of Abdul and Amara and legitimised their criminalisation. Such exclusionary depictions shape both policies and public perceptions.

The El Hiblu Three case thus exposes the dangers of reductive representations of young migrant men used to justify punitive migration policies. Institutional and media narratives that criminalise young people at the intersection of migration and security deny them not only their rights but also their recognition as political subjects.

## Rights and recognition online

Despite years of dehumanisation, rights violations, and prosecution in adult courts, Abdalla, Abdul, and Amara continued to claim their rights. In collaboration with transnational advocacy networks and through grassroots organising and digital activism, they generated alternative concepts of rights and belonging. Their struggles underscore the need to analyse not only their limited rights and access to institutions but also the narrative battles that regulate who can speak and on what terms.

To capture these dynamics, this chapter adopts a methodology that draws on the theory of performativity and an account of rights as translation.[95] Together, these perspectives conceptualise youth participation not simply as formal inclusion but as a process through which marginalised actors become audible and visible within constrained regimes of recognition.

From these perspectives, rights claims articulated from the EU's external border are not just appeals for recognition but interventions that contest the boundaries of legitimacy. For young men portrayed as threatening or illegible, claiming rights requires translational acts that recast their position across regimes of recognition.

This analysis draws on materials produced by and around the Free the El Hiblu 3 campaign: a 120-page book of testimonies, interviews, and visual materials produced by Abdalla, Abdul, and

Amara alongside educators, artists, and activists;[96] online archives of testimonies, news stories, and other information;[97] and a dataset of 505 posts with the hashtag #ElHiblu3 from the platform X (formerly Twitter) on 22 November 2022.[98] The material focuses on moments of heightened collective visibility, when rights claims were channelled through intensified affective practices.

This snapshot does not aim to capture the full scope of the campaign's digital presence but to examine how rights, solidarity, and political subjectivity are articulated in moments of concentrated attention. The dataset thus foregrounds transnational solidarity as conveyed through performative rights-claiming practices, rather than expressions of individual authorship.

The analysis pays particular attention to the symbolic and affective dimensions of rights claiming, and to the ways in which hashtags, testimonies, and visual elements resonate with audiences. This approach aligns with scholarship on digital rights activism, which treats online practices as embodied, affective, and performative.[99] Far from being merely symbolic, the digital domain functions as a crucial site where rights are enacted, political actors emerge, and dominant framings of young migrants are unsettled.

The Free the El Hiblu 3 campaign contests institutional framings while refusing to conform to expectations of legitimacy. The campaign does not merely protest the injustices faced by the three young men; it enacts a broader performative practice through which young migrant men become political subjects and the landscape of rights and recognition in the EU is reconfigured.

## Digital solidarity against criminalisation

Legal scholars emphasise that the actions of Abdalla, Abdul, and Amara aboard *El Hiblu 1* in March 2019 did not meet the threshold for piracy under international law, as they were passengers acting collectively to protect themselves with no intent to seek private gain.[100] The charges were therefore aimed as a deterrent, a symbolic way of criminalising survival and resistance that ignores established norms of human and children's rights.[101]

### "I Am Not a Terrorist!"

The Free the El Hiblu 3 campaign offers a key counternarrative. The campaign website and book position the three young men as agents of collective survival, framing their refusal to return to Libya as an act of resistance. The charges were described in one analysis as "weaponizing the law against the vulnerable".[102] This reframing transforms the narrative from threat to solidarity and from deviance to dignity.

The campaign emphasises the status of Abdalla, Abdul, and Amara as adolescents navigating the contradictions of migration governance. In this situation, they are neither passive victims nor minors in need of protection but actors who are confronting systemic exclusions. The campaign exemplifies how marginalised young people perform their rights within structures that criminalise survival. Testimonies, digital expressions, and collective storytelling reconfigure the labels that

are imposed on young people, such as “pirates”, “terrorists”, and “migrants”, into affirmations of dignity and political presence.

The testimonies of Abdalla, Abdul, and Amara further highlight the discursive violence of criminalisation and the affective labour of reclaiming a voice.[103] In “Shattered Dreams”, Abdalla situates his journey within intergenerational loss and precarity. He describes how structural inequality and exclusion force young people to migrate. Abdalla’s account of being separated from his wife and accused of terrorism, despite acting as an interpreter on the *El Hiblu 1*, highlights the dissonance between the humanitarian discourse and the punishing governance of an EU member: “The Maltese state accused us of being pirates, terrorists and all kinds of things, which I still don’t understand.”[104]

Abdul’s account, “My True Story”, transforms the theme of migrant youth through the counternarrative of endurance. In his words: “I held onto the hope that I was heading for a land of opportunity. Instead, I found myself in a horrific situation in Libya. My dream became a nightmare as armed men regularly exploited me for unpaid labour … My life became characterised by fear and hopelessness in Libya.”[105] For Abdul, migration was the pursuit of a better life.

Meanwhile, in “I Am Not a Terrorist!”, Amara recounts his imprisonment, forced labour, and escape: “Those who didn’t pay were beaten … I spent about nine months in prison working in the fields without being paid.”[106] His refusal to accept the status of a criminal culminates in his declaration that “I feel lucky and I thank God that I am still alive … I am afraid I will again miss work and lose my job.”[107]

Jointly, the three testimonies produce a subject who resists criminalisation by telling the truth. Other commentators who stood in solidarity with the trio echoed and amplified this process online. Social media posts declared: “They are not terrorists. They are not pirates. They are not criminals. They are heroes. They are human.”[108] Others underlined the paradox behind the act for which they were being prosecuted: “Three youths could be jailed for life for saving the lives of fellow refugees on the Mediterranean.”[109]

Such posts, which were widely shared, collectively countered the young men’s criminalisation, with each repost performing an act of refusal and solidarity. Hashtags like #FreeElHiblu3 and #DropTheCharges functioned as digital chants, turning the individual cry of “I am not a terrorist” into a collective statement of resistance. The posts not only contested the criminal label but also criticised celebrations of youth voices that exclude young people in precarious situations. The campaign thus exposed the contradictions in heralding youth activism while disregarding the criminalisation of young migrants who assert their rights.

### A sea of solidarity

Beyond contesting criminalisation, the Free the El Hiblu 3 campaign generated an affective politics of solidarity. Across its online ecosystem, the campaign’s selfies, hashtags, video testimonies, drawings, and messages of solidarity turned trauma into transnational connections. NGOs such

as Sea-Watch and Alarm Phone, youth collectives, activist groups, and supporters contributed to amplifying the campaign's messages across languages and platforms.

Among the most widely circulated posts, one drawing portrayed the three young men embracing, with the caption "Migrants trying to escape from inhumane conditions and those in solidarity with them become criminalised".[110] Another viral post showed graffiti on a Berlin train reading "Free El Hiblu 3 – This train is unstoppable", in a metaphor for unstoppable justice.[111] These creative acts are a way of claiming rights and remind observers that recognition can be enacted, not merely requested.

The campaign's website and book represent spaces of co-authorship. Abdalla's, Abdul's, and Amara's oral and written testimonies are accompanied by letters, essays, and art by activists, rescue workers, NGOs, and youth collectives.[112] This solidarity shows how digital activism produces relational rather than representational politics. As publics unite around shared feelings and issues, they can create new vocabularies of belonging that go beyond national and legal boundaries. The campaign thus converts isolation into visibility and speech into solidarity, with each post, visual, or story representing a micro-act that turns marginalisation into a collective right to speak.

## Rethinking youth participation in EU migration governance

Young migrants resist their exclusion from political and legal spheres in Europe through performative practices of claiming their rights. By tracing how the Free the El Hiblu 3 campaign transformed acts of criminalisation into collective expressions of dignity and solidarity, this study has revealed how Abdalla, Abdul, and Amara became political subjects through the creation of new grammars of rights and recognition.

This case study lays bare an important inconsistency of EU migration governance. While global and regional policymaking increasingly celebrates youth inclusion, those whose voices most urgently demand justice, such as young migrants, are silenced or criminalised when their agency unsettles the securitised order of Europe's borders.

The Free the El Hiblu 3 campaign exposes the rarely recognised limits of young people's institutional participation and reveals how justice is being reimagined from below and from the margins. Human rights exist not only in court rooms or policy frameworks but also in digital, creative, and collective practices that turn silence into speech and isolation into solidarity. Testimonies, hashtags, artwork, and collaborative publications become acts through which recognition is not requested but enacted. Rights emerge as living, affective practices that are disruptive, relational, and grounded in a shared struggle.

In this way, the campaign unsettles the institutionalised models of youth participation that international organisations often celebrate. Whereas EU frameworks tend to value compliant voices that are aligned with institutional norms, the Free the El Hiblu 3 campaign embodies resistance, through which participants refuse to be co-opted and insist on justice over visibility. Abdalla, Abdul,

and Amara are therefore not anomalies but representatives of a wider young generation whose agency is forged through exclusion.

Ultimately, to take their struggle seriously is to recognise that political agency and justice do not wait for institutional validation. Rather, agency and justice come about through refusal and an insistence on being heard. The Free the El Hiblu 3 campaign serves as a reminder that the boundaries of Europe's migration governance are also the front lines of democratic renewal, where the fight for a voice becomes a fight for justice itself.

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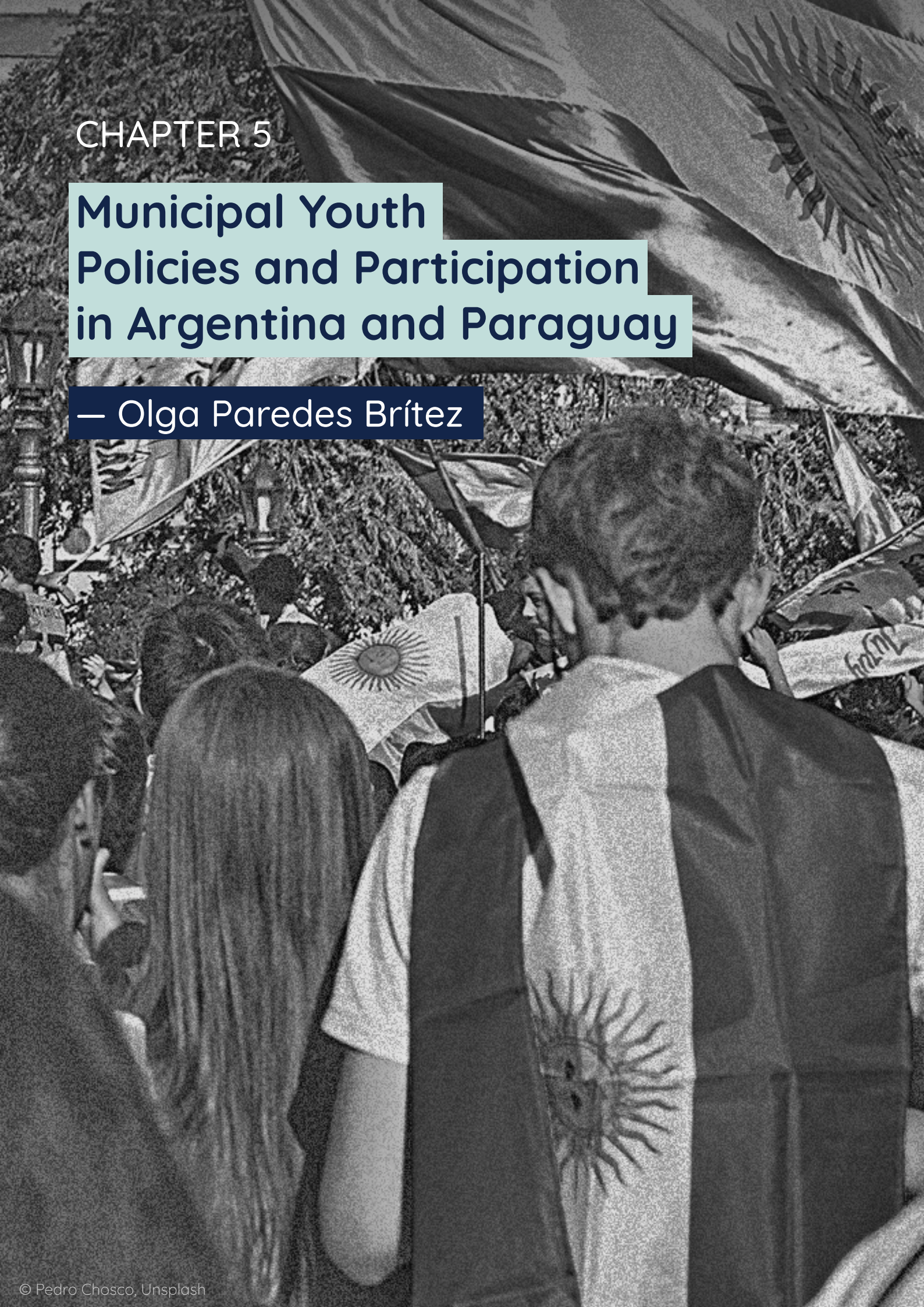
CHAPTER 5

# Municipal Youth Policies and Participation in Argentina and Paraguay

— Olga Paredes Brítez



# Municipal Youth Policies and Participation in Argentina and Paraguay

— OLGA PAREDES BRÍTEZ

Youth officially became a matter of public policy in Latin America in the 1980s, when specialised state agencies were created to institutionalise youth policies. In Argentina and Paraguay, the emergence of these policies coincided with the return of democracy after military dictatorships, with young people playing a significant role in the democratic transitions. This highlights the direct relationship between democracy, youth participation, and the development of youth policy.

The advent of democracy in Argentina and Paraguay occurred at the same time as decentralisation and municipalisation processes. Municipal governments have a strategic role in youth policies because of their territorial proximity and their capacity to create specific institutional arrangements for youth participation.[113] In Paraguay, the first democratically elected municipal government after the dictatorship created the country's first official youth policy unit, before any national institutionalisation.[114] Despite the importance of specialised youth services in local governments, however, obstacles such as resource shortages and difficulties in ensuring effective and sustained youth participation remain.

The concept of youth constructed by a state is fundamental in defining the approach of its policies. This approach can take one of two forms. It can be transitional, focused on helping young people enter adulthood through employment and education.[115] Or it can be affirmative, based on an understanding of youth as a social condition and aimed at promoting identity building and participation.[116]

Given the tension between these two approaches, and in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, this study seeks to answer the following question: How did the municipal governments of Buenos Aires (Argentina) and Asunción (Paraguay) – with their structural differences but common challenges – develop youth policies and promote youth participation in the period surrounding the pandemic?

## Methodology

This chapter analyses how the municipal governments of Buenos Aires and Asunción addressed youth policies and participation between 2016 and 2024. The study examines regulatory frameworks, prevailing policy approaches, forms of youth participation – both institutionalised and non-institutionalised – and youth involvement across different stages of the policy cycle.

Buenos Aires and Asunción were chosen as case studies because of their status as national capitals and their political and institutional relevance. This allowed for the identification of shared challenges in the development of municipal youth policies across different national contexts.

The research adopted a qualitative approach based on semistructured interviews with key interlocutors, including current and former municipal youth directors and academic experts in youth studies in both cities. Participants were selected based on their institutional roles and academic experience in the field. Interviews were structured around the main research categories – youth policies and youth participation – and were transcribed and analysed thematically to identify patterns, similarities, and differences relevant to the study's objectives.

The study period includes the Covid-19 pandemic, which is a contextual factor that helps explain changes in youth policies and participation mechanisms, particularly in relation to education, employment, and mental health.

## Youth policies in Buenos Aires and Asunción

Municipal youth policies, because of their territorial proximity and institutional location, tend to offer greater opportunities for youth participation than national policies. However, these opportunities are neither automatic nor homogeneous. They are shaped by the extent of legal frameworks, the prevailing policy approaches, and the ways in which youth participation is promoted across different stages of the policy cycle.

### Legal frameworks

At the municipal level, the strength of legal frameworks is central in determining whether proximity translates into effective youth participation. Legal frameworks not only define institutional responsibilities and policy continuity but also affect the extent to which youth participation can become a stable component of public action.

In both Argentina and Paraguay, the absence of such frameworks is evident. Despite the existence of youth departments or programmes, neither country has enacted a comprehensive youth law that structures responsibilities or guarantees institutional continuity. Both countries display regulatory gaps across three normative levels: constitutional, functional, and administrative.

Argentina lacks an explicit constitutional recognition of young people as subjects of rights, while Paraguay mentions the promotion of youth participation only in one article of its constitution. At the national level, both countries have partial sectoral laws – on education, health, and employment – that address young people tangentially and often contradict one another. In Buenos Aires, there is a law mandating a youth survey, whereas in Asunción, no relevant municipal regulation on young people exists.

This absence of comprehensive frameworks reflects weak institutionalisation. This perception was shared by both former municipal youth directors and academic experts interviewed, who emphasised that youth policies depend largely on political contingencies and institutional voluntarism.

### Approaches to youth policies

Interviews with former municipal youth directors revealed that youth policies in both Buenos Aires and Asunción have been structured around a limited set of priorities. Employability and scholarships emerged as the most consolidated lines of action, alongside fragmented recreational initiatives.

Based on interviewee testimonies, it is clear that a transitional approach to youth policies predominates in both cities. This approach places the responsibility for young people's transition into adulthood primarily on the youth themselves, while underestimating structural constraints, such as poverty, territorial inequality, and digital exclusion.[117]

In Buenos Aires, this logic is particularly evident. Employability is the basis for training programmes, first-job initiatives, and links with productive sectors, reinforcing young people's functional role in the system.

In Asunción, in contrast, the most consolidated youth policy is the provision of university scholarships, which reflects a selective and individualist response to youth inequality. Beyond this central policy, youth action largely emphasises leisure and recreational initiatives – particularly sports and entertainment activities – without being embedded in a broader transitional or rights-based framework.

This approach may operate as a form of symbolic containment rather than structural intervention, diverting attention from deeper social inequalities and potentially aggravating young people's vulnerabilities.[118] As a result, a third paradigm emerges – one that neither systematically supports young people's transition to adulthood nor affirms their autonomy. Instead, this third way seeks to manage youth presence through fragmented and depoliticised interventions, mainly recreational programmes.

Interviews with former youth directors in both cities revealed a shared willingness to advance towards affirmative, rights-based policies – such as youth participatory budgets or civic programmes – that conceive of young people not merely as students or future workers but as full citizens. These efforts, however, are consistently constrained by institutional fragilities, budgetary restrictions, and the absence of a strategic vision that can consolidate young people as transformative political actors within municipal governance.

### Historical and social context

Historical and political trajectories play a central role in shaping approaches to youth policy. During the democratic transitions that followed the two countries' military dictatorships (Argentina in 1983, Paraguay in 1989), youth participation was strongly promoted through affirmative policies that emphasised political engagement.[119]

However, this approach shifted in the 1990s with the advance of neoliberal reforms, particularly in Argentina, where so-called excluded youth were increasingly framed as policy targets

through employability and vocational training initiatives.[120] In Buenos Aires, successive municipal administrations consolidated this employability-centred axis within youth policies.

In contrast, in Asunción, youth policies were progressively hollowed out. Participatory spaces were weakened and municipal action was redirected towards sports and recreational programmes, often focused on children and early adolescents, rather than young people as political subjects.

As of 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic acted as a stress test for already fragile institutional frameworks: it weakened policy capacities, displaced young people from the social policy agenda, and reinforced control-oriented narratives. In this context, youth issues were not only pushed to the margins of public policy, but young people also came to be framed as expendable in public-health terms.

At the same time, pandemic-related lockdowns exposed long-neglected problems – particularly young people's mental health and suicide – revealing structural vulnerabilities that predated the pandemic. However, these warning signs were not followed by robust youth mental health policies, underscoring a persistent disconnect between recognising the problems and delivering effective policy action.

Based on the collected testimonies, it can be concluded that Buenos Aires exemplifies a transitional, employability-centred approach, while Asunción illustrates symbolic containment within a weaker institutional environment.

## Youth participation: institutionalised and non-institutionalised

Youth participation at the municipal level has taken place through a combination of weakly institutionalised mechanisms, such as ad hoc councils or consultations, and a wide range of non-institutionalised practices, including protests, cultural activism, and digital mobilisation.

Youth policies are not solely a product of state design; they are also the result of social struggles and the participation of collective actors.[121] In Argentina, the state recognised pre-existing youth movements, illustrating how youth participation can precede and shape public policy.[122] In Paraguay, participation has shown peaks of visibility, yet repression and criminalisation continue to inhibit its institutional consolidation.[123]

The field of youth participation is marked by a tension between a restrictive understanding of the term, which equates it with partisan or union activism, and a broader conception that acknowledges the political nature of unconventional practices, such as cultural activism, street art, social networks, or protests.[124] Today, non-institutionalised participation is highly significant yet rarely recognised by public policy.[125]

Empirical evidence reveals a paradox of low effective youth participation in decision-making alongside a high desire to participate.[126] A central explanation for this paradox lies in the tension

between recognition and autonomy: youth collectives seek the state's validation to influence policies while preserving their independence from official frameworks. In practice, the two forms of participation are interdependent: the institutionalised form opens stable channels, while the non-institutionalised form innovates, monitors, and exerts pressure, sustaining a dynamic ecosystem of civic engagement.

When it comes to institutionalised participation, voting is the most widespread – and, in many cases, the only – guaranteed mechanism. Beyond suffrage, there is a striking lack of structured spaces, such as local youth councils, whose existence is almost entirely at the discretion of the municipal administration. This reveals a pattern of institutional fragility: in the absence of binding legal frameworks, participatory bodies are exposed to shifts in administrations' priorities, as evidenced by the dissolution of youth councils in Asunción and similar experiences in Buenos Aires.

The Covid-19 pandemic deepened this split, weakening formal participation while accelerating online engagement. A strong form of solidarity-based youth participation emerged, expressed through networks of mutual aid and community organisation in response to urgent social needs.[127] Young women, despite facing care burdens and precarious conditions, led numerous collective actions. This dynamic reflects a form of resilient youth participation, in which political engagement persists despite structural constraints. These experiences strengthened organisational capacity, social bonds, and political commitment within initiatives marked by strong local youth involvement.

According to one interviewee, Buenos Aires presented a more consolidated tradition of non-institutionalised participation, such as anti-neoliberal resistance, student movements, feminist mobilisations, and rights-based agendas.[128] In contrast, another informant said that in Paraguay, civic participation had been structurally weakened across social sectors, also affecting youth participation, which tended to emerge only episodically and under adverse conditions.[129] This context of weakened institutional support and higher risks of repression helps explain the intermittent visibility of youth mobilisation in Asunción.

In both cases, overcoming the paradox of low participation despite a high desire for it requires broadening the frameworks of recognition for institutionalised participation while acknowledging non-institutional forms of engagement. It is essential to ensure fair access to participation – in terms of time, resources, and connectivity – and link territorial and solidarity-based practices with decision-making mechanisms that give young people real influence in the public sphere.

The Covid-19 pandemic did not result in the creation of new or sustained municipal mechanisms for youth participation in either city. Instead, it tended to weaken already fragile institutional spaces while shifting youth involvement towards informal, solidarity-based, and digital practices. Although local governments temporarily increased contact with young people through emergency responses, these interactions did not translate into more binding or permanent participatory arrangements. In this sense, the pandemic acted less as a catalyst for institutional innovation than as a stress test that exposed the limited depth of participatory governance at the municipal level.

### Participation across the policy cycle

According to former youth directors interviewed, youth participation across the policy cycle in Buenos Aires and Asunción is uneven. Young people have minimal influence on the formulation and implementation of youth policies and virtually no involvement in their evaluation.

The diagnostic phase of policymaking shows some noteworthy elements, such as surveys that seek to identify young people's priorities and demands. These instruments provide valuable inputs into decision-making and help strengthen the legitimacy of public policies. However, youth participation in decision-making is still a main challenge facing local youth policies in Latin America.[130]

There are some exceptions, such as the participation of young civil servants in governmental spaces, for example through youth cabinets, which introduce a generational perspective to public administrations. Yet this form of participation has clear limitations: it is largely restricted to young people with political and institutional capital, and their influence depends on hierarchical structures that do not always value or incorporate their contributions.

During the implementation phase, participation becomes even more diluted, with limited articulation between design and execution. Although the youth presence may be more visible at this stage, it is often reduced to moments of public exposure or interaction, rather than meaningful involvement in policy design or decision-making. Young people are sometimes invited to receive benefits, such as scholarships or material resources, but are rarely involved in the processes through which these policies are formulated. Participatory processes tend to generate less political visibility and impact than symbolic acts such as public events or photographs, contributing to the absence of sustained spaces for participation.[131]

Most critical is the evaluation phase, where youth participation is virtually nonexistent. This absence reflects a weak evaluation culture across the region.[132] This limits the possibility of understanding the real impacts of youth policies and of incorporating young people's perspectives into assessment processes.

Overall, youth participation throughout the public policy cycle is sporadic, discontinuous, and marginal. Rather than a cross-cutting dimension of public action, participation is treated as an accessory or symbolic element. Overcoming this limitation requires a shift towards participatory governance models in which young people are not merely recipients but co-creators and evaluators of the policies that affect them.

## Conclusions

In both Buenos Aires and Asunción, the legal frameworks for youth policies are limited. Neither Argentina nor Paraguay has a comprehensive national youth law, and frameworks are fragmented across sectors. In both contexts, the institutional architecture is weak and discontinuous: youth departments typically depend on other secretariats and lack resources and clear mandates. This

results in an institutional hollowing out: regulations without enforcement, programmes without stable funding, and participatory mechanisms that operate intermittently.

In terms of policy approaches, a transitional perspective of young people as "adults in the making" persists. In Buenos Aires, the state's interventions are aimed at young people's employability; in Asunción, a bias towards leisure and sports prevails. This pattern reproduces an adult-centric view that limits recognition of young people as political subjects. The Covid-19 pandemic did not correct these trends; rather, it deepened institutional fragmentation, reinforced punitive narratives, and displaced young people from the policy agenda, even as it exposed critical issues, such as mental health, digital inequality, and labour precarity.

As for participation, a clear tension exists between fragile institutional formats, such as councils and ad hoc consultations, and non-institutionalised forms, like cultural activism, digital interventions, and protests, which highlight young people's civic vitality but are undervalued by local governments.

Across the policy cycle, youth involvement is sporadic: it appears in isolated diagnostic exercises, rarely influences policymaking, weakens during implementation, and is nearly absent at the evaluation stage.

In sum, without structural changes in legal frameworks, intersectoral governance, and binding participation mechanisms, municipal youth policies will continue to be fragile, reactive, and of low transformative impact – though with strong latent potential from the local level.

Beyond the specific cases analysed, this study suggests that the municipal level is a politically strategic – albeit fragile – arena for youth citizenship in contexts where national commitments to young people are weak or regressing. While local governments do not escape structural constraints, their territorial embeddedness enables forms of interaction, recognition, and experimentation that are largely inaccessible at higher levels of governance. The challenge, therefore, is not to idealise municipal youth policies but to recognise their potential as spaces where youth citizenship can still be contested, negotiated, and, under certain conditions, expanded.

### Recommendations

Advancing municipal youth policies requires strengthening rights-based legal frameworks at the local level. Municipal rules should define clear objectives, competencies, organisational structures, budgets, and accountability mechanisms, including non-regression clauses to ensure policy continuity across administrations.

At the same time, it is essential to institutionalise binding participation mechanisms, such as local youth councils with deliberative functions throughout the policy cycle. These should be complemented by tools like youth participatory budgets and public hearings that ensure intersectional representation.

Effective youth policies also demand intersectoral governance that links areas such as health, education, labour, culture, the environment, and housing, supported by shared goals, indicators,

and transparent monitoring. Recognising non-institutionalised participation is equally important. Cultural activism, digital networks, and community-based initiatives should be integrated as legitimate sources of diagnosis and innovation, with funding and technical support for youth-led projects.

Finally, strengthening state capacity through professionalised teams, specialised training, and merit-based recruitment is crucial for moving towards a comprehensive, participatory, and sustainable youth policy agenda.

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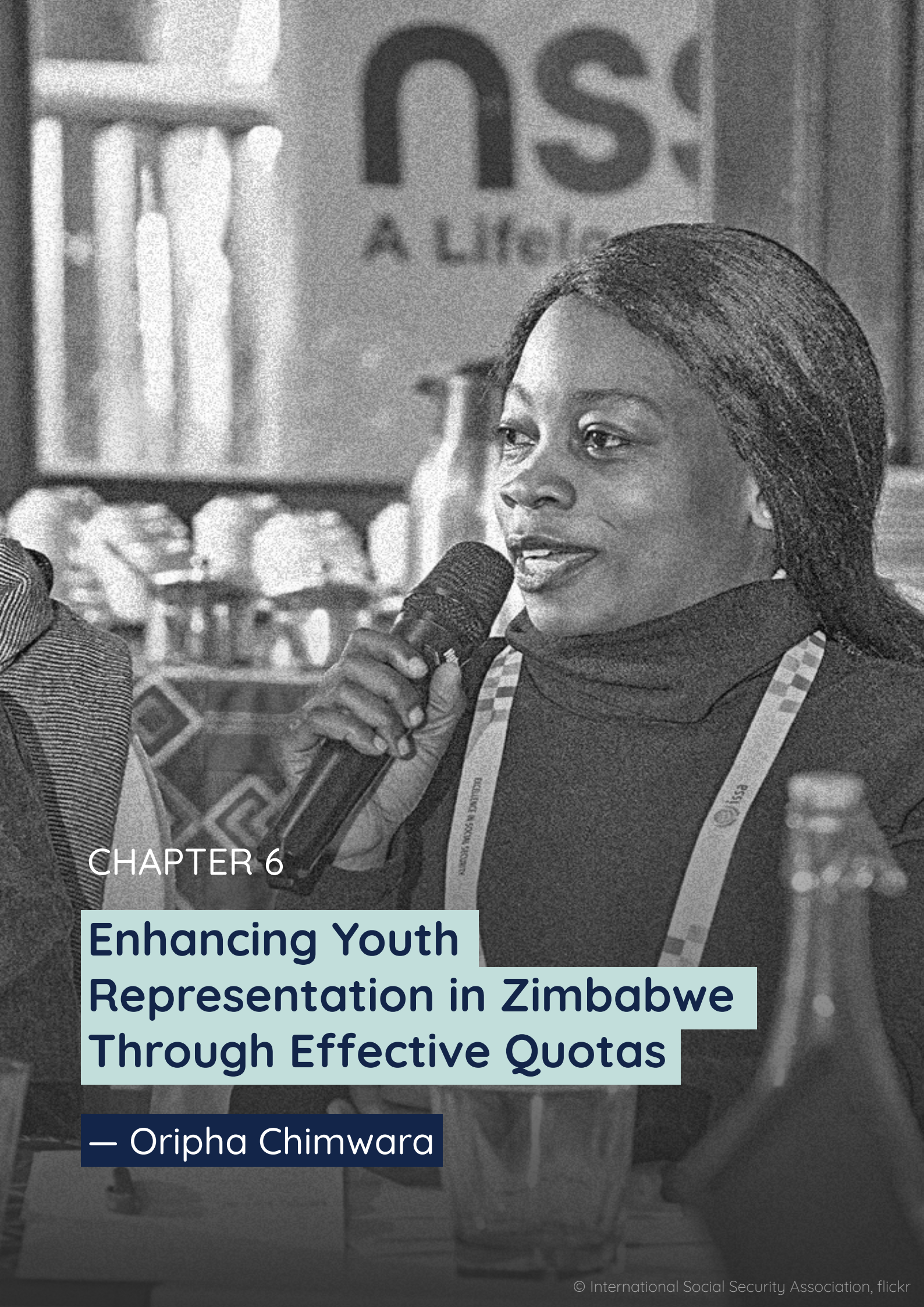

CHAPTER 6

# Enhancing Youth Representation in Zimbabwe Through Effective Quotas

— Oripha Chimwara

# Enhancing Youth Representation in Zimbabwe Through Effective Quotas

— ORIPHA CHIMWARA

Across the globe, quotas have been used to promote the inclusion of underrepresented social groups. Indeed, the introduction of such provisions in politics is widely regarded as a legitimate way of ensuring equal opportunities.[133] Previously, representational politics centred on gender quotas; recently, the focus has shifted to youth quotas.

Reports by the Inter-Parliamentary Union highlight that about half of the global population is aged under 30, yet young people are underrepresented in national parliaments: in 2023, only 2.8% of the world's parliamentarians were under 30, while 18.8% were under 40.[134] This lack of youth representation diminishes institutional credibility, intensifies young people's feelings of powerlessness, and prevents parliaments from effectively addressing the critical issues that affect this social group.[135]

But while youth quotas appear to be desirable political tools, there is no consensus on their impact on representation. Beyond their potential benefits, the novelty of quotas and the broader political and institutional framework in which they are implemented also play fundamental roles in shaping youth inclusion.[136] Thus, youth quotas, although progressive, are "merely one aspect of the more important project of 'democratising democracy'".[137]

Zimbabwe introduced a youth quota system in 2021. This chapter examines the conditions under which quotas contribute to the equal and fair representation of young people in the country's parliament. Specifically, the study explores to what extent Zimbabwe's quota system is accompanied by an ecosystem of institutions, laws, and programmes that promote youth participation in the legislature. The findings will help inform policy in countries such as Zimbabwe that are new to the use of youth quotas.

## Methodology

This study employed a qualitative methodology to examine the influence of Zimbabwe's youth quota on promoting youth inclusion in parliament. The research was carried out as part of the author's PhD study on youth participation and representation in Zimbabwe. Interviews were conducted with parliamentary officials, four young parliamentarians, and six youth activists.

The parliamentarians and activists were selected according to strict criteria. The former were members of the Zimbabwean parliament that was formed after the 2023 general elections; they were all aged between 18 and 35 at the time of their election. The latter were members of the same

age group who were working either independently or under a registered civil society organisation. The criteria of sex, education level, and party affiliation were not used either to include or to exclude participants.

The study also drew on primary and secondary source documents to place the findings in a broader national and international context. Documents consulted included journal articles, election observation reports, civil society organisation reports, and media reporting, such as press releases and newspaper articles.

This approach, based on multiple qualitative methods, ensured corroboration of the findings. Research participants were assured of anonymity through the removal of all identifiers and the use of codification.

## Introduction of a youth quota in Zimbabwe

The paradox of elections is that they can be used to promote or undermine democratic governance.[138] Having now held several elections since gaining independence in 1980, Zimbabwe has a political landscape marked by feelings of apathy, despair, and resignation among a significant number of young people.[139]

The issue of youth representation in Zimbabwe's national parliament is a relatively recent phenomenon, although a women's quota has existed since 2013. Calls for greater youth inclusion in parliament have come from both local and international organisations. In 2019, the Youth Empowerment and Transformation Trust (YETT) called for 50% youth quotas for political parties, parliament, and government to ensure young people's effective representation and participation in democratic processes.[140] A 2018 report by the Zimbabwe Election Support Network highlighted the need to involve young candidates in decision-making.[141]

Similar views were expressed during a 2018 conference led by the Mandela Institute for Development Studies titled "Reigniting Hope for Democracy beyond Elections in Zimbabwe". Participants argued that because young people constitute a majority of citizens in Zimbabwe, this should be reflected in the make-up of leadership positions, including in parliament. International election observers, such as the Commonwealth, also urged Zimbabwe to consider a youth quota system similar to those of other countries, like Rwanda.

In response to these calls, a constitutional amendment in 2021 introduced a youth quota system in Zimbabwe for the first time. The system reserves 10 out of 280 seats in the National Assembly – the lower house of the national parliament – for members aged between 21 and 35, one from each of the country's 10 provinces. They are elected by party-list proportional representation.[142] This system was first used in the 2023 general elections.

Zimbabwe's youth quota of just under 4% is comparable with that of the four other countries that have a similar system: Uganda (1.2%), Rwanda (1.8%), Kenya (3.4%), and Morocco (7.6%).[143]

## Impact of the youth quota

Zimbabwe's introduction of a youth quota system has had far-reaching implications for representational politics in the country and for the structure of parliament, in addition to providing a foundation from which to improve Zimbabwean democracy. Indeed, the quota system is the most significant advance in youth representation in Zimbabwe's current parliament. The Commonwealth's 2023 election observation mission commended the establishment of the youth quota.[144]

Four research participants interviewed for this study expressed their support for the quota, calling it a "positive beginning" for youth representation in parliament. They argued that the quota creates an open political environment for young people to attain leadership roles. These roles are often difficult to reach through traditional party pathways because of prevailing cultural factors, which place the elderly in sacrosanct positions.[145] In the words of one study, young Zimbabweans have to navigate "gerontocratic masculinities".[146]

Supporting the youth quota, one young parliamentarian from the main opposition party argued that "the youth quota is a progressive measure which should be applauded as it shows that the Zimbabwean government is pushing towards the best international practices on ensuring youth [can] participate in decision-making institutions".[147]

The youth quota has also increased the number of young people who stand as candidates in elections. This confirms earlier research that found that the youth quota has promoted young people's candidacies.[148] Interviewees highlighted that "for the first time, many youths were not afraid to stand as candidates". Others argued that the quota's significance lies in the fact that it serves as an "initiation process" for young people into decision-making.

As a result of the youth quota, Zimbabwe's 2023 elections saw an increase in the number of young people in parliament for the first time since 1980. A total of 35 young people were elected;[149] in addition to the 10 under the youth quota, this figure includes eight parliamentarians who were elected through a separate quota for women and 17 who were elected directly under no quota. Thus, youth representation in the 2023 parliament stood at 12%, an increase from 2% in the previous legislature.[150]

Comparing Zimbabwe with its neighbours reveals a positive link between the presence of a youth quota and the level of youth representation. In the European Partnership for Democracy's 2025 Global Youth Participation Index (GYPI), Zimbabwe achieved a score of 13 out of 100 for youth representation in the legislature, significantly higher than Mozambique's 3 out of 100, Zambia's 2 out of 100, and Botswana's 0 out of 100 – all countries that lack youth quotas.[151] In contrast, South Africa, which also does not have a quota, scored 14 out of 100.[152] These scores illustrate that while a quota can enhance youth representation in the legislature, other factors, including the quality of political rights, are also crucial. On this dimension, South Africa performed well, scoring 86 out of 100, compared with Zimbabwe's 28 out of 100.[153]

Zimbabwe's introduction of a youth quota system – combined with the existing quota system for women, which was extended by a constitutional amendment in 2021 – broadened the avenues for young people to be elected. Still, while young women had more options for getting elected than their male counterparts, they remain underrepresented in parliament. Of the 10 seats reserved for young people, only three are occupied by women.[154] Meanwhile, only one of the 17 young parliamentarians who entered the legislature by direct election is a woman. Eight young women from the ruling ZANU-PF party were elected under the women's quota.

Despite the positive outcome of the youth quota, concerns have been raised about its implementation. The 2019 YETT report questioned the extent to which the dynamics of political engagement in Zimbabwe could be effectively addressed through the country's party-list system.[155] There has also been criticism of the limited number of seats reserved for young people. This view was supported by nearly 80% of the study participants.

Indeed, establishing a quota of 10 youth seats highlights the imbalance in parliamentary representation in a country where young people make up the majority of the adult population.[156] The quota system should therefore be viewed as one element of a broader democratic project aimed at promoting youth representation in parliament. Zimbabwe's wider institutional and political framework needs to be structured in a way that reflects the ethos of the representation agenda.

Overall, Zimbabwe's first experience of a youth quota system has been somewhat beneficial, yet its impact on long-term democratic growth is unclear. On the one hand, by ensuring a minimum number of young people in the legislature, the quota has allowed for some youth representation. On the other hand, the quota alone is not what drives young Zimbabweans' political involvement, as it allocates only 10 reserved seats, whereas 17 young people were directly elected to the current parliament with no quota. This underscores that meaningful youth representation depends on favourable political conditions more broadly.

The quota therefore risks serving as a ceiling rather than a floor: it suggests that as long as the 10 designated seats are occupied, the issue of youth engagement has been sufficiently addressed. Thus, rather than encouraging and promoting young candidates across all constituencies, the quota may in fact limit the growth of youth representation by standardising a fixed, limited number of young parliamentarians.

This dynamic raises concerns about the potential of quotas to deepen democracy in Zimbabwe. By highlighting the youth presence in parliament, the regime can project an image of inclusiveness without tackling fundamental reforms to liberalise the country's broader political environment.

## Challenges to youth representation in Zimbabwe

The issue of youth representation in Zimbabwe's parliament should not be viewed solely through the lens of quotas. The democratic task of ensuring youth participation should also focus on the broader political and institutional environment in which the quota system is implemented.

An analysis of the 2023 elections, when the quota was first used, reveals that several structural, economic, and political factors hindered young people's participation and their subsequent uptake of leadership positions.

Young Zimbabweans faced various administrative challenges during the elections that affected their ability to register to vote and stand as candidates. For example, some young people had to pay an additional US$2 for travel to registration centres that were not well located.[157]

Another administrative challenge was the exorbitant fees required to register as a parliamentary or presidential candidate. A 2022 law had increased the nomination fee for a constituency election from US$50 to US$1,000.[158] This 1,900% increase made Zimbabwe the country with the highest nomination fees in the region.[159] Such fees disadvantaged potential young candidates.[160]

Election campaigns further increase the cost of politics for young people. A 2001 act provides state funding for parties that received at least 5% of the vote in the previous general elections.[161] In 2023, a total of Z$1.5 billion was disbursed to qualifying political parties, with ZANU-PF receiving just over Z$1 billion and the remaining Z$450 million being given to the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) Alliance.[162]

The significance of state funding for political parties when it comes to youth participation is twofold. First, because only qualifying parties receive this funding, parties are instrumental in financing campaigns. Campaign costs are high for individuals, especially young people who decide to run as independent candidates or come from minor parties that do not get state funding.

Second, resource disparities between ZANU-PF and the MDC Alliance unevenly affect the relative chances of these parties' candidates. Worse, reports indicate that in the 2023 elections, ZANU-PF used many state resources for its campaign, the costs of which were covered by the party directly.[163] Meanwhile, the MDC Alliance had limited resources, and the party's individual candidates bore their own campaign costs.[164] Party alignment thus influences the cost of politics for young Zimbabweans.

The cost of politics in Zimbabwe is also high because of clientelism. A clientelist party provides material benefits to its supporters in exchange for their votes.[165] Such parties are commonly observed in countries with high levels of poverty; the benefits offered include branded clothing, food, and other forms of assistance. Clientelism implies that during election periods, the electorate expects aspiring candidates to provide such inducements. Elections are thus a give-and-take, which some young people use to their advantage. But clientelism is a double-edged sword, aspiring young candidates may lack the material benefits to reward their supporters.

Interviewees agreed that Zimbabwe's electoral politics is characterised by what is known as the "politics of the belly". This practice refers to the material items, in particular food, that the electorate expects from political parties and candidates. In Zimbabwe, the politics of the belly thrives among young people, many of whom are unemployed.[166] Thus, rather than aspiring to stand as candidates, some young people opportunistically take on marginal roles during elections,

such as serving as foot soldiers in exchange for material benefits. In the words of a 2024 study, young people's "vulnerability to unemployment and lack of resources force them to participate in politics in peripheral roles that allow them to survive through benefits extended to them by patronage systems".[167]

Gatekeeping by political-party leaderships is another challenge that affects young people who seek political office outside the quota system. In particular, the main opposition party employed a controversial method of selecting candidates called bereka mwana, in which supporters form a queue behind their preferred candidate.[168] Three-fifths of the research participants agreed that political parties did not prioritise young candidates. In particular, one young parliamentarian argued that the candidate selection process was not based on age but was a simple case of winner takes all.

Young Zimbabweans therefore continue to be structurally and politically excluded, and evidence shows that the quota system of reserved seats is far from addressing these issues. Structural reforms and an accountable, inclusive governance system are needed to ensure sustained youth representation in the country's legislature.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Youth quotas are an essential tool for encouraging youth representation in national parliaments. Zimbabwe has joined four other countries – Rwanda, Kenya, Morocco, and Uganda – in reserving seats in the legislature for young parliamentarians. While Zimbabwe's youth quota system is relatively new compared with the more established system of gender quotas, it has already yielded positive results.

This view is validated by GYPI data for Zimbabwe and its neighbours Botswana, Zambia, and Mozambique, which do not have youth quotas. Beyond the reserved seats, Zimbabwe's youth quota had ripple effects, with more young people standing as candidates in the 2023 elections than in the previous contest. As a result, 17 young people were elected from the country's 210 constituencies under the normal rules.

Still, beyond the quota's short-term influence in promoting youth inclusion and representation in parliament, the measure's sustainability is unclear in the broader context of Zimbabwe's institutional and political environment. Visible setbacks, including administrative hurdles, nomination fees, gatekeeping by political parties, and an entrenched patronage system, hinder the durability of an open space for youth participation.

To ensure the sustained positive impacts of this representational tool, the quota should be implemented in an environment with youth-friendly administrative guidelines and an open political space. To this end, the following four steps would help ensure sustainable youth representation in Zimbabwe's parliament.

First, the country's political parties should either adopt a voluntary candidate quota listing or prioritise young candidates during elections. They should also finance young candidates to promote their effective participation.

Second, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission should ensure its registration centres are in accessible locations to promote the registration of young voters.

Third, the government should revoke the 2022 law that increased the nomination fees for constituency elections and reduce the exorbitant costs of registering a candidacy.

Finally, the women's quota must be revised to include some reserved seats for young women.

Zimbabwe's youth quota system is a welcome and progressive instrument, but it needs to be implemented within an ecosystem of youth-friendly electoral norms. While the quota has offered short-term gains for youth representation, its long-term democratic value depends on whether it forms part of a genuinely open political environment. Sustainable youth representation in Zimbabwe's parliament requires a political and administrative framework conducive to youth participation throughout the electoral cycle.

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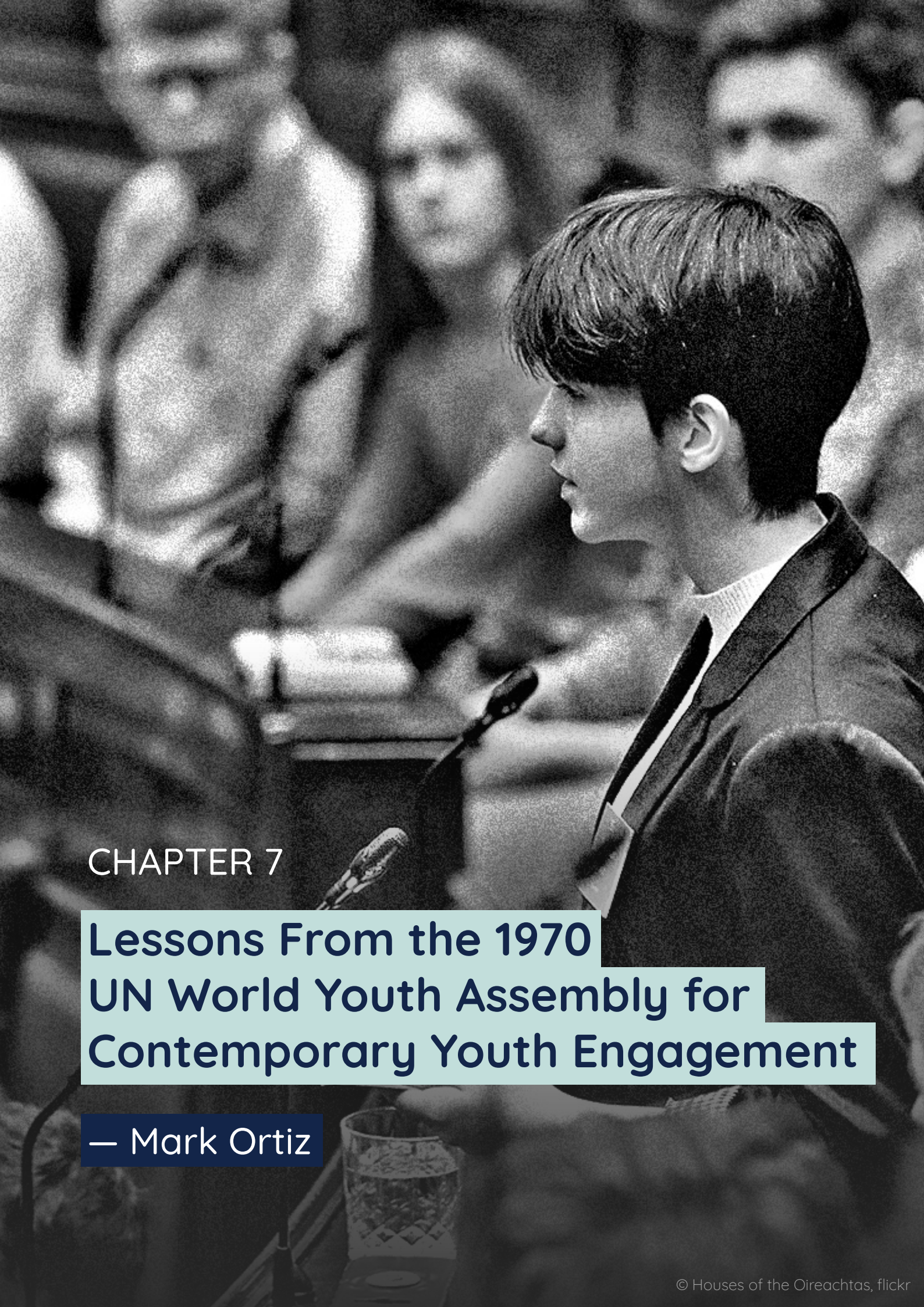

CHAPTER 7

# Lessons From the 1970 UN World Youth Assembly for Contemporary Youth Engagement

— Mark Ortiz

# Lessons From the 1970 UN World Youth Assembly for Contemporary Youth Engagement

— MARK ORTIZ

Over the last decade, the United Nations (UN) system has increasingly invested in creating institutional space for greater youth participation and leadership. Launched in 2018, Youth2030 is a UN-wide youth strategy that prioritises "meaningful youth engagement in policymaking and decision-making processes".[169] Other efforts to systematise youth participation include the UN Youth Office, the UN Youth Envoy, and the 2024 Summit of the Future.

Attempts to reform institutional architectures to enhance meaningful youth participation have elements that are both new and old, inventive and anachronistic, symbolic and material. Indeed, current attempts to fashion institutions and processes that represent multiple generations have historical antecedents. While many of the UN's contemporary youth engagement efforts are cast as novel, they are situated within much longer stories of the UN as an institution that is invested in involving and reaching young people.

This chapter explores the reinvention of intergenerational politics through the case study of the 1970 World Youth Assembly, held at the UN headquarters in New York. The chapter details several complex aspects of youth representation and offers three lessons for understanding youth engagement in multilateral decision-making today.

First, it is important to pay critical attention to the framings of "generation" and "youth" adopted by different actors to different ends. Examining the varying interpretations of these concepts highlights contradictory narratives that are still relevant for intergenerational politics today.

Second, it is essential to centre analyses of youth engagement in questions of power. Focusing on power enables a nuanced analysis of the intersections of representation, geopolitics, gender, class, and age in shaping the potential and limitations of youth inclusion.

Finally, this case study highlights how young people adapt inherited processes to offer more expansive conceptions of what is political. This suggests that research on youth politics must deal not only with the formal politics of youth engagement in institutions but also with the micropolitics of how young people reimagine politics more generally.

## The 1970 World Youth Assembly

To commemorate the UN's 25th anniversary in 1970, then Secretary General U Thant spearheaded a first-of-its-kind World Youth Assembly at the organisation's headquarters in New York. Over 600 participants from some 120 countries convened in July that year to discuss a broad range of topics, such as education, peace, development, and the environment. The average participant was reported to be in their early 20s, with nearly half engaged in some sort of education or university training, and many involved in youth organisations.[170]

The videos, documents, and speeches that remain from the assembly form a unique archive that illustrates how the UN and its officials articulated their roles in generational language. As U Thant said in a radio broadcast before the assembly, the project's ambition was to forge a "relationship of mutual confidence and cooperation … between generations so that we can transmit the goals and ideals with which the United Nations was brought into being a quarter of a century ago".[171] Here, U Thant articulated a mission of progressive betterment intended to engender a sense of global citizenship.

### Generational conflict and geopolitics

Framing this mission was a notion of nascent generational conflict. Victor Mills, the assembly's executive officer, alluded to broad youth dissatisfaction with the sluggishness and inefficacy of institutional politics.[172] Similarly, in his opening remarks to the event, U Thant described the central generational fissure as being between the "older generation", with its emphasis on the "legacy of achievements passed on to the youth of today", and the younger generation focused on "injustice, waste, [and a] lack of love and understanding".[173]

Ghana's permanent representative to the UN, R.M. Akwei, also focused parts of his speech on diagnosing a generational chasm and identifying different articulations of democratic thought. He, like Mills, mentioned a prevailing sense of frustration among young people because of the "inability of individuals to influence institutions in order to make them more humane and responsive to new social values". He described a "virtual civil war" between an older generation interested in affluence and younger citizens critical of the "emptiness and callousness" that affluence produces.[174] He went on to suggest that the younger generation was interested in a vision of democracy that embraced "spontaneity", in contrast to rigid institutions.

Speeches and historical reporting present contradictory narratives about young people that oscillate between idealism and chaos. A cautionary report for the *Boston Globe* in May 1970 wondered: "What happens if the gathering decides its own agenda, different from that offered? And what if it produces a psychedelic manifesto of revolution and irreverence?"[175] The central dialectic that emerges is of youthful idealism as either an engine of possibility or a harbinger of social breakdown.

UN Chef de Cabinet C.V. Narasimhan identified two potential pathways the assembly could take. The first was that the "the young will bring a new dimension to our own thinking about how the

world should be run … and how the future affairs of mankind should be handled". The second was a "rambunctious youth assembly" that "would end in chaos".[176]

U Thant's opening remarks leaned into an optimistic vision that framed participants as part of a long historical lineage of young people leading "inspirational" and transformational change.[177] Both Narasimhan's and U Thant's understandings of young people embodied a faith in them as progressive catalysts. But across the archival materials, a thin line distinguishes youthful idealism and innovation from the omnipresent threat of disorder.

Each stage of the assembly was animated by the geopolitical conflicts of the era, suggesting the need to take seriously power dynamics in studies of youth engagement and intergenerational politics. For example, countries disagreed over whether a youth assembly should happen at all, with one western representative reportedly suggesting that the Soviet Union was more "worried about [the] unpredictability of youth than we are".[178] Another report suggested that "the big powers, sensing they would be the prime targets of the youthful participants, became wary".[179]

U Thant appealed to a sort of universalist generational thinking to elevate the gathering's importance as transcending geopolitical interests. He suggested that if the event did not happen, its absence would be "likely to affect the relations between generations for a long time to come".[180]

Thus, generational ideas interacted with questions of geopolitics. In western reporting, many of the delegates who represented communist-affiliated youth fronts were described as older and interested in pursuing a manipulative realpolitik. *New York Times* reporter Kathleen Teltsch described the discussions being dominated by "not-so-young professionals who had learned their tactics at youth festivals in various communist capitals".[181] In the same way, a write-up in *Time* magazine decried the presence of "professional Youths" in the conference.[182] Here, depictions of young people function as sites of geopolitical contestation that distinguish subversive, not-so-young attendees from communist countries, on the one hand, from their innocent or naive counterparts from the west, on the other.

### Delegates' views

Many young attendees criticised the way their conversations unfolded along predictable lines and implored other participants to embrace a spirit of possibility. Dennis Smith from Jamaica lambasted the assembly for "quarrelling" in the way that national leaders did in the UN and suggested that the outcomes of such bickering would be "foolish".[183]

Speeches by young delegates in the early stages of the assembly challenged the forum's purported universality: there was criticism of the presence of young people selected by China's nationalist regime, of military action by the United States (US) in Vietnam, and of global imperialism.[184] Some participants withdrew from the forum entirely, including one Puerto Rican participant who cited a "climate of ideological intolerance".[185]

A delegate from Mali exhorted participants to "have faith in our capacity to persuade, in our capacity to change each of these youth into the men of tomorrow", suggesting a promising view

of the possibility of negotiation and interpersonal change. Australia's Kenwin Smith suggested that "virtually no one has managed to break beyond the concepts of the adult generation".[186]

A young participant from the US offered a different view: "There has been an overt sign of entire chaos, but I think underneath a lot of work has been getting done." Lars Thalen, who chaired the assembly, insisted that the role of young people was to take a "longer view" and inject politics with a future-oriented moral vision.[187] Overall, the participants' experiences emphasised that young people cannot be shoehorned into reductive symbols of progressivism or future-oriented politics.

In closing the assembly, U Thant remarked that "the ideological, political, and other preoccupations of the world were bound to reflect themselves in the attitudes of youth". His sober concluding assessment departed from the aspirational tone with which the assembly was opened and imagined. Interviews with attendees after the event painted a negative image of the affair, with one *Chicago Tribune* headline reading "U.N. parley disillusions youth".[188] Meanwhile, an appraisal for the *Boston Globe* claimed that "adult cynicisms and ploys crept into the attitudes and voices of the young supplanting the dreams of a better world with polemics of the present".[189]

A Norwegian delegate quoted in the *Chicago Tribune* recounted being disillusioned that young people were not "more capable of international cooperation than their elders"; another delegate remembered how her "hopes sank lower and lower" as she watched the assembly unfold.[190] Even amid the maelstrom of the gathering, Thalen hoped the forum would provide the basis for the creation of a "permanent channel through which youth or young people can speak to the General Assembly and to the U.N.", indicating modest ambitions for institutional innovation.[191]

## Reflections on 1970 in the context of intergenerational representation today

As U Thant remarked presciently at the closing of the 1970 World Youth Assembly, "the United Nations will probably never be the same".[192] While the assembly's organisers expressed an ambition that the delegates would "inject new ideas" into the conversations unfolding on the international stage, participants and news reporters converged on how congruent the assembly was with the broader geopolitics of the moment.

So, what, if anything, did the assembly accomplish, and what can scholars and practitioners interested in youth engagement today glean from this historical moment? Three lessons stand out.

### The importance of framings

First, analysts must be attentive to "youth" and "generation" as symbolic constructs loaded with complex and often contradictory meanings, depending on who is using them. This results in tensions that mark young people as unsettled political subjects and materially shape the politics and possibilities of participation. While some observers extol young people as bridges to a new historical formation, the same commentators often describe the potential for youth politics to become unruly, chaotic, or destructive.

Young people are often depicted as the political foils to older adults. However, as institutions like the UN increasingly carve out space for youth participation, the contrary expectation is that young participants will inject new ideas, practices, and energies into inflexible institutional settings while embodying the norms of staid, bureaucratic dialogue.

### The centrality of power

The second lesson is that any study of young people that does not take seriously questions of power will be limited in its analytical utility. As with the World Youth Assembly, in any political deliberations involving young people today, articulations of youth are key battlegrounds on which states, corporations, and other actors seek to articulate, curate, and control their images and extend their influence.

The World Youth Assembly was undeniably shaded by the great-power geopolitics of the cold war, the rising tide of decolonisation and anti-imperial insurgencies, and the countercultural youth and student movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Within today's power dynamics, youth representation in settings like UN climate negotiations is vitiated by concerns about so-called youth-washing – the careful selection and curation of young spokespeople to exhibit representativeness, which presents potentially misleading images of governments and corporations.[193]

Still, as one researcher has suggested, while youth-led change may be "partial and incomplete", it is "always playful in the sense that it is generative and creative".[194] While it may be impossible to trace any large-scale changes emerging from the 1970 assembly, a sense of the micropolitics of youth advocacy helps analysts understand the modest advances that emerged across the gathering. U Thant's closing remarks alluded to some of them:

> Your informal manners, the practice of certain commissions to limit the statements to five minutes or even less, the recognition of speakers by number rather than country, and most of all the principle of individual participation rather than governmental representation … all of these may affect in some way the practice of the United Nations organs in the long run.[195]

### The value of history

The third finding is that as the international community pursues ever more substantive modes of intergenerational inclusion, it is essential to look back at the histories of youth and intergenerational politics in order to more perspicaciously look forward. The stories of generational tension and the divergent representations of youth that unfolded at the World Youth Assembly resembled the stories that shape multilateral negotiations, local forums, and political conversations around the world today.

The assembly's final declaration expressed "regret that the conditions of the World Youth Assembly did not permit the participation in the Assembly of all the youth organizations and movements" and did not embody a "universal character".[196] The document also prioritised representation of young

people from the "Third World", the importance of protections for those in work, and efforts to promote literacy among "out-of-school youth". These priorities offer important precursors of what would become an interest in meaningful youth engagement that takes broad inclusion seriously.

The final statement also envisaged the creation of a "UN International Youth Centre" that would "work through a decentralized structure … through many local bases directly". These modest visions, along with Thalen's insistence on creating a more permanent platform for UN youth engagement, have stood the test of time and find their institutional forms in the youth-focused strategies and offices of today.

The current younger generation may leverage social media, digital technologies, and pop culture to articulate their political dissatisfaction.[197] But the "do-it-ourselves" politics of youth climate activism in the 2010s and 2020s is not so different from the visions of democracy and shared generational consciousness expressed by many attendees back in 1970.[198]

## The 2024 Summit of the Future

Comparing more recent efforts to engage young people in multilateral institutions with the 1970 World Youth Assembly reveals both parallels and contrasts. One major event was the UN's 2024 Summit of the Future, which focused on meaningful youth engagement, reflecting commitments made in the Youth2030 strategy.

Before the two-day negotiations on 22–23 September, UN Secretary General António Guterres convened two action days to set the tone for the talks. The first was entitled "#YouthLead for the Future". Speaking at this action day, UN Assistant Secretary General for Youth Affairs Felipe Paullier described the summit as an opportunity to "put young people at the centre" of multilateral decision-making.[199]

The media that documented the summit and the preceding action days reveal a diverse range of young participants. The involvement of marginalised individuals, such as disabled people, Indigenous groups, children, and others, signalled an evolution of inclusion since 1970. Similarly, the language used in the outcome document of the 2024 event reflected a greater emphasis on generation-spanning challenges and insisted on the importance of factoring future generations into today's decision-making.

Juxtaposing the highly curated media, interviews, and celebratory tone of the 2024 summit with the grainy, amateurish footage of the 1970 assembly, it would be tempting to believe that youth inclusion has evolved in a singularly positive direction. And indeed, the organisers of the 2024 event took strides to contribute to the aspiration expressed in the final outcome of the 1970 assembly that future gatherings should evolve towards a more "universal character".

But today, the central question is pivoting from the mere inclusion of young people in traditionally adult-dominated meetings to more meaningful ways to link multilateral processes with

transformative, youth-centred outcomes on the ground. As young climate change commentators such as Greta Thunberg have noted extensively, and as could be heard even in the youth speeches of 1970, although young people may be at the table, too often the words, promises, and commitments of older political figures do little to enable intergenerational equity in practice.

## A continuous legacy of youth leadership

There remains work to be done to translate the lofty promises of forums such as the 2024 summit to the layered and often unjust realities experienced by children and young people around the world. Worryingly, progress in the representation and inclusion of young people in multilateral governance is set against the backdrop of declining faith in multilateralism, antidemocratic turns in many nations, and widespread youth dissatisfaction, as evidenced in protest movements around the world.

And yet, the outcome of the 2024 summit, particularly the first-of-its-kind Declaration on Future Generations, enshrined an intergenerational ethic at the heart of the multilateral system. The declaration considers the past, present, and future as a set of interlinked flows that shape the material realities of the children and young people of today and tomorrow.

This type of intergenerational outlook is something that young people have been campaigning for through their participation in multilateral institutions – from Thalen's speech at the 1970 World Youth Assembly to then 12-year-old Severn Cullis-Suzuki's words at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit or Thunberg's many speeches at UN climate summits. From the 1970 assembly to the 2024 summit and beyond, there is a continuous legacy of youth leadership. This legacy, which is embodied in young people's insistent demands that global institutions evolve to more meaningfully represent them and their successors, continues to influence the shape and scope of multilateralism today.

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CHAPTER 8

# From Protest to Pessimism: Youth Voices in Chile's 2023 Constitutional Process

— Ellie Catherall

# From Protest to Pessimism: Youth Voices in Chile's 2023 Constitutional Process

— ELLIE CATHERALL

The inclusion of youth perspectives in policymaking is necessary both to realise young people's rights and to advance and sustain global democracy.[200] Not only does excluding young people from political processes destabilise democracies by generating mistrust in institutions, but the young also bring unique perspectives and can offer creative and inclusive policy solutions.[201] When engaged at the institutional level, young people can therefore bolster socioeconomic development and political stability.[202] However, political, economic, and civic barriers often prevent youth voices from being heard.[203]

Globally, this alienation from traditional channels of participation has prompted young people to engage more through informal channels, such as social media or protests, as opposed to voting in elections.[204] This shift is perhaps most acutely felt in Latin America, where disengagement with traditional politics contrasts with high levels of activism in alternative political spaces.[205] According to the public-opinion survey Latinobarómetro, only 45% of the continent's young people are satisfied with the functioning of their democracy, with 40% saying they do not trust their government.[206]

The Chilean movement *Estallido Social* (Social Uprising) was part of a regional trend of youth-led movements that rely mainly on protest to denounce unrepresentative political models.[207] In October 2019, secondary-school students began to jump the barriers in the Santiago metro in response to increased fares. Within days, mass protests erupted across Chile, with demands for a fairer economic model and the end of neoliberalism as a system of government, which has been prevalent since the dictatorship of 1973–90 and is enshrined in the country's current constitution.[208] For Chile's Indigenous population, the uprising had an anticolonial dimension, in which the right to self-determination, economic marginalisation, and violent repression by the military were key mobilising factors.[209]

The role of young people as catalysts and leaders in the uprising shows that they are not politically disengaged but instead feel excluded from traditional politics and modes of participation.[210] The protests ended when the Chilean congress agreed to hold a referendum in 2020 to allow Chileans to decide whether they wanted a new constitution.[211] The following three years would ultimately see two failed processes, despite extensive public consultations on the content of the drafts.

This research seeks to understand how and to what extent youth voices were included in the second process, which ran from March to December 2023. Interviews with young Chileans reveal that while there was an appetite for a new constitution, the inclusion of youth voices was limited by a lack of willingness from the drafters to take up proposals on issues important to young people. The design of the participatory process also restricted fuller engagement with young people on their proposed articles.

Most significantly, the politicisation of the process meant that young people's desire for an inclusive new constitution was negated by the fact that the final draft maintained the status quo and largely reflected the politics of Chile's right-wing Republican Party. At the same time, the diversity of youth voices meant that certain aspects of the draft found support among some of those interviewed.

Even when opportunities for participation are available and progress has been made on deepening democracy, changing embedded structures remains a challenge. As such, this chapter looks outside the debate on whether or not young people engage in politics by recognising the limitations to inclusion beyond participation in processes and institutions.

## Methodology

This case study is based on 12 in-depth online interviews with young people aged 18 to 31, conducted over the course of two weeks. The age range was selected to capture different perspectives from the various cohorts within the 18–31 age range, and because these participants would have been aged 15–28 during the second constitutional process, matching Chile's official definition of "youth".[212]

Participants were selected using snowball sampling and through an online survey that was shared with students from the University of Chile and the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile who took part in the country's citizen participation process. Overseen by an elected constitutional council with support from an expert commission, this process allowed participants to propose changes and provide feedback on an initial draft. The final sample of interviewees included five men and seven women from the Santiago Metropolitan, Araucanía, and Aysén regions.

Interviews were conducted remotely in Spanish, then transcribed and translated into English. Participants provided verbal consent for the inclusion of their first name, age, and region, with the option to be completely anonymised. Content analysis was used to identify common topics or ideas in the responses.

The ability to generalise from this study is limited by its small sample size, geographic concentration, and potential selection bias. However, the findings are intended not to give a comprehensive account of youth opinion on the draft constitution but to offer insights into perspectives that may be elaborated on in future research.

## Youth demands in the Social Uprising

All interviewees had participated in at least one march during the 2019 Social Uprising and believed that doing so was important to amplify the collective voice of those demanding change. They had similar hopes when they took part, with the most common demands centring on equal access to good-quality and free education, fair provision of healthcare, and a change in the pension system.[213] Other common demands were increased opportunities, both in work and more broadly, and higher salaries.

Those interviewed wanted to see the recognition and protection of the rights of specific groups, such as Indigenous peoples, women, the LGBTQ+ community, and animals. Many also expressed a desire for the safeguarding of the environment. Some participants wanted a more fundamental change to Chile's neoliberal political system and excessive private and foreign ownership, particularly of the country's natural resources and core industries. One participant, who identified as Mapuche, said that justice for Indigenous peoples who had been subjected to violence from the military was particularly important to him and other young people in his community.

Notably, young people did not mobilise purely on behalf of youth issues. Rather, they were aware of issues that impacted society more generally and felt compelled to fight injustice on behalf of others, too.

## Youth expectations for a new constitution

While most interviewees were in favour of a new constitution for Chile, this is not what they were hoping to achieve when they first joined the protests. Instead, the push for a constitutional process emerged gradually as a way to channel the multitude of demands and seemed a legitimate solution to Chile's problems.

On the one hand, there was a consensus that the current constitution needed to be updated because it had been written during the country's 1973–90 dictatorship and did not reflect today's society. On the other hand, some participants believed that an updated constitution would not go far enough, and that there was a need for a more fundamental and revolutionary change in the country's economy and society to meet the demands of the uprising. Some were even disappointed when an agreement was reached to create a new constitution, as this signalled the end of what could have been a more profound shift and the start of an institutionalised process in which the people would not be able to play a major role.

The interviews revealed that participants believed Chile's constitution should reflect society as a whole, instead of being a political project of either the left or the right. While many held progressive views, they felt it was important for the constitution to truly represent the country, which, many admitted, is rather conservative. This point illustrates how young people perceive the role of the constitution – compared with political parties and the government – and highlights tensions between their vision of Chile's future and that of the majority of the nation.

## Youth inclusion in the citizen participation process

A significant proportion of those interviewed had taken part in Chile's citizen participation process, especially through popular initiatives on topics they felt were important to include in the draft constitution, such as women's rights. Some had been involved through organisations that authored and promoted their own initiatives on topics such as housing and animal rights.

For a few, participating in this way was a worthwhile experience, as they felt their proposals had been fairly considered and they had been listened to. Even though the process ultimately failed, they were glad their issues had been discussed and provided a foundation for future work. For others, however, there was a sense that their proposals were not given sufficient consideration because of the high number of Republican Party constituents in the constitutional council who did not want to include progressive proposals. One participant said not only that they felt ignored but also that they received a hostile reception when they presented their proposal to the council.

Those involved in the popular initiatives, either through voting or through their work with civil society groups, said they would have preferred greater follow-up and engagement. This would have allowed them to know the outcomes of the debates in which their proposals were discussed and give further input on their initiatives once they had been submitted. The initiatives were also limited by the fact that they could only amend existing articles of the original draft constitution written by the expert commission. By contrast, in the first constitutional process, it had been possible to submit new proposals.

Beyond the design of the citizen participation process, a key barrier was a lack of trust in politicians and a belief that participants' views would not be listened to. In general, most young people felt that citizen engagement was much more limited than it had been in the first process.

## Youth voices in the draft constitution

As for the content of the draft constitution, opinion was divided between those who believed it did not reflect youth voices at all and those who felt their voices were partly reflected. The elements of the draft that received approval were the right to decent work, the right to equality before the law and the prohibition of discrimination, the equal treatment of men and women, and the rights of animals. However, there were significant gaps: interviewees often referred to the text's failure to deal sufficiently with LGBTQ+ rights and environmental conservation.

Indeed, some Chilean LGBTQ+ groups claimed the draft was potentially dangerous because it protected conscientious objection on religious grounds, which might override the right to nondiscrimination. Article 12 of the draft gave priority to parents or guardians in deciding what is in the "best interests of their children", which could conflict with more progressive interpretations of children's rights.

Meanwhile, article 3 framed international human rights treaties as complementary to Chilean national law, as opposed to giving them a constitutional rank. By leaving the obligation to protect and promote human rights to the "organs of the state", the draft proposed a step back from current practice, whereby Chile's courts already treat international treaties as having authority equivalent to the constitution.[214]

While the draft proposed that the state should have a duty to protect the environment, some participants said they were concerned by the draft's separation of environmental protection

and economic development, and the tension that would arise from its attempt to reconcile the two. Although article 21 guaranteed the "right to live in a healthy environment, free of pollution, that allows sustainability and development",[215] legal experts believed the inclusion of the word "development" throughout the text – as opposed to "sustainable development" – would "open the door to the possibility of relaxing environmental regulations in the name of economic development".[216] What is more, the final draft excluded a proposal that explicitly referred to environmental justice and the fair distribution of environmental burdens and benefits.[217]

For many participants, the draft failed to include not only youth voices but also the voices of Chilean society. Instead, it aimed to preserve the economic system enshrined in the current constitution, which reflects the views of the extreme right. Indeed, some believed that if approved, the draft would have led to greater inequality and an entrenchment of the neoliberal system. For them, there was no attempt to fundamentally change Chile's education or pension system, improve opportunities, or address any of the other demands of the Social Uprising.

Globally, constitutional processes are rarely successful in contexts of high polarisation.[218] They require politicians to balance their short-term political interests with longer-term national interests.[219] Among those interviewed, there was general dissatisfaction with how the Chilean process became distorted by politics and, as such, how the draft responded mainly to polarising issues of the day, as opposed to being a neutral document that would be relevant for years to come.

## Deciding who should be involved

Most interviewees believed that those involved in writing the draft constitution, particularly those on the constitutional council, were not acting in the interests of young people. This is not necessarily because most of the council were members of the Republican Party, but because politicians generally were perceived as untrustworthy and acting in their own interests, mirroring a global trend of young people's distrust in political elites.[220]

There was a general desire for the drafters to have not only subject-matter expertise but also lived experience of the topics they were writing about. While young people supported the involvement of the expert commission, they believed that the politicians in the constitutional council who created the final version did not know enough about important issues. Other groups that young people believed should have been more formally involved to make the process more representative of youth voices included trade unions, grassroots civil society groups, teachers, doctors, Indigenous communities, charities, foundations, and environmental groups, as well as young people with expertise on certain topics.

Student groups were more controversial, because some young people believed them to be too radical and a way for politicians to launch their careers instead of representing young people. These groups were viewed as an extension of party politics at a time when young people globally are motivated by "cause-oriented" and "self-actualizing" forms of engagement that lead them to organise within particular interest groups – for example, women's rights or environmental

groups.[221] This perception was also reflected in the way that participation in the Social Uprising was motivated by demands related to topics beyond youth issues.

## Enhancing inclusion

Almost all those interviewed said they would have felt more included in the constitution-drafting process if there had been more opportunities, either in person or online, to meet constituents from their region to discuss their priorities for the draft, particularly in rural areas or regions outside Santiago. Meanwhile, some interviewees acknowledged that because those on the council wanted to retain the status quo, no amount of dialogue would have substantively altered the content of the draft. For them, their demands were clear from the extensive consultation that had taken place in the first constitutional process.

Others, particularly those less interested in politics, would have valued opportunities simply to hear about the process directly from those involved in it. That would have allowed them to feel informed without relying on social and traditional media, both of which were seen as unreliable sources of information. Indeed, many felt that the lack of access to unbiased information meant they did not feel sufficiently informed when the time came to vote on the final draft.

In sum, the youth voice in Chile's 2023 constitutional process can be seen not as a demand for issues that relate uniquely to young people but as a desire for a more just and equal society for all. This means a more fundamental shift that may include a new constitution but should also seek to address Chile's economic and social inequalities. For this reason, it was important for young people that the draft did not reflect just one ideology but encompassed demands and desires shared by all Chileans. The limitations of the citizen participation process, along with the manipulation of the process by political elites on the extreme right, significantly restrained the degree to which youth voices were included in the draft.

## Conclusion

The inclusion of youth voices in the 2023 proposed draft of the Chilean constitution was limited by several factors. Young people wanted a document that represented the whole of Chilean society and responded to the fundamental demands of the Social Uprising. Yet the politicisation of the process and the dominance of right-wing parties in the constitutional council meant that young people felt the document was unrepresentative and reflected the views of elites who sought to maintain the status quo.

Those who took part in the citizen participation process faced barriers to meaningful involvement, including limited timeframes, a lack of follow-up, restrictions on submitting new initiatives, and a perceived lack of willingness among the constitutional council to consider progressive proposals. What is more, a lack of access to neutral and reliable information made young people feel disconnected and disengaged from the process. At the same time, the multiplicity of youth voices

meant that some elements of the draft, particularly those on gender equality and animal rights, found approval.

While there was little optimism for the future of the constitutional process, participants felt that Chile had woken up at the time of the Social Uprising, generating momentum that would bring about change in the long term.

As of this writing, however, with José Antonio Kast of the Republican Party having taken office as Chile's president in March 2026, the possibility of the constitutional process being revived looks increasingly remote. Throughout the presidential campaign, the most dominant topics across the political spectrum were security and immigration.

For any future constitutional process to succeed, its design and implementation must include and empower a diversity of youth voices.

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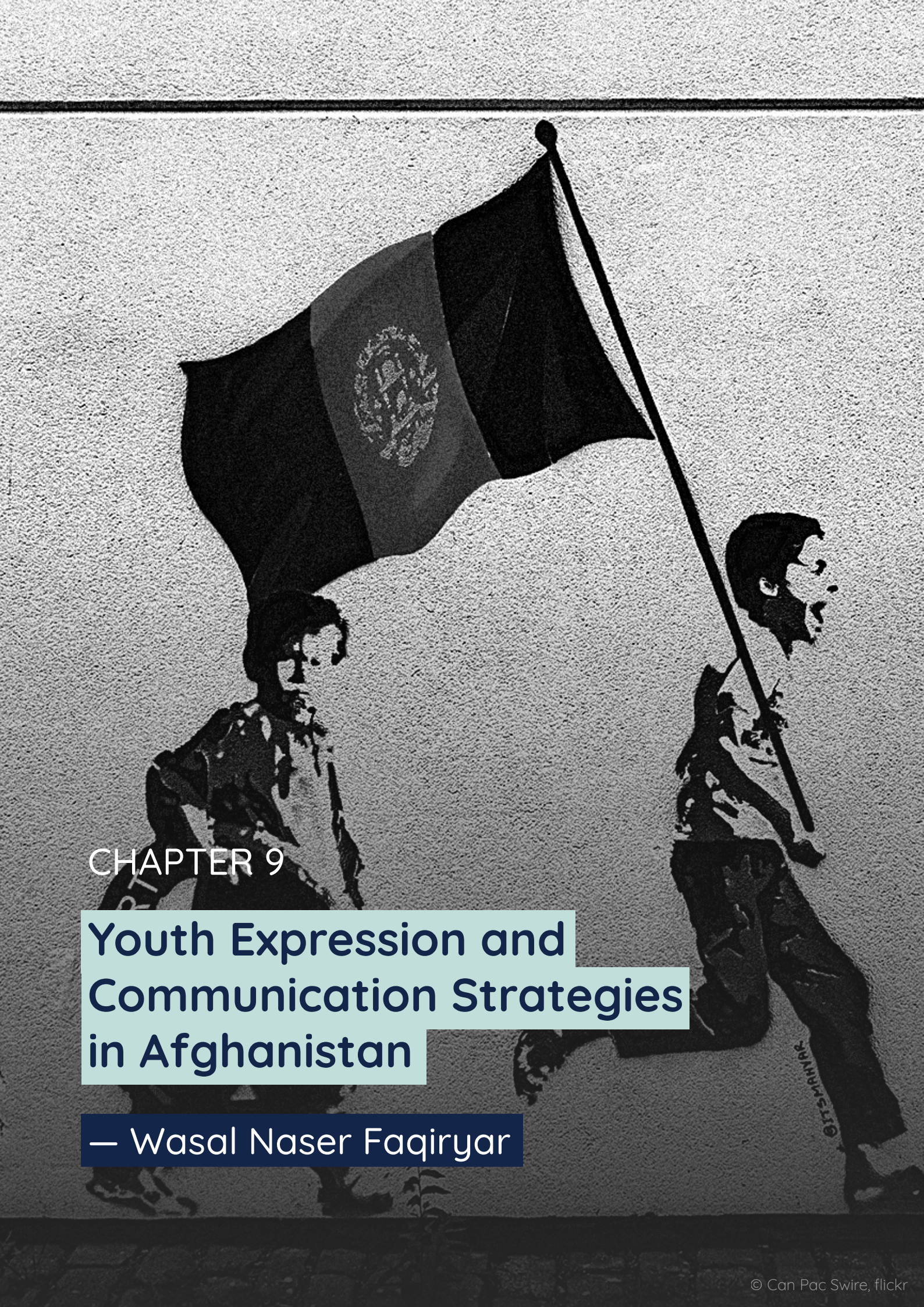


CHAPTER 9

# Youth Expression and Communication Strategies in Afghanistan

— Wasal Naser Faqiryar

# Youth Expression and Communication Strategies in Afghanistan

— WASAL NASER FAQIRYAR

After becoming a nation-state, Afghanistan experienced several waves of attempts at democratisation. The last major effort began in December 2001, when a republican political system re-emerged in the country. Over the following 20 years, until the system's collapse in August 2021, the people of Afghanistan became increasingly familiar with free speech, elections, and the rule of law, although each of these elements faced significant challenges.

During that period, both men and women hoped for a better Afghanistan and saw education, creativity, and dedication to their goals as vital for social advancement and individual emancipation. A dramatic change occurred when forces of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the United States (US) withdrew in 2021, leading to the Taliban's return to power.[222]

Many people initially assumed that the Taliban, in their second period in power, might adopt a milder and more democratic approach. This expectation was based on the belief that Afghanistan could no longer be governed as it had been from 1994 to 2001, when the Taliban were first in charge. However, this expectation proved short-lived. After March 2022, the Taliban gradually began enforcing their rigid interpretation of religious texts and ideology, building on earlier measures, like a ban on girls' secondary education. The Taliban imposed restrictions on every aspect of political and social life, initially through informal verbal edicts, which later evolved into formal decrees that are still in force today.[223]

In this ongoing restrictive environment, where young people have been disproportionately affected by the erosion of democratic norms and civic values, three questions emerge. First, how do young Afghans employ artistic and non-artistic forms of expression to communicate their perspectives and civic ideas without provoking violent retaliation from Taliban rule? Second, what risk-management strategies make such expression viable? And third, what channels and methods do young people use to try to ensure their voices are heard, even in a limited way, under these repressive conditions?

## Methodology

This research used a mixed-methods, cross-sectional survey to examine strategies of youth expression under Taliban rule. This approach enabled the systematic documentation of diverse forms of expression, the perceived risks of different communication methods, and the channels through which young Afghans attempt to ensure their voices reach their intended audiences.

A total of 207 participants aged 15–24 took part in the study. The sample included both female and male respondents; 87% were female. The median age was 20. Data was collected electronically through an online survey platform from 22 to 26 September 2025. The survey was distributed through social networks and educational communities that were accessible to young Afghans. Participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous, with no personal information collected beyond the basic demographic characteristics of age and sex. This method was chosen to ensure participants' safety and encourage honest responses, given the sensitive political context.

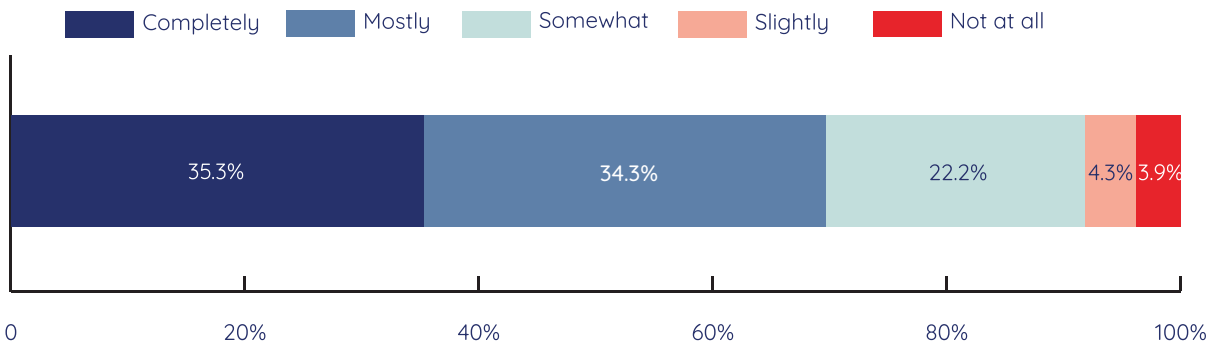
Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics appropriate to each data type. Participants' qualitative responses in Persian, Pashto, and English from open-ended questions were also analysed. This combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches provides a broad and deep understanding of the complex situation facing the young people of Afghanistan. The primary survey data was supplemented by secondary literature.

A limitation of this research is that responses are likely to have been completed primarily by young people living in urban areas who have internet access and take part in educational programmes, potentially excluding the perspectives of those in Afghanistan's rural regions.

## Quantitative findings

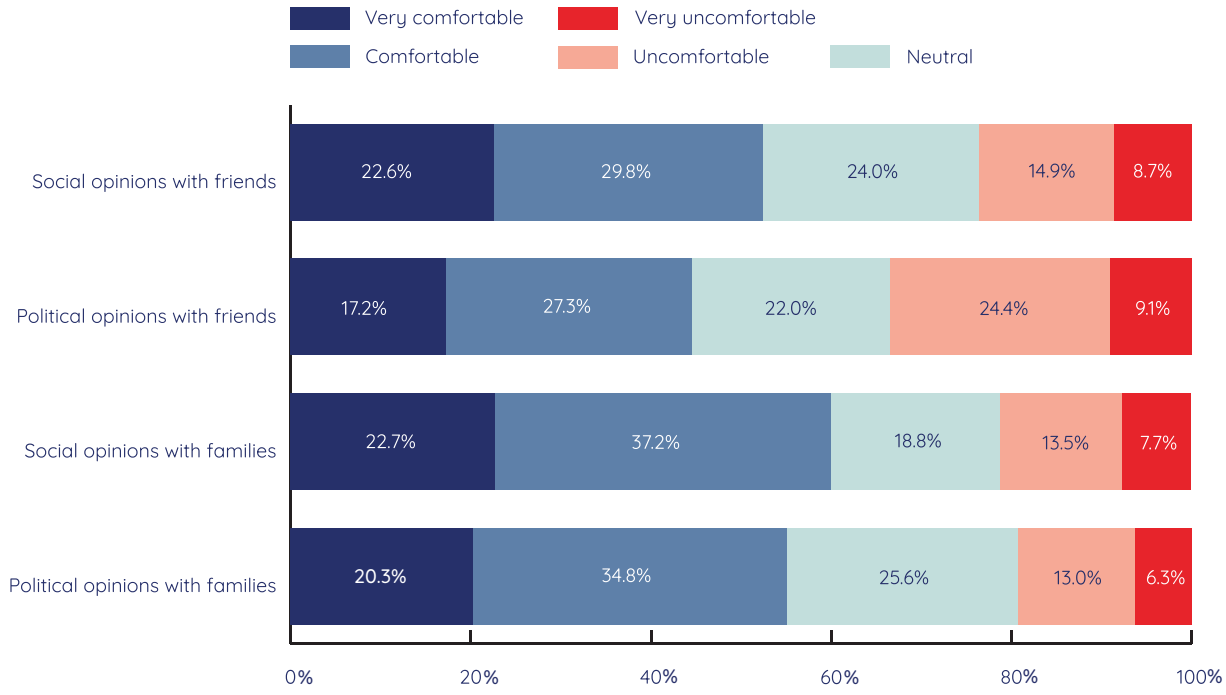
Young people in Afghanistan are at a crossroads of social, political, and economic struggles. Among these, the struggle for self-expression seems to be the most challenging, as the regime deploys several mechanisms to gradually indoctrinate society into following its ideology.[224] Of the young Afghans surveyed, 69.6% said the Taliban completely or mostly restricted their self-expression, with only 8.2% perceiving slight restrictions or none at all (figure 9.1).

Figure 9.1. Young people's perceptions of Taliban restrictions on self-expression



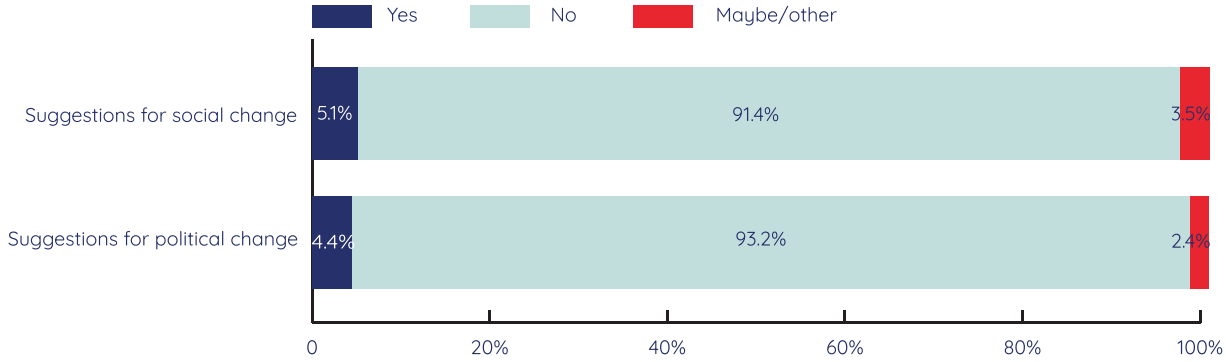
Asked how comfortable they felt expressing their social and political opinions to their families and friends, participants said they were more at ease with family than with friends (figure 9.2). Between 55% and 60% of respondents reported feeling comfortable discussing social and political issues with their families, versus 44–53% with their friends, suggesting that the family is young people's primary safe space. Across both contexts, respondents felt slightly safer discussing social topics than political ones.

Figure 9.2. Young people's levels of comfort when discussing social and political views



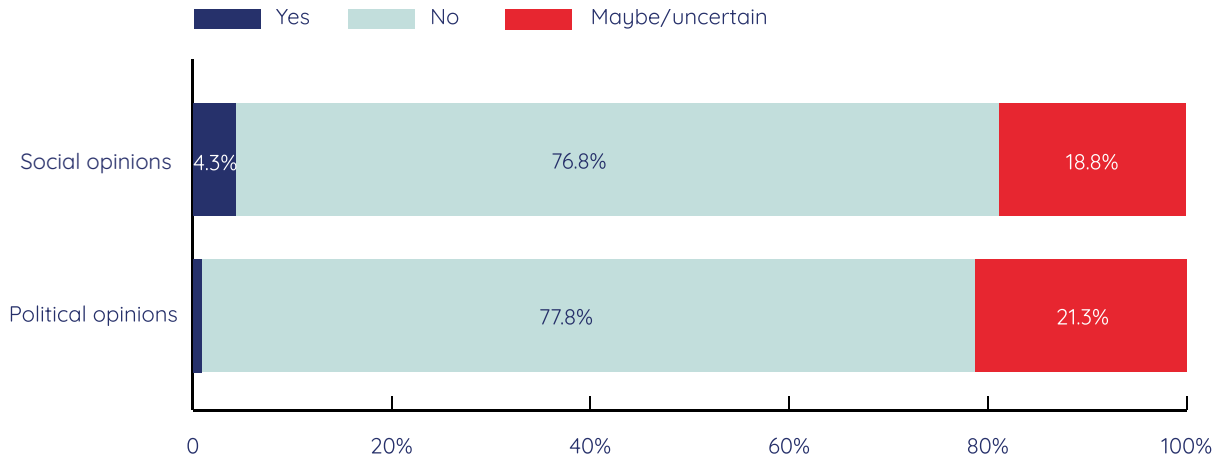

As for the Taliban's receptiveness and whether they listen to young people, the data shows an overwhelming sense of pessimism. Of those surveyed, 91–93% believed that the Taliban did not listen to their suggestions for change (figure 9.3). This reflects a near-unanimous feeling about the Taliban's authoritarian rule and refusal to engage with youth voices. Political suggestions fared slightly worse than social ones, indicating that young Afghans believe the Taliban are marginally more closed to political than social input.

Figure 9.3. Young people's perceptions of whether the Taliban listen to youth voices



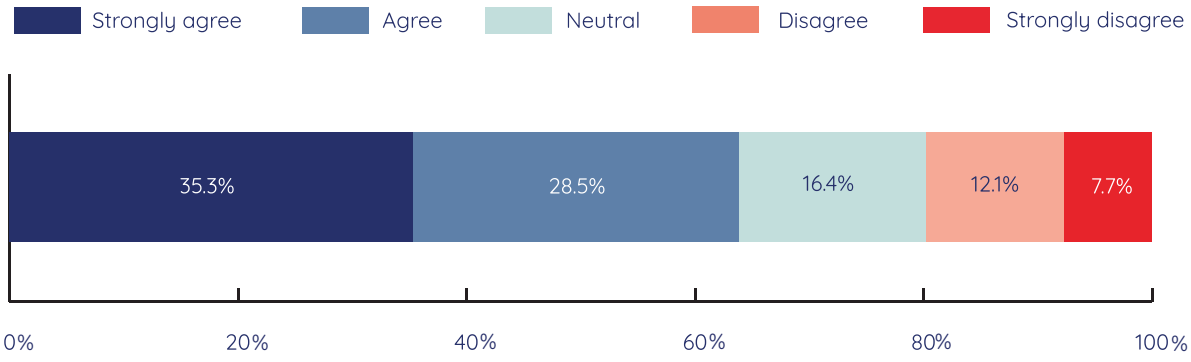
The data also shows a massive trust deficit, indicating profound political alienation. Very few young people surveyed believed that Afghanistan's supreme leader trusted their social or political opinions (figure 9.4). The significant proportion of those who were uncertain about this question – around one-fifth – could reflect several dynamics. Given the regime's authoritarian nature, where rights are granted rather than guaranteed, this uncertainty might reflect a cautious hope in a context of pervasive mistrust; alternatively, it might indicate confusion about whether any trust exists at all under such opaque governance.

Figure 9.4. Young people's perceptions of whether the supreme leader trusts youth opinions



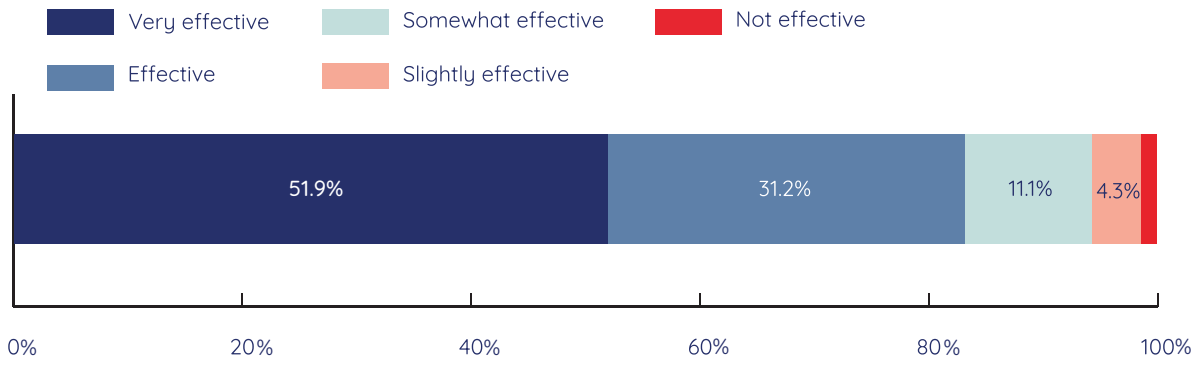

Despite the negative perceptions, restrictions, and overwhelming evidence that the Taliban do not listen to young people, nearly two-thirds of those surveyed maintained hope about their potential to influence change (figure 9.5). This paradox suggests resilient optimism or a belief in long-term change despite the current restrictions. The minimal proportion of respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the idea that they can influence change shows that most young Afghans have not given up on their sense of agency.

Figure 9.5. Young people's belief in their ability to influence positive change under the Taliban



Finally, young Afghans overwhelmingly view art as a powerful alternative channel of expression under restrictive conditions (figure 9.6). The large percentage of those who rated art as effective shows a remarkable consensus on the value of art as a way for young people to voice their concerns.

Figure 9.6. Young people's perceptions of the effectiveness of art for expressing their concerns




Art in Afghanistan today faces a difficult and tense situation. It is pushed and pulled between two forces, sometimes accepted or praised, sometimes punished or banned. On the one hand, positive art that shows behaviours and actions approved by the regime and gives an appearance of normal life gets the regime's automatic approval. If art avoids controversy and supports the image of a peaceful, problem-free Afghanistan, it is left alone. On the other hand, when art even hints at rights, women, education, or journalism, or tries to advocate, campaign, resist, or question the status quo, fierce pushback follows – no matter if the artist is a citizen, a tourist, or a resident.

The resulting fear of creating art is made greater by the fact that most rules about art, speech, and behaviour are unwritten, unpredictable, and dependent on who is in power and where the art appears. Outcomes depend on local circumstances, the awareness of the artist, and the influence of those who come to their rescue. This can lead to very different results. Because of this, artists, citizens, and visitors feel lost or fearful, as expectations are clear but punishments are not.

## Qualitative analysis

Standing up for civic values and ideas through any form of expression, whether artistic or non-artistic, is dangerous, threatened, and constrained under Taliban rule. Nevertheless, young Afghans make strategic use of various forms of expression while attempting to maintain the viability of these forms through careful risk management. Young people have also identified a range of channels as workable strategies to ensure their voices reach others.

### Forms of youth expression

In Afghanistan today, public speeches about political affairs and social matters regulated by the Taliban are not only unsafe but also often perceived by young people as futile. As a result, young Afghans redirect their voices, ideas, dreams, and ambitions to alternative channels through which meaning can be shared while the speaker is protected.

The primary forms of expression identified by respondents include poetry, creative writing, storytelling, painting, drawing, calligraphy, photography, graphic design, handcrafts, embroidery, vlogging, music, and even narrative wishes. All of these activities are performed predominantly in private settings to minimise detection by the regime, except for non-provocative vlogging, which comprises content about daily life or routine activities, adverts, and general content creation.

These creative practices exist along a spectrum from completely private to selectively public. Several young people write under pen names and keep notebooks or notes apps with content they never share, viewing this as the safest way to preserve dangerous or private thoughts. Others choose to publish their creative work online, accepting the risks of doing so.

Digital forms of expression manifest themselves through both anonymous and non-anonymous social media accounts. The former are used predominantly by women, who tend to adopt pseudonyms in keeping with cultural norms about women's public presence on social media, which also protects those who post criticism of the Taliban. Non-anonymous accounts are more common among men and those women who choose to display their information or pictures as online influencers.

Notably, women use social media, especially Instagram, as a hub to create and publish content on a variety of apolitical and non-social topics, gather followers, and then turn their pages into sources of income through promotions and ads. They are paid between 2,000 and 20,000 afghanis ($32–320) per Instagram post and sometimes receive the products they advertise for free, depending on how many followers they have accumulated. Young men, meanwhile, are more inclined towards creating entertaining content, showcasing infrastructure developments, documenting daily activities, and organising giveaway challenges to engage their followers.

Among the respondents, a poet in Helmand province who composes poems on the situation in Afghanistan explained that writing kept his hope alive. Another respondent identified storytelling as one of the best forms to describe the current situation and pointed to novelist Khaled Hosseini's books *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as strong examples of works that portray the problems and pains of the previous Taliban period. One respondent said she had submitted poems and stories to international competitions while working on an entrepreneurship project she hoped to fund herself.

### Risk-management strategies

The risk-management strategies deployed by young Afghans to make these forms of expression viable are sophisticated and multilayered, reflecting young people's deep understanding of the surveillance state in which they live. Five strategies stand out.

The first line of defence is anonymity. Young people create fake social media accounts, use pseudonyms, hide their faces by blurring them or deliberately not displaying them, and avoid sharing clear photos that could identify them. One respondent noted that she never shared clear photos online, and that even having a LinkedIn profile with her photo and information caused her stress when strangers message her to ask about her location.

The second critical approach is indirect expression. Young Afghans use metaphors in stories, symbolic art, and drawings; frame their messages around shared cultural or religious values; speak about issues through fictional characters rather than direct commentary; and deploy humour as subtle critique. Many respondents described writing stories in which characters experience what the author feels, allowing them to discuss freedom, girls who want to study, and people who are tired but hopeful, without explicitly identifying these narratives as autobiographical.

Third, private and limited sharing ensures that expression remains within safe boundaries. Content is limited to trusted circles: home-based activities, WhatsApp groups that contain only members known to each other, private conversations with vetted friends, and personal notebooks that the writer has no intention of disseminating publicly.

Beyond these technical and content-based measures, young people employ several interpersonal and behavioural strategies to protect themselves. The fourth tactic, a particularly significant one, is strategic silence. Young people consciously choose when not to express themselves, practise rigorous self-censorship, and maintain complete silence in public spaces where a Taliban presence is likely.

Fifth, respectful communication allows young people to maintain dialogue with ideologically opposed audiences while minimising risk. This strategy involves choosing words carefully, avoiding direct confrontation with figures of authority, speaking respectfully even when fundamentally disagreeing, and connecting messages to religious principles that the Taliban cannot easily dismiss.

For example, one respondent described approaching conversations with Taliban sympathisers by emphasising shared Islamic values rather than secular rights, thereby creating space for dialogue that would otherwise be immediately shut down. Another respondent explained that the only way to persuade Taliban supporters was through mullahs, whom they deeply respect, noting that when ordinary people express the same ideas, they are accused of being non-Muslim.

In addition to these communication strategies, environmental and relational factors significantly shape young Afghans' expression practices. The need to protect their families informs virtually all young people's decisions to express themselves: they do not discuss activities with extended family members who might inform the Taliban; parents sometimes do not tell their colleagues

about their children's participation in online education; and young people put the safety of their families before any form of public expression.

Finally, geographic location influences people's assessment and management of risk. Young people express themselves more freely outside Afghanistan, take greater care in provinces with a heavier Taliban presence, and are acutely aware of regional variations in the enforcement of restrictions.

### Amplifying youth voices

Young Afghans use multiple interconnected channels to ensure their voices reach others despite systematic suppression. These channels can be organised into distinct yet overlapping categories that reflect both the opportunities available and the constraints imposed by the regime.

Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and Telegram, are primary channels for amplification. Young people create content designed for viral spread, including shareable images, emotional narratives, and symbolic artwork that resonates beyond the creators' immediate networks.

Education settings function as channels where voices can be expressed with relative safety. These include English-language courses, computer classes, online university programmes, study circles, and volunteer teaching positions that allow facilitators to share perspectives while ostensibly delivering academic content. One respondent described her work as a volunteer teacher, in which she helped Afghan girls to access education and get psychological and educational advice from professionals while using the platform to discuss strict policies and identify solutions.

Organisations also provide structured opportunities to amplify youth voices. Young people engage through local nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations, entrepreneurship learning programmes, and civic leadership initiatives that connect young Afghans to broader audiences abroad and limited resources.

Beyond these formal channels, community spaces, though increasingly restricted, offer limited opportunities for expression. Such spaces include family gatherings where careful conversations can occur; informal home meetings with trusted participants; small, clandestine groups; and neighbourhood networks built on long-standing relationships.

Complementing these local networks, international connections have become increasingly critical as domestic space contracts. Young people contact international organisations and associations by email, take part in international competitions that provide platforms for Afghan voices, engage with foreign media, and connect with foreign and Afghan educators for online language learning, education, or even therapy.

One respondent recounted being interviewed by a Swedish journalist and speaking confidently about themselves, their future, and their country without hiding their face, despite the security risks.

The resulting video reached thousands of international viewers and provided a rare moment in which courageous public expression felt possible.

Creative outlets, while severely constrained, occasionally function as channels for youth expression, though with no guarantee of continuity, as Taliban intervention can shut them down at any moment. These outlets include art exhibitions and painting or calligraphy courses that operated briefly after August 2021 before being closed in some provinces while being allowed to continue in others.

Young people are also adaptable when faced with new restrictions. They find alternative platforms when existing ones are blocked or they receive threatening messages; they adjust their content through careful linguistic choices and metaphors to avoid provocation; and they continuously evolve their methods based on ongoing risk assessments.

One respondent from Balkh province detailed how internet cuts lasting more than eight days prevented them from accessing recorded university sessions or attending online courses. These blackouts forced students to rely on expensive mobile data that limited their ability to watch recorded lectures, showing how technological restrictions directly constrain educational access and the amplification of youth voices.

Another respondent recounted posting content critical of the Taliban on their Facebook page. About a week later, the respondent received a message from someone who claimed that their statements about the Taliban were incorrect and asserted that the Taliban were good people. The message warned the recipient not to publish similar content again and threatened them with consequences. Feeling frightened by this threat, the respondent removed the post. After this incident, they changed their strategy by sharing their ideas and thoughts through poetry instead of direct statements.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Young Afghans navigate a paradox of persistent agency amid profound constraint: they exhibit a sustained civic consciousness and adopt creative forms of expression even as they face systematic repression under the Taliban. Survey data shows that almost 70% of young Afghans experience severe restrictions on their self-expression, while over nine out of 10 believe the Taliban do not listen to their suggestions for change. Despite this overwhelming climate of repression, nearly two-thirds of young people are still hopeful about their potential to influence change, and more than 80% view art as a powerful alternative channel for expression.

Young people in Afghanistan employ diverse forms of artistic and creative expression. These forms exist along a spectrum from completely private to selectively public. The sophisticated risk-management framework identified in this research reveals young people as strategic actors rather than passive victims.

Young Afghans use multiple interconnected channels to amplify their voices. Social media platforms serve as primary channels, with content deliberately designed for viral spread. Education settings

provide secondary channels through which perspectives can be shared alongside the delivery of academic content.

Respondents in this study specifically identified strategic communication through religious frameworks as necessary when engaging with the Taliban and their supporters. As such, the international community must leverage technology to expand peaceful and open discourse through religious vlogging and the production of content that counters harmful narratives inside Afghanistan. This content must reach not only Taliban supporters but also conservative families who impose restrictions on their children, to guide them towards perspectives that benefit the country, its society, and its individuals. By documenting daily lives, concerns, hopes, and economic situations while expressing dissent on prohibited subjects, clergy and mullah vloggers can amplify popular sentiments that would otherwise remain beneath the surface.

Since August 2021, young Afghan men and women have been largely forgotten by the international community. Despite young Afghans' engagement in creative forms of expression, fewer than five NGOs or institutions have organised art competitions in Afghanistan, and almost none has awarded significant prizes or provided the mentorship that young people in the country desperately need. The international community must fund local NGOs or establish competitions with substantial prizes for large numbers of participants to showcase the works of Afghan boys and girls. Merely producing reports on the situation in the country is not, and will never be, sufficient.

Finally, young Afghan men and women need courses to teach them content-creation techniques. These courses must help young people to produce content at global standards to transform them into ambassadors for Afghanistan on the world stage. Despite the unreliability of the country's internet access – given a two-day nationwide internet and mobile network shutdown in September 2025 and ongoing filtering of social media – Afghans remain thirsty for knowledge and learning. Whether through YouTube, online universities, or other platforms, young Afghans place education at the forefront of their lives.

Just as substantial international support flowed into Afghanistan during the 20 years before the Taliban's second period in power, such support is needed again. Indeed, the need is now even greater because the conditions are darker than before.

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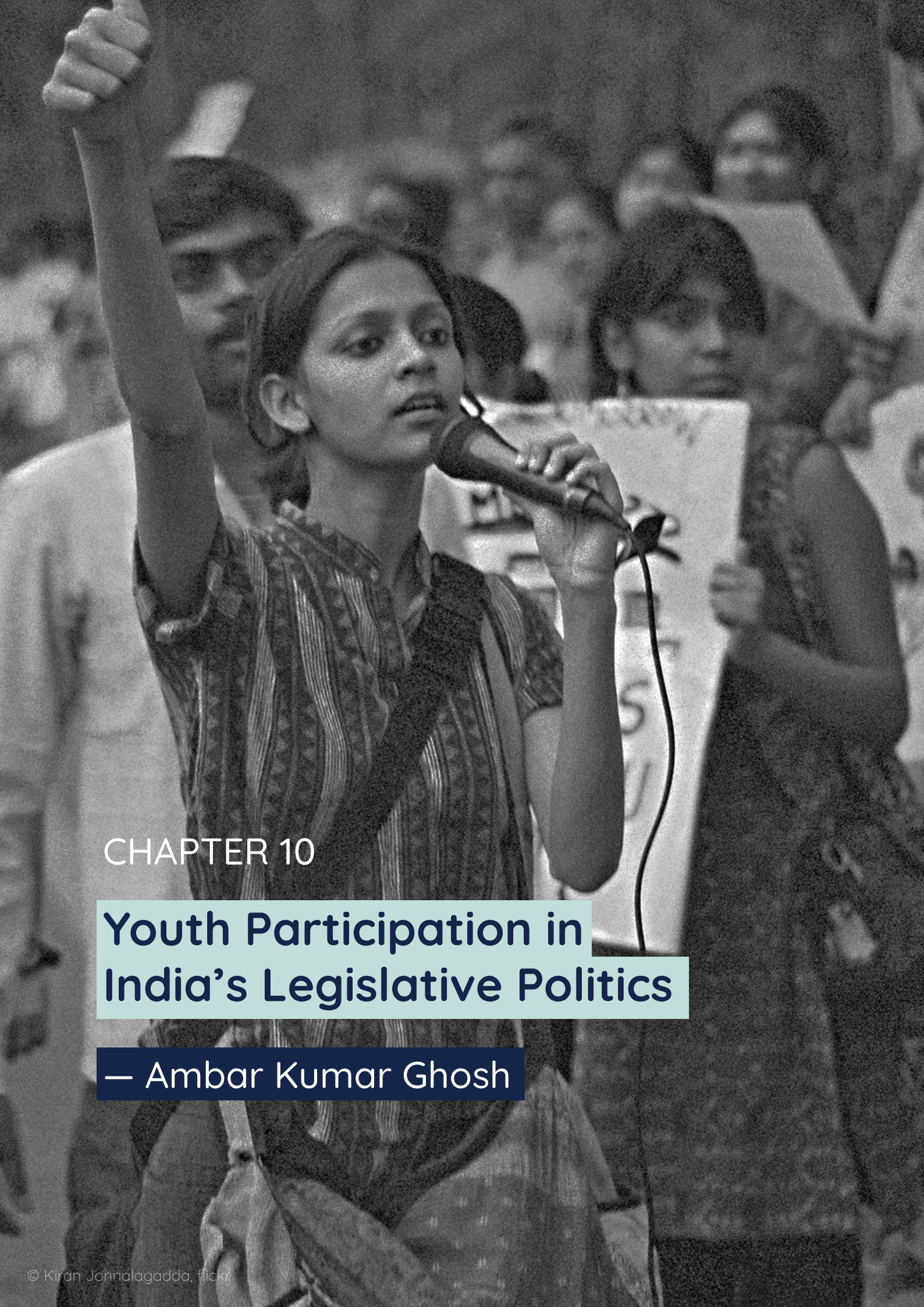


CHAPTER 10

# Youth Participation in India's Legislative Politics

— Ambar Kumar Ghosh

# Youth Participation in India's Legislative Politics

— AMBAR KUMAR GHOSH

Young policymakers, as youth representatives, are essential for ensuring that young people's voices, aspirations, demands, and challenges are heard at the highest levels of decision-making. However, research in 2024 revealed that the average age of world leaders from 1945 to 2023 was 57, far above the average age of the global population. The study further indicated that only 2.4% of countries had a leader aged 35 or under.[225]

According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, less than 3% of the world's parliamentarians are under the age of 30, which is a matter of great concern. The data suggests that 68% of legislators worldwide are over 45, making the spectrum of youth representation in global parliamentary politics extremely narrow.[226]

India, as the world's largest democracy, has a vibrant multiparty parliamentary system with a federal structure.[227] As of 2024, India had 420 million people officially categorised as "youth" – that is, between 15 and 29 years of age.[228] India has an emerging young population with tremendous potential to buttress the country's economic growth and ideational, technological, and scientific advances. Adequate representation of young voices in India's democratic institutions is therefore crucial. Given the country's robust democracy, which now has nearly 1 billion voters, youth representation in India's multilayered legislative structures is a vital marker of the inclusivity of its political institutions.[229]

In this context, this chapter analyses the nature of youth political participation in Indian democracy. The study focuses on the Lok Sabha (the lower house of India's national parliament) and a selection of Vidhan Sabhas (state legislative assemblies) from five states: West Bengal, Assam, Punjab, Kerala, and Rajasthan. The study investigates youth representation in India's national and state legislatures and seeks to understand the institutional and procedural hurdles for young Indians seeking to participate in electoral politics.

The chapter is divided into four parts. First, it offers a brief profile of India's youth population and looks at the evolution of youth representation in the country's electoral politics in general. Second, it takes a deep dive into youth representation in India's national parliament and selected state legislative assemblies in the last decade and a half. Third, the study analyses the persistent challenges for greater youth political participation in India, bearing in mind the country's multidimensional diversity. Finally, the chapter explores possible institutional reforms to ensure more inclusive youth representation in India in future.

## Methodology

This study confines its scope to the last decade and a half, for two reasons. On the one hand, this period coincides with India's changing demographic dynamics, as the country's population has, on average, become younger over recent years.[230] On the other hand, this period covers the tenures of two key national governments: the 2004–14 United Progressive Alliance, led by the Indian National Congress; and the National Democratic Alliance, dominated by the Bharatiya Janata Party and in power since 2014.

In addition to the situation at the national level, the analysis also focuses on youth representation in a selection of India's state legislative assemblies. Apart from the two major national parties, regional political forces are in government in several Indian states. Including an analysis of state-level politics therefore broadens the scope of the study.

The first part of the analysis uses disaggregated data on India's national and state legislators along with relevant secondary literature. For the second part, primary data was collected to offer an understanding of the opportunities and challenges of youth political participation. Limited in-depth interviews were conducted with young politicians and political hopefuls, and focus group discussions were held with young political actors, young citizens, and members of the general electorate. Thirty experts, including researchers, journalists, election officials, and academics working on youth politics, were also consulted to gather their insights. A quota sampling method was used to choose the respondents.

This chapter uses both quantitative and qualitative research methods. For the quantitative data on youth representation, a descriptive statistical method is used to graphically represent the data. For the qualitative primary data collected through interviews and focus group discussions, discourse analysis is the method adopted.

## Understanding India's youth

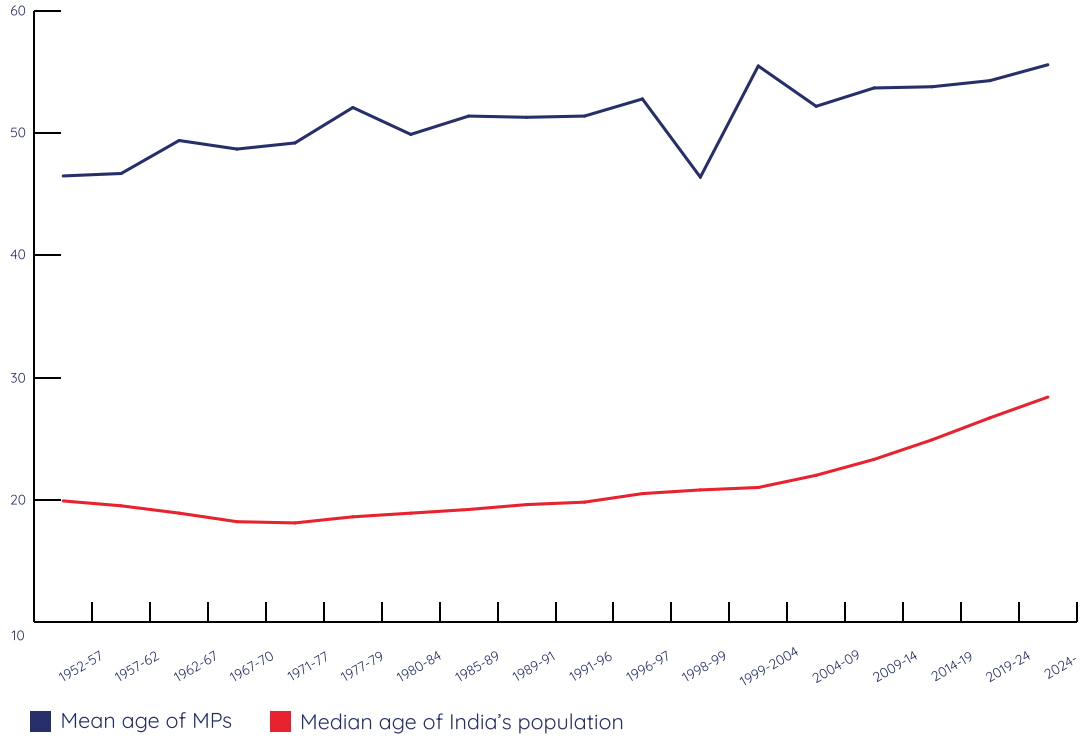
India has a substantial youth population. According to government data, 65% of Indian populace is under the age of 35.[231] In terms of young people's geographic distribution, a 2024 survey by People Research on India's Consumer Economy revealed a roughly 2:1 split between rural and urban areas. Of a total of 420 million young voters, about 20 million (nearly 5%) cast their votes for the first time in 2024.[232]

It is important to understand Indians' education profile, as it is a key driver of informed participation in public life. In 2024, around 31% of young Indians were university graduates, about 22% had received higher secondary education, and 13% were matriculates, meaning they had passed the 10th-grade secondary school leaving exam. Roughly 13% had only completed primary schooling, and 3% were recorded as illiterate. Thus, it is clear that young Indians have a relatively strong educational profile.[233] Notably, India's southern states have more young people in higher education than other regions.

In terms of young people's economic participation, the data is more revealing. Nearly 40% of young Indians are earners, collectively contributing some 43% of India's total disposable household income.[234] As for their financial and digital inclusion, 84% have a registered bank account and 81% have a mobile phone, with a sizeable number of youth people using the internet and online payment interfaces.[235] Hence, a substantial section of India's youth population has the educational qualifications and the digital and financial skills that are crucial for informed political participation.

The Indian constitution allows anybody aged 25 or over to stand in direct elections for the Lok Sabha or the state legislative assemblies.[236] Yet India's youth population has a low presence in the country's legislative politics. In the first two and half decades of Indian democracy, the average age of Lok Sabha members of parliament (MPs) was between 46 and 50. Over the years, the parliament has grown older, with the average age of MPs ranging from mid-40s to mid-50s (figure 10.1).[237]

Figure 10.1. Average ages of Lok Sabha MPs and India's population, 1952–2024



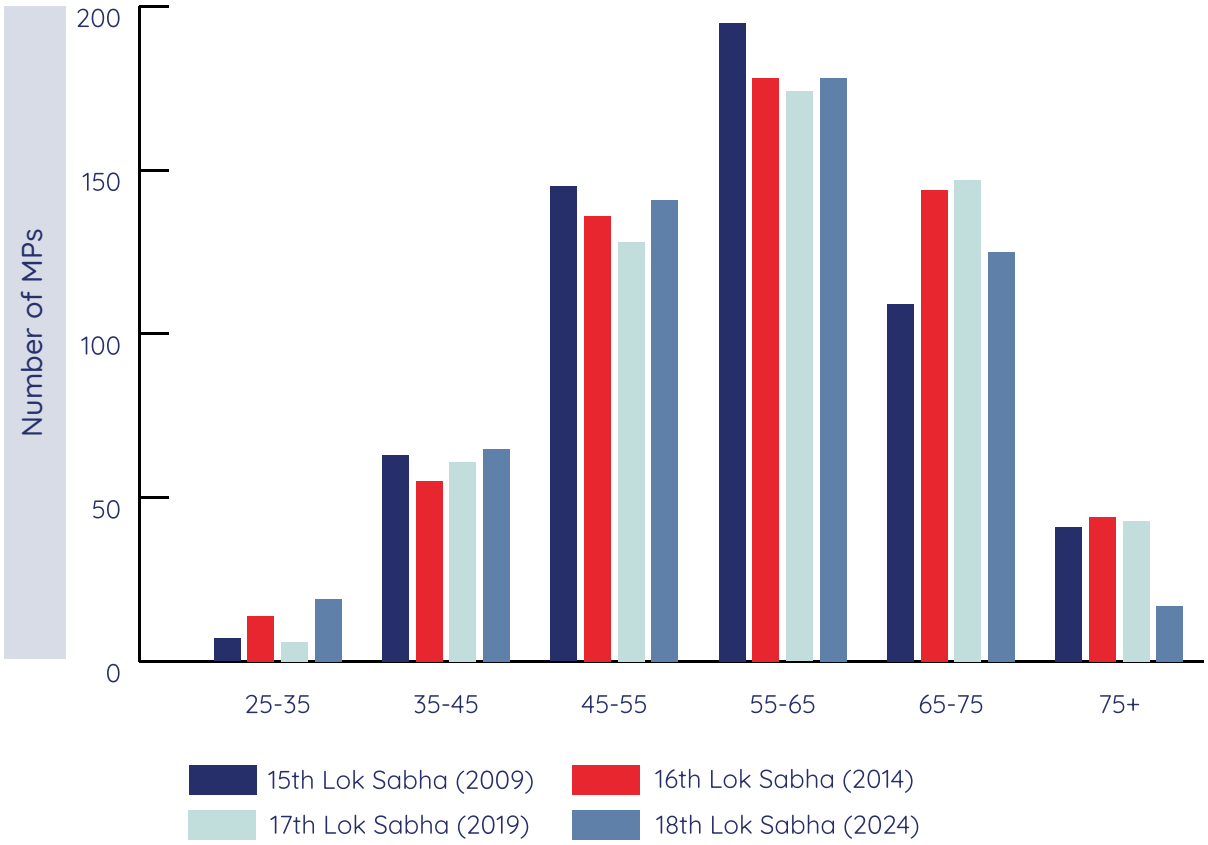

Sources: Registrar General of India, United Nations Data Portal, Election Commission of India, Lok Sabha Secretariat.

Notably, the percentage of young MPs – those aged from 25 to 40 – in the Lok Sabha has declined over the decades from 30% to 10%. Young people's levels of turnout on election day have also plummeted in recent years.[238]

## Youth participation in legislative politics

The share of Lok Sabha MPs aged 25–45 has been low across the last four legislative terms, although the parliaments elected in 2014 and 2024 did slightly better in terms of youth representation (figure 10.2). Over this time, MPs aged 25–35 have never made up more than 3% of the total, while those aged 35–45 have not exceeded 12%. In all of the last four terms, the largest group of MPs has consisted of those aged 55–65, followed by those aged 45–55 and then 65–75. Around 4–8% of all MPs are over 75 years of age. In short, the bulk of MPs in the Indian parliament are aged 45–65, while youth representation is visibly low.

Figure 10.2. Age distribution of Lok Sabha MPs, 2009–24

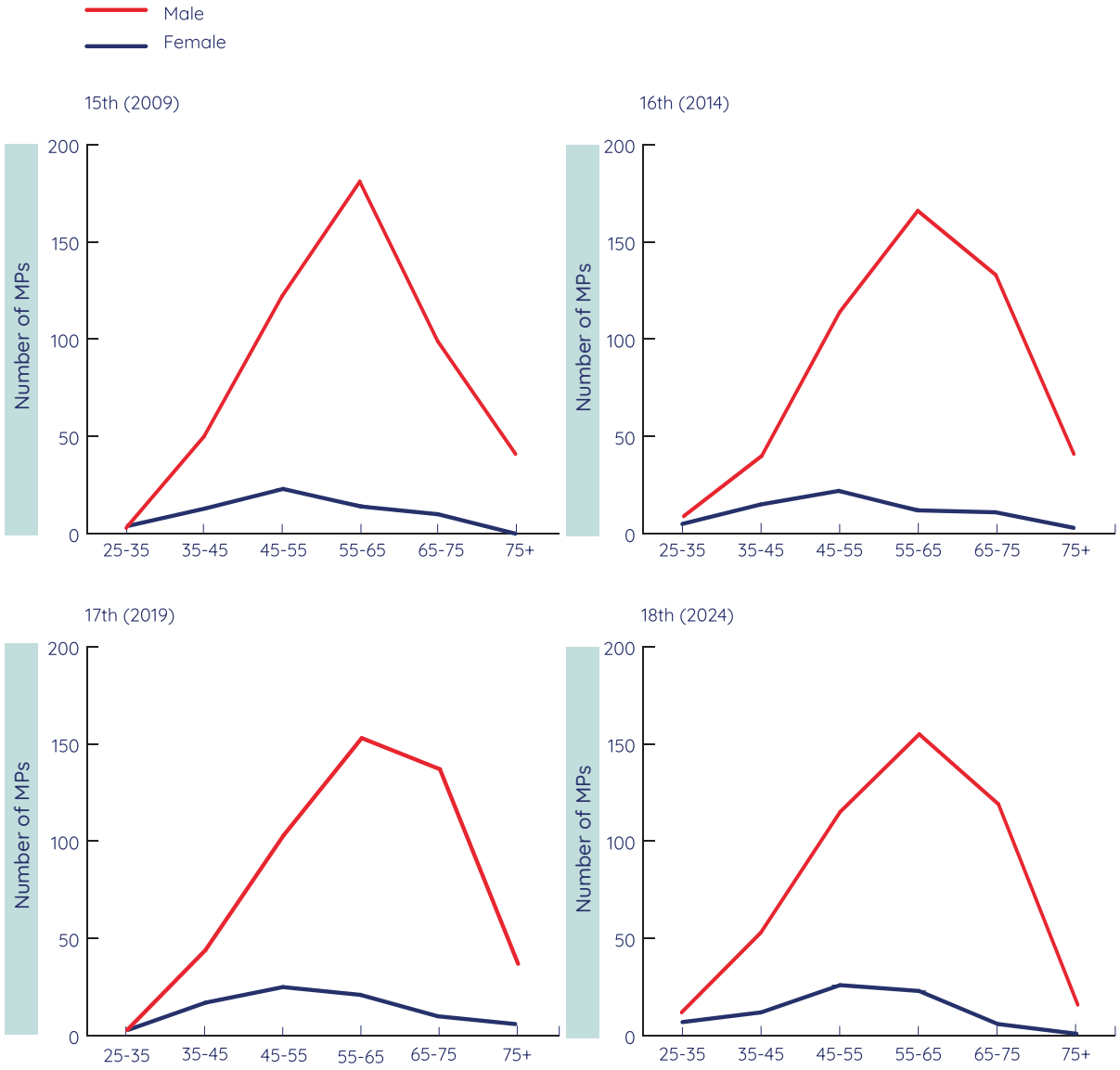



Note: Data for all elections includes MPs elected through by-elections. Data for the 15th and 16th Lok Sabhas also includes MPs chosen through nominations.

Sources: PRS Legislative, Myneta.info, Election Commission of India.

Among India's young MPs, female parliamentarians are even less well represented than their male counterparts (figure 10.3). Young female politicians appear to face higher barriers to entry into parliament because of social and structural factors discussed below.[239]

Figure 10.3. Age and gender distribution of Lok Sabha MPs, 2009–24

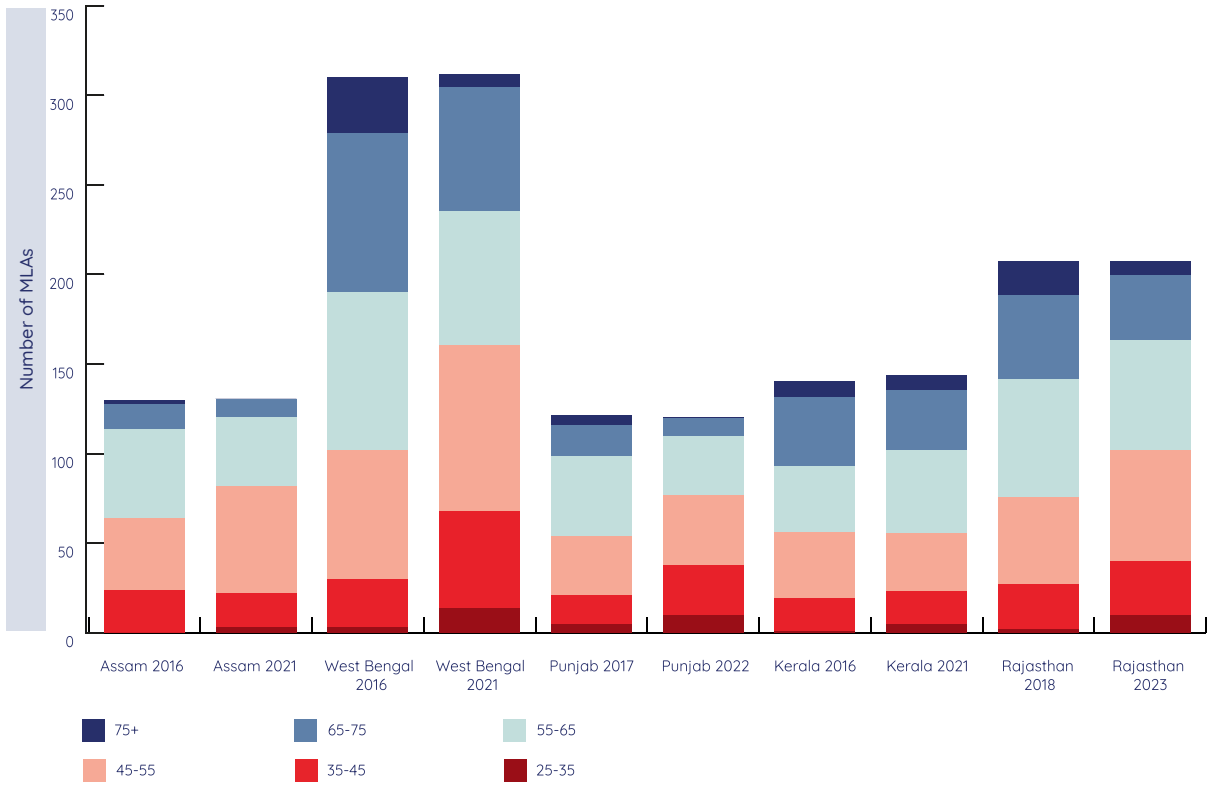



Note: Data for all elections includes MPs elected through by-elections. Data for the 15th and 16th Lok Sabhas also includes MPs chosen through nominations.

Sources: PRS Legislative, Myneta.info, Election Commission of India.

The data further reveals that as in the Lok Sabha, most members of India's state legislative assemblies (MLAs) are over 45 years of age (figure 10.4). The data is also similarly skewed against young female legislators. However, a few states have slightly higher proportions of MLAs aged 35–45 than do the Lok Sabha and other states. For instance, 17% of MLAs in West Bengal's 17th legislative assembly were in this age bracket, as were 23% of MLAs in Punjab's 16th assembly and 18% in Assam's 14th assembly. Meanwhile, the number of MLAs aged 25–35 is abysmally low for most states.

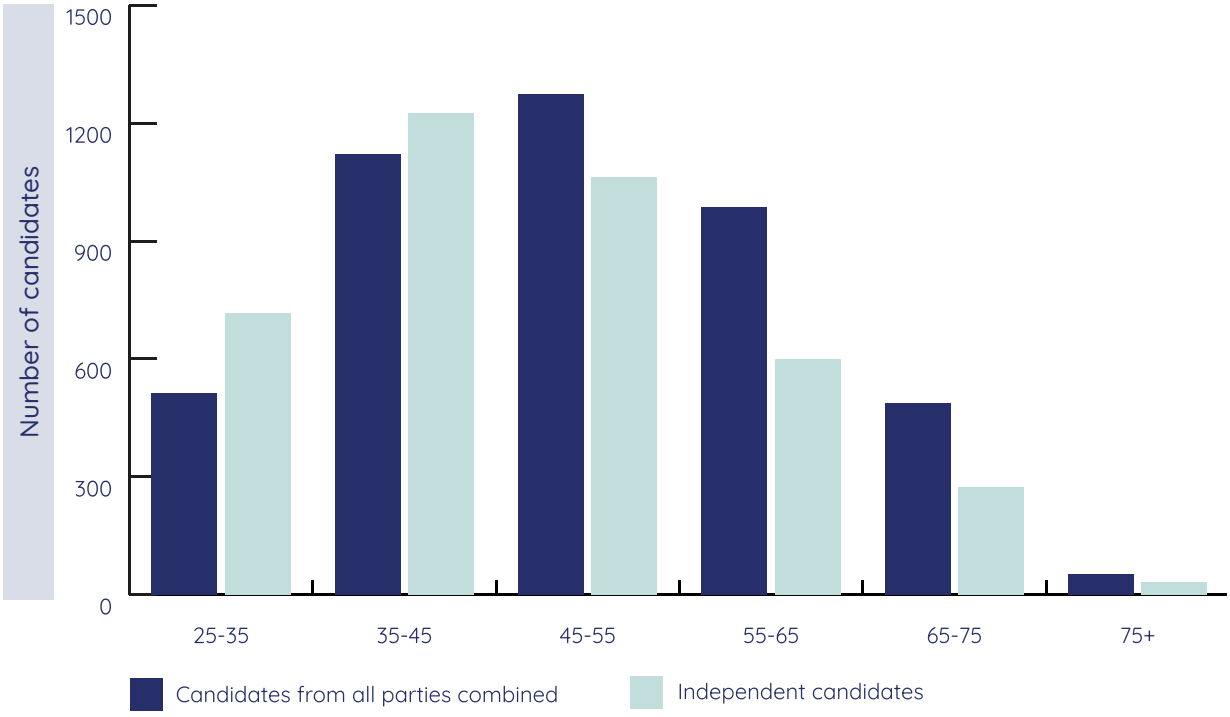
Figure 10.4. Age distribution of members of selected state legislative assemblies in the last two elections




Sources: PRS Legislative, Myneta.info, Election Commission of India.

To understand whether young Indians are unable to win elections or are not contesting the elections in the first place, the analysis looked at a breakdown of candidates at the last Lok Sabha election in 2024. The data revealed that political parties in India put forward very limited numbers of young candidates (figure 10.5). Interestingly, a sizeable number of young candidates who do not have the support of an established party stand as independents, but they are often unable to win because of structural limitations, especially a lack of political capital and financial backing.[240]

Figure 10.5. Age distribution of Lok Sabha candidates, 2024




Sources: Myneta.info, Election Commission of India.

The European Partnership for Democracy's 2025 Global Youth Participation Index confirms a low level of youth participation in electoral politics not only in India but also in many other countries. The report attributes this low participation to structural and logistical barriers rather than to political apathy among young people.[241]

## Barriers to youth participation

Interviews and focus group discussions revealed five key challenges that young people in India face in participating in electoral politics: the role of money, centralised party structures, disillusionment with politics, dynasticism, and greater hurdles for women. These institutional, structural, procedural, and socioeconomic factors cumulatively hinder young people's involvement in India's political life.

### The growing salience of money

The exponentially rising costs of a career in electoral politics are deterring many young Indians from entering politics.[242] Many interviewees admitted that the increasing costs involved in building political networks, gaining party nominations, taking up mass-mobilisation initiatives, running election campaigns, managing polling stations on election day, and securing social media outreach made it extremely difficult to effectively fight and win elections.

According to the study participants, legacy candidates and privileged veteran politicians with adequate social capital overshadow younger and poorer candidates. Less well privileged but committed young political hopefuls reported that the rising costs of electoral politics were a "major discouragement for them to continue in politics".[243]

### Centralised party structures

India's major political parties tend to nominate very limited numbers of young candidates because of the parties' highly centralised structures.[244] The dominance of veteran politicians and party leaderships, on the one hand, and parties' concerns about the electability of new and younger candidates, on the other, act as major impediments to bringing young people into electoral politics. Many young, vibrant, ambitious, articulate, and committed individuals are therefore unable to secure their party's nomination to contest an election.

As a result, many young aspiring parliamentarians are compelled to stand as independent candidates. However, because they lack resources and political capital, few independents win elections. Many of these young, driven politicians are then deterred from contesting the next election as they reel from "financial distress and lack of motivation".[245]

### Negative perspectives of political careers

A crucial finding of this study is that many young people are disillusioned with politics and sceptical of embracing it as a career. They feel demotivated and discouraged by a strong societal perception that politics is an "immoral, corrupt, unstable, and violent career".[246] Many young individuals who are driven and want to serve their nation and society are apprehensive about devoting their life to electoral politics, which is perceived to be marred by violence, defamation, and financial risk. Several young political hopefuls interviewed for this study lamented that despite their willingness to contribute to India's nation-building, they have stayed out of politics because of their own inhibitions and those of their families about a career in politics.

### The prevalence of dynastic politics

The strength of dynastic politics in India has enabled many young members of famous families to successfully enter and thrive in electoral politics, as they have the necessary resources and privilege to do so. Meanwhile, many less well privileged would-be contenders feel that this situation hinders their participation in electoral politics.

Many interviewees confided that the prevalence of dynastic politics and the dominance of legacy candidates kept "non-dynastic and under-privileged youth" away from electoral politics.[247] While young people with strong political family connections or some other financial or social legacy that gives them access to political leaders can easily receive party nominations through their networks, those who are not privileged in this way are neglected and kept outside the electoral competition.

### Greater hurdles for female politicians

Finally, a notable number of young female interviewees who wanted to enter politics revealed that they experienced perceptible discrimination. As non-privileged young women, they face a harder struggle than their male counterparts to secure a party ticket or access the financial and social capital needed to contest and win expensive elections. What is more, fear of violence, humiliation, social prejudice, and structural barriers in political life deter many talented and committed young women from taking part in India's electoral politics.[248]

## Recommendations

Based on the views of various stakeholders and experts consulted for this chapter, and drawing on insights from other related studies, this section offers some recommendations for how to increase youth participation in India's parliamentary politics.[249]

### Youth quotas in party nominations

Political parties should have a legally enforceable mechanism to reserve at least one-third of all nominations for candidates under the age of 45. Sub-quotas would ensure that this allocation goes to the socially and economically marginalised.

### Limits on money and muscle

Effective legal measures and stringent safeguards by the Election Commission of India are essential to reduce the growing salience of money and the role of antisocial behaviour and violence in politics. This would encourage young, non-privileged, but interested political hopefuls to enter electoral politics.

### Greater public awareness

Political actors and other stakeholders should launch awareness campaigns to educate voters about the importance of having more young leaders in politics. These campaigns should encourage young people to become more politically aware and take an active part in political life without fear or hesitation.

### A special emphasis on bringing more young women into politics

Young female politicians and aspiring candidates find it particularly difficult to enter electoral politics. As such, structural reforms and societal transformation are needed to make India's electoral politics more inclusive by giving young and committed women from non-privileged backgrounds a strong voice.

## Conclusion

It is crucial to engage India's young people in the country's electoral politics in general and its legislative structures in particular. Under India's system of parliamentary democracy, youth representation in the national legislature has a direct bearing on the presence of young leaders in the executive branch and the institutions of government. India has a large young population, so appropriate representation of youth voices in the country's politics is a prerequisite not only for India's advancement and wellbeing but also to ensure more responsive, inclusive, and democratic institutional structures.

Most importantly, young people have an inalienable democratic right to be represented in the institutions of democracy. Effective measures are therefore crucial to mitigate the institutional and procedural barriers to greater youth representation in India's legislative politics.

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CHAPTER 11

# Can Democratic Elitism Explain Bhutan's Minimal Youth Political Participation?

— Dechen Rabgyal

# Can Democratic Elitism Explain Bhutan's Minimal Youth Political Participation?

— DECHEN RABGYAL

Ever since Bhutan's introduction of democracy in 2008, a recurring question has been why so few young people are involved in the country's politics. A 2018 study observed that even students of political science do not see politics as "something that they can care about".[250] The need for a more realistic approach to encouraging youth political engagement has been raised time and again.

Bhutan has a respectable record in the European Partnership for Democracy's 2025 Global Youth Participation Index (GYPI), with an overall score of 63 out of 100.[251] A closer analysis, however, underlines the recurrent challenge of how to boost the political participation of young Bhutanese. While Bhutan's score of 81 out of 100 on the index's socioeconomic dimension pushes the country's average upwards, the score for political affairs is a meagre 55 out of 100.

With an estimated 51% of its population of almost 800,000 under the age of 30, Bhutan is a youthful nation.[252] The puzzle of why a country with a large young population has such low youth engagement can be studied in the context of Bhutan's strict eligibility criteria for parliamentary candidates.

Bhutan's parliament consists of the *Druk Gyalpo* (the monarch), the National Council, and the National Assembly.[253] The National Council has 25 members: five eminent persons nominated by the *Druk Gyalpo* and one elected member from each of the country's 20 districts.

In August 2022, the Election Commission of Bhutan adopted a rule requiring candidates for the National Council to have at least 10 years of professional experience, and candidates for the National Assembly to have five or more years' experience.[254] These criteria were in addition to the existing constitutional provision of a minimum age of 25 as well as the 2008 election act, which required all candidates to have an undergraduate degree.

The requirement of professional experience points to an elitist approach to democracy. As young people necessarily have fewer years of experience than their older counterparts, the 10-year rule for the National Council effectively made electoral politics the preserve of older, educated adults. As a result, youth participation in Bhutan's mainstream politics remained low.

Drawing on the stories of four aspiring parliamentary candidates, this chapter reveals how Bhutan's strict experience requirement cancels out the successes of young people's initial political socialisation.

## Methodology

To explain the minimal level of political participation among young people in Bhutan, this study focuses on the concept of democratic elitism. Elitism is understood here to refer to an outlook that favours those with good educational qualifications and a high level of professional experience.

Through this lens, the study examines the factors that affect youth participation in Bhutan's electoral politics. The research brought together four aspiring National Council candidates, including one former National Council member. None of the participants could run for election as they did not meet the 10-year experience criterion.

All four research participants took part in semistructured interviews that allowed for a deeper understanding of the respondents' beliefs, attitudes, and opinions. Three of the participants also engaged in a focus group discussion, which provided exposure to group language and narratives by exploring specific topics among people of similar backgrounds and experiences.[255] Held virtually, the discussion covered youth political participation, young people's motivations to run for office, and the implications of recent electoral laws.

To maintain their confidentiality, the four participants were given the pseudonyms Dawa, Karma, Norbu, and Phuntsho.

## Bhutan's election rules

The rule of law is a foundation for any democratic polity. As one interviewee, Phuntsho, stated: "Laws should create enabling conditions for people to exercise agency and rationality, enabling youth political participation … to influence policies and programmes." In that context, procedural incentives are important to promote young people's participation.[256]

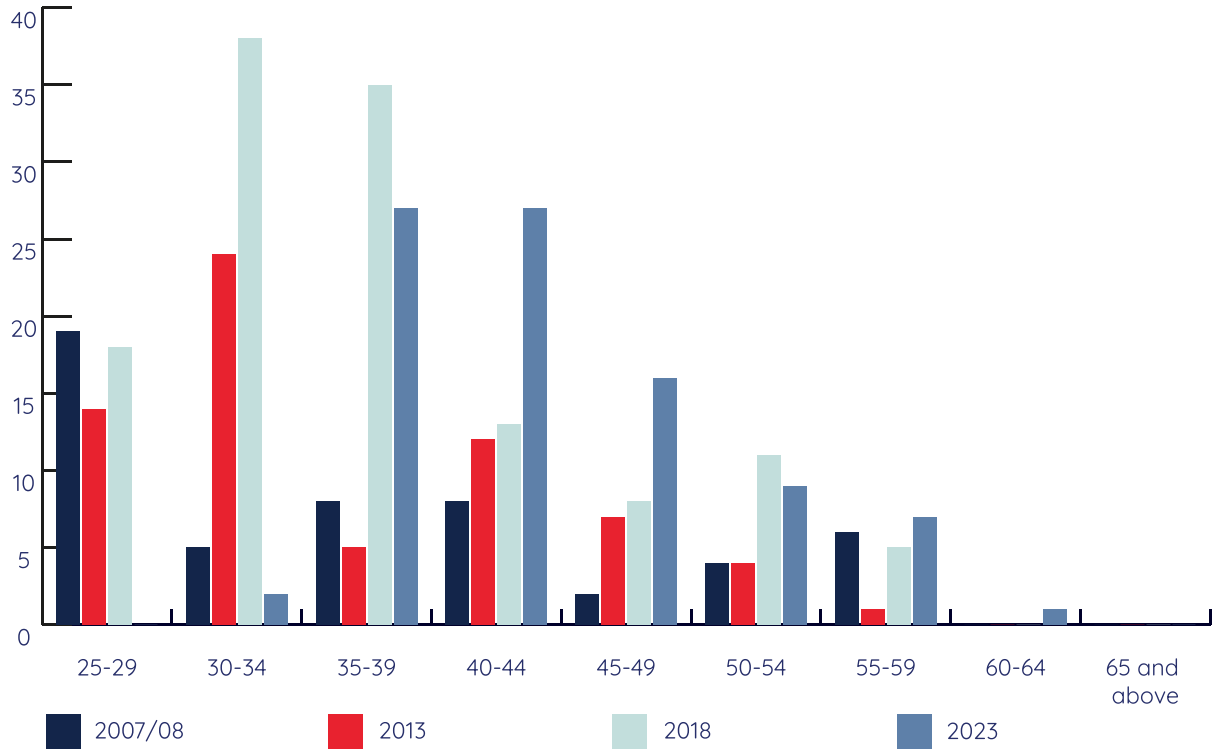
In Bhutan, clear election procedures were established by the country's constitution, which requires members of the National Council to be at least 25 years old, and the 2008 election act, which made it compulsory for candidates to have an undergraduate degree. The latter criterion emphasised the need for parliamentarians to have subject-matter expertise to be better able to study policies and legislation.[257] This provision disappointed former representatives who had served in the old National Assembly between 1953 and 2007, as "they saw no place for themselves in the new parliamentary setup".[258]

When a draft of the 2008 election act was adopted the previous year, only 16,000 of the country's then 634,000 inhabitants had an undergraduate degree.[259] This shows that the law represented an elitist approach to democracy: formal education was equated with competence, making democratic processes an arena for the qualified few – the academic elite.

In each of the three National Council elections held from 2007 to 2018, the largest group of candidates consisted of those under the age of 35. These candidates are likely to have had less

than 10 years' professional experience, as most Bhutanese are around 23–24 when they complete their first university degree. In 2007–08, 19 out of 52 candidates were aged 25–29. By contrast, in the 2023 election, the first held after the introduction of the 10-year rule, there were no candidates in this age range (figure 11.1).

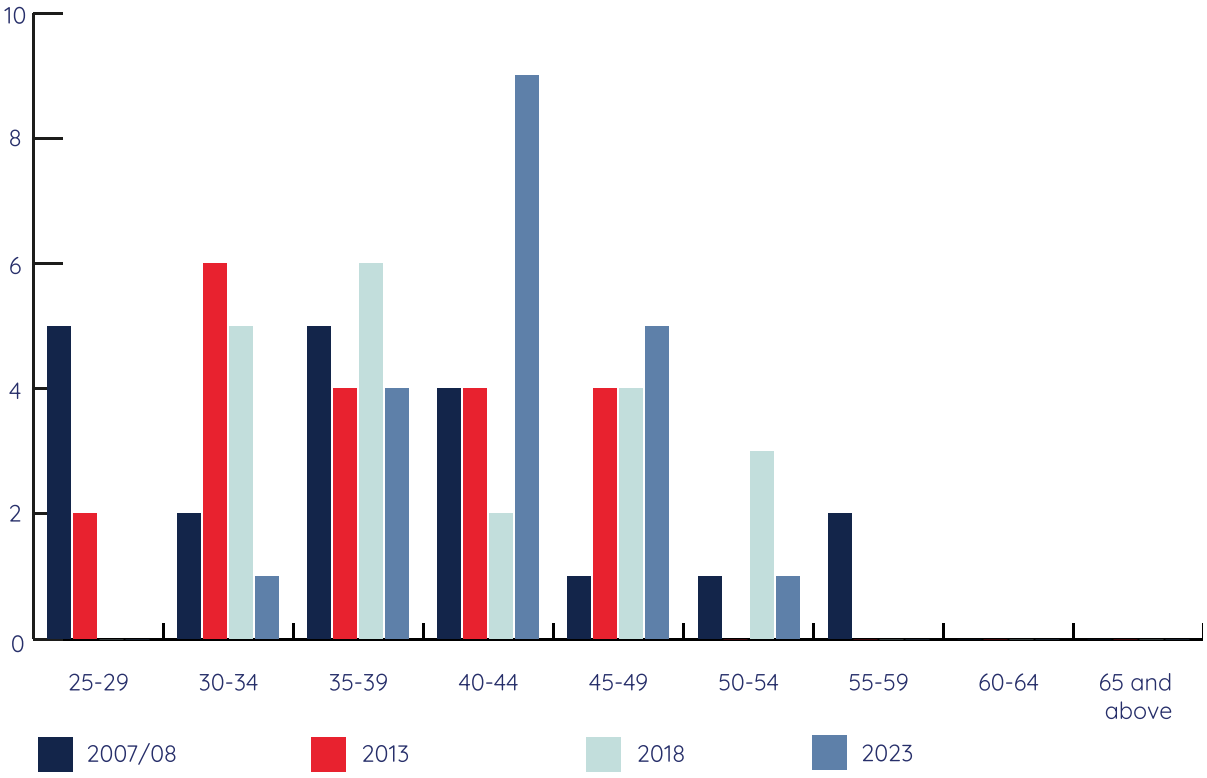
Figure 11.1. Number of candidates in National Council elections by age, 2007–23




Sources: Gyambo Sithey and Tandin Dorji, "Drukyul Decides: In the Minds of Bhutan's First Voters", Centre for Research Initiatives, 2009; Gyambo Sithey, "Drukyul Decides II: Bhutan's Second Parliamentary Elections, 2013", Centre for Research Initiatives, 2014; "Statistical Information on Bhutan's Third Parliamentary Elections 2018", Election Commission of Bhutan, 2018, https://www.ecb.bt/rnp/PE2018.pdf; Bhutan Broadcasting Service's coverage of candidates' profiles, https://www.bbs.bt/.

In the elections before 2023, some younger candidates were able to oust their older counterparts (figure 11.2).[260] As long as younger candidates met Bhutan's high legal benchmarks, informal societal norms and expectations did not prevent young Bhutanese from running for office.

Figure 11.2. Number of elected National Council members by age, 2007–23




Sources: Gyambo Sithey and Tandin Dorji, "Drukyul Decides: In the Minds of Bhutan's First Voters", Centre for Research Initiatives, 2009; Gyambo Sithey, "Drukyul Decides II: Bhutan's Second Parliamentary Elections, 2013", Centre for Research Initiatives, 2014; "Statistical Information on Bhutan's Third Parliamentary Elections 2018", Election Commission of Bhutan, 2018, https://www.ecb.bt/rnp/PE2018.pdf; Bhutan Broadcasting Service's coverage of candidates' profiles, https://www.bbs.bt/.

## Empowerment versus elitism

Engagement in civic and community projects encourages political participation.[261] In Bhutan, democracy and civic-education programmes play an important role in socialising young people into mainstream politics. For example, Phuntsho was a member of the Youth Initiative launched in 2014 by the Bhutan Centre for Media Democracy. Modelled on youth parliaments in other countries, the initiative aimed to nurture and empower young people.[262]

In 2015, the election commission established the Bhutan Children's Parliament (BCP) to foster the country's future parliamentarians. The BCP's members were elected from democracy clubs established in 2012.[263] However, the national parliament questioned the legitimacy of the BCP, which also suffered from the apprehension of its youth parliamentarians and criticism that Bhutan's education system was being politicised.[264]

Despite these initiatives, youth participation in Bhutan's mainstream politics, such as elections, remained low. In the first round of the 2013 National Assembly election, only 26.6% of those aged 18–30 cast their vote. Five years later, 21.7% of those between the ages of 18 and 24 turned out to vote.[265] In the GYPI, Bhutan's score for youth voter turnout was a meagre 21 out of 100, against a global average of 41.[266]

The 2022 rule change therefore came at a time when youth enthusiasm in mainstream politics – in terms of voter turnout – was already low. The 10-year work experience requirement made Bhutan's electoral laws more restrictive and turned electoral politics into the mainstay of a gerontocracy that undermined the younger generation while protecting the old.[267] The pre-existing requirements of a minimum age limit of 25 and an undergraduate degree were already high benchmarks.[268] As early as 2019, critics had argued for the removal of the requirement of an undergraduate degree.[269]

Yet Bhutanese lawmakers and authorities have a deep-seated inclination towards an elitist, competence-based approach to democracy. Back in 2007, the National Assembly proposed that candidates should have at least eight to 10 years of work experience. The proposal was turned down, as a 10-year experience rule would have taken the effective minimum age to 34, since most Bhutanese complete their undergraduate studies at 23 or 24. This would have been at odds with the constitutional requirement of a lower age limit of 25.

In 2014, the National Council similarly proposed requiring its members, except for incumbents, to have 10 years' work experience, with the aim of ensuring that members had the competence to review draft legislation.[270] According to one analysis, the proposal had "heavy overtones of elitism and an air of preserving the old boys' club".[271] Again, the National Assembly decided against introducing the requirement.[272]

## Experience over aspiration

The 2022 rule made several aspiring candidates ineligible for election. Supporters of the new rule argued that professional experience would bring mature, well-educated, capable people with real-life professional experience into Bhutan's legislature.[273] According to one former member of the National Council, intellectual competence and professional integrity come with age.[274] There were concerns that the previous system had allowed well-connected candidates, who were not necessarily the most capable, to be elected.[275]

Young people were seen as lacking the competencies needed to shoulder the burdens of parliamentary office.[276] The rule change to privilege older, more mature, more capable, and more experienced candidates was supposedly geared towards maintaining democratic stability and coherent public policy, an approach best explained as an example of elitism.[277]

Young Bhutanese never lacked motivation to run for public office. One interviewee, Karma, had left a postgraduate studies opportunity to stand in the 2023 National Council election. Norbu, a former National Council member, said: "I was prepared to [stand for election again] to serve the people with more experience and maturity." For Phuntsho, his engagement in various social activities

and volunteerism awakened his political consciousness. Three interviewees – Karma, Dawa, and Phuntsho – were politically socialised and driven by their respective desires to contribute to decision-making, change political outcomes, and pursue the common good.

Yet for all four interviewees, their ambitions were quashed by the new rule. Norbu's skills and knowledge from his previous term in office, Karma's social capital and network, Phuntsho's aspiration to influence political outcomes, and Dawa's commitment to duty – all factors that encouraged political participation – were swept aside by the fact that they did not meet the professional experience requirement. The new rule inadvertently became anathema to the would-be candidates' processes of political socialisation. The focus on professional experience solidified Bhutanese lawmakers' long-standing assumption of a strong link between competence and age. Leadership skills and youthful dynamism were seen as mutually exclusive.

The 2022 rule change challenged parliamentary supremacy and became more powerful than the 2008 election act, as the numbers of candidates and elected members in the 2023 National Council election confirm.[278] There were only two candidates under the age of 35, one of whom was elected.

The implications of the rule change on the motivations of young Bhutanese were significant. In the words of Dawa: "It felt like everything vanished overnight." He continued: "The rule affected my enthusiasm, my energy … it was all drained out … I do not think we would have the same energy to come and contest in the elections [in the future]." Phuntsho reflected: "I could not participate, but that is it. It was not the end of everything for me." But he went on to say: "I do not think I will be joining politics anymore."

Norbu, however, said: "I will contest future elections with more experience and exposure." The impact of structural constraints on young people's political engagement is therefore not universal, as Norbu's persistence attests. Yet of the four interviewees, three were discouraged from participating in future. Bhutan's elitist approach to election rules, and to politics in general, looks set to have an effect on young people's long-term commitment to public service and political office.

## Conclusion

Young people have been referred to as "standby citizens".[279] Their low levels of political engagement have been attributed to unequal access to social services, a lack of political influence, and a lack of trust in political parties and politicians. The political climate and the discourse of youth engagement in Bhutan are no different from elsewhere, albeit with a unique national context.

Even before 2022, the minimum requirements for Bhutanese wanting to run for elected office – a lower age limit of 25 and an undergraduate degree – already set a high bar. Still, before the new rule was adopted requiring 10 years' professional experience, the largest group of candidates for National Council elections consisted of those under 35 years of age, who may not necessarily have had 10 years of experience. Indeed, democracy and civic-education programmes, a sense of duty, and a motivation to serve all empowered young people to run for political office.

However, the requirement of 10 years' work experience has made elected office a stronghold of the experienced and educated few, an outcome best explained as an elitist approach to democracy. Young people, previously keen to run for office, are left disappointed, and their motivation to take part in future elections may be affected. This trend, with its outcome of lower political participation, effectively cancels out young people's gains from their initial political socialisation, the benefits of which would otherwise increase as democracy matures. At the same time, voter turnout among young Bhutanese continues to be lower than the global average.

Future research could build on this study by broadening the sample size to include not only the National Council but also the National Assembly. The impact of the 2022 rule on young people's motivation and the composition of Bhutan's two houses of parliament could be studied comparatively to gauge parliamentary dynamics, political participation, and the broader impact on democracy.

Further, a quantitative approach could generate data on correlation and causation, which would provide a better understanding of the impacts of legislative interventions such as eligibility criteria on youth participation. This would be an important lens through which to assess the expectation that democracy becomes more representative, participatory, and competent as it takes root.

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CHAPTER 12

# A Comparative Study of Political Generations in Australia

— Intifar Chowdhury

Kiros Amin, unsplash

# A Comparative Study of Political Generations in Australia

— INTIFAR CHOWDHURY

In most advanced democracies, declining electoral turnout is disproportionately concentrated among young people.[280] For example, in the 2024 United Kingdom general election, less than half of 18- to 24-year-olds cast a ballot, compared with three-quarters of people aged 65 or above.[281] Similar trends were seen in recent elections in France and Germany, where young people were considerably less likely to vote than older people.[282]

Low electoral engagement underscores democratic inequality: those who are economically and socially disadvantaged abstain from taking part.[283] This then introduces a representation bias in public policy, reduces government responsiveness, and compromises political competition.[284]

With its strictly enforced compulsory voting, Australia has not suffered a similar fall in youth turnout in federal and state elections. Compulsory voting ties young people to the political system, even when they are disillusioned by mainstream party politics. This is almost an enforced exposure to the political system, which prevents apathy and disenfranchisement and stops young people from turning away from democratic politics. Does this mean that youth democratic engagement in Australia manifests itself differently from elsewhere?

The reasons for examining the Australian experience are twofold. First, despite compulsory voting, there has been a gradual and continued decline in Australians' trust in politics since 2007.[285] Satisfaction with democracy has fallen rapidly, in 2019 reaching its lowest level since the 1970s.[286] Second, both major political parties have seen a steady decline in their support over the past two decades; they won less than 70% of the primary vote between them in the 2022 and 2025 federal elections.[287] This remarkable drop-off is attributed to poor performances by successive governments and a broad detachment from politics across generations. Voters' poor evaluations of the country's governance are also reflected in a rise in support for minor parties and independent candidates.

Once among the most satisfied democratic nations in the world, Australia scored a modest 79 out of 100 in the European Partnership for Democracy's 2025 Global Youth Participation Index, owing to a lack of youth disengagement and youth-focused policies and candidates.[288] Australia's score of 64 out of 100 on the index's political affairs dimension reflects young people's moderate representation in parliament and party structures, an absence of youth quotas, and young people's limited influence in leadership roles. Disillusionment with formal institutions is rising among young Australians, especially as public spending is skewed towards older demographics, despite economic pressures on younger workers.

This study investigates how and why young Australians are reshaping the political landscape. Looking at intergenerational differences in democratic engagement, the research draws implications for future political-party competition in Australia. The chapter shows that young people are increasingly willing to explore alternatives to the major parties. This signals that future parliaments will increasingly instil a balance of power in non-established minor parties and independents. But as the Australian electorate evolves to become more aligned by issue than by party, no political actor can take the youth vote for granted. Australian politicians will have to adapt to the changing policy priorities of younger generations to gain and retain support from election to election.

## Background and approach

To avoid the misunderstanding that young people are disengaging from the democratic system in Australia, it must be stressed at the outset that there is no evidence of a decline in youth commitment to democracy as a desired system of government.

This chapter focuses on generational replacement or change as the key explanation of youth engagement. People socialise politically in their formative years, when they develop certain patterns of behaviour based on their experiences in late adolescence and early adulthood. These attitudes persist throughout their lives and are resistant to change from new developments.[289] Generational replacement occurs when younger generations, who are socialised in different historical periods, replace older cohorts.

Generational cohorts differ because of slow evolutionary change. The underlying mechanism is the accumulation of certain characteristics due to societal transformations, such as a rise in education or the development of new technologies. These transformations are different from disruptive events like wars or pandemics. The events of specific time periods can also impact democratic attitudes and behaviours, but these effects influence the entire population rather than just people in their formative years. Therefore, there is a distinction between lasting characteristics and sudden changes in political behaviour that are particular to a given cohort.

The gradual decline in political engagement across generations provides support for societal modernisation, which is a long, continuous process of transformations, rather than a one-off feature. The withdrawal from traditional practices is due to lasting generational characteristics and is not unique to one cohort, meaning it does not subsequently fade away.

This chapter highlights how Australia's younger generations, despite being equally committed to democracy, interact with traditional political institutions, such as political parties and elites, differently from older generations. The study covers the six generations since 1915 (table 12.1).

Table 12.1. The six generations included in this study

| Generation | Birth years |
|---|---|
| War | 1915-29 |
| Builders | 1930-45 |
| Boomers | 1946-60 |
| X | 1961-79 |
| Y | 1980-94 |
| Z | 1995-2004 |

The generational change in Australia's electoral politics away from traditional party loyalties can be referred to as voter *de-alignment*. This concept describes a drift away from political parties altogether, as opposed to voter *realignment*, where voters shift their loyalties from one party to another.[290]

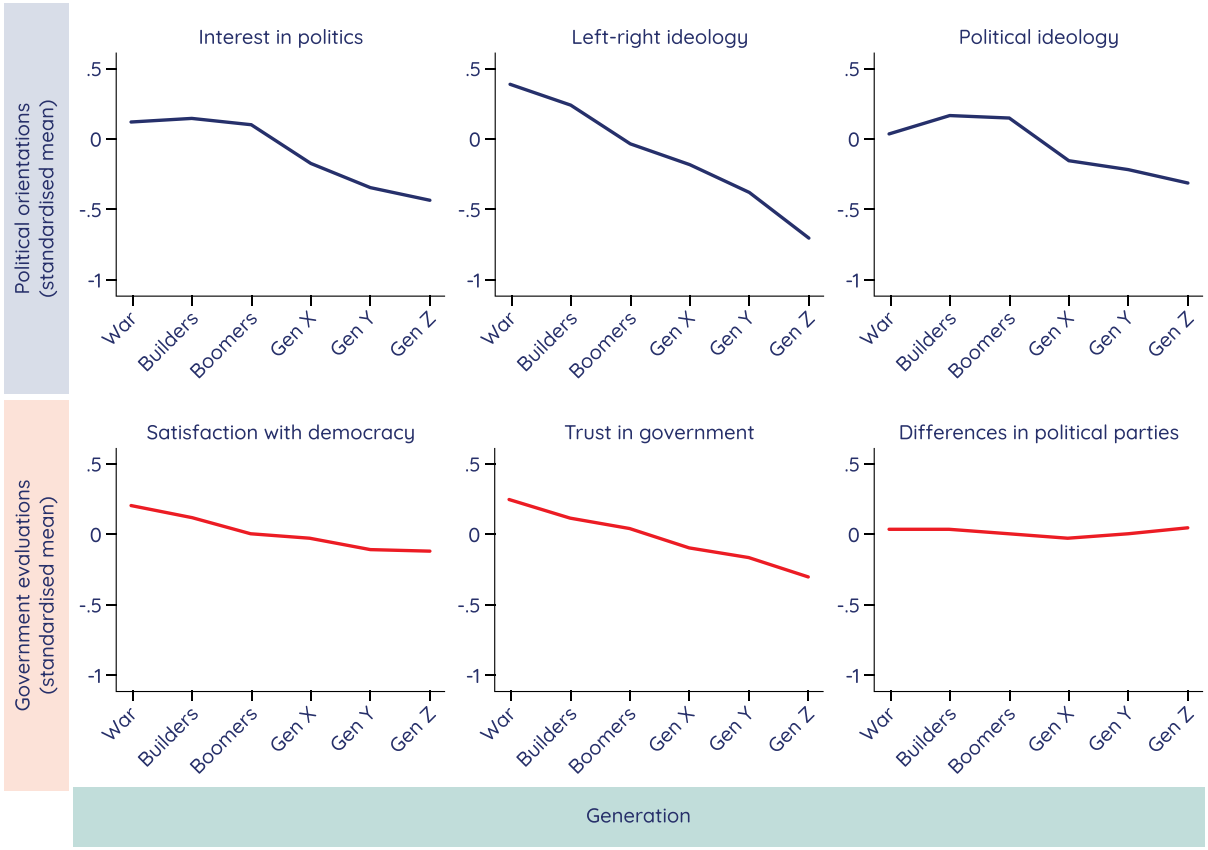
Features of realignment include new voting coalitions and parties winning over groups that were not previously theirs. By contrast, de-alignment is characterised by a rising number of independent candidates, declining partisan identification, and more volatile voting, where issues matter more than party loyalties in determining voters' choices from one election to the next. When partisan weakening happens for a sustained period across generations, it reflects a lasting generational shift rather than a temporary youth rebellion that tends to moderate with age.

This chapter uses nationally representative post-election survey data from the Australian Election Study (AES), collected between 1987 and 2022, to look at political orientations, government evaluations, and voting patterns across generations.[291] It uses descriptive and inferential statistics to reveal generational and voter groups that are turning away from major parties. A limitation of this cohort approach is that the effects of factors such as age and time period are not isolated from generational effects. But a 2021 study attempted to separate these effects in Australia and concluded that fixed generational effects are the most important in explaining youth (dis-) engagement.[292]

## How young people are changing politics

In terms of their political orientation, young Australians tend to be less interested in politics, more progressive or left-wing in their political views, and less knowledgeable about political facts than their predecessors (figure 12.1, top row). Meanwhile, when it comes to evaluations of governments, young people are less likely to be satisfied with democracy and less likely to trust the government than older generations (figure 12.1, bottom row).[293] All generations are comparable in the differences they see between the two major political parties, the centre-left Labor Party and the centre-right Liberal Party.

Figure 12.1. Generational trends in political orientation and government evaluation



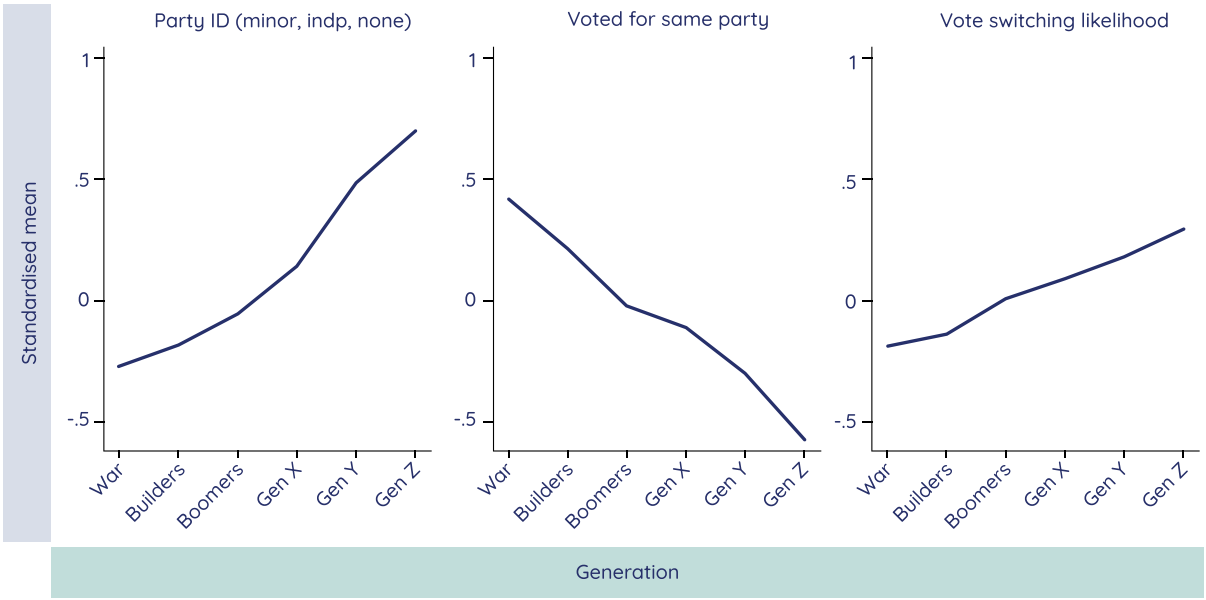

Note: Positive values mean a cohort is, on average, more interested, more right-leaning, more knowledgeable about politics, more satisfied with democracy, more trusting of government, and more perceptive of differences between political parties.

Source: Australian Election Study, 1987–2022.

Poor evaluations of governance are also reflected in the rise in support for minor political parties and independent candidates.[294] In 1980, non-major groups accounted for only 8% of the vote. By 2025, this had increased to 34%, the highest share ever recorded when a major party received fewer votes than independents and minor parties.[295] This trend is mirrored in Australia's states and territories, where all jurisdictions have experienced some form of power sharing.

Although young voters remain engaged at the polls, thanks in part to compulsory voting, they are also abandoning party loyalties. Younger generations are less likely to align with a major party, less likely to consistently vote for the same party, and more likely to change their voting intention during election campaigns (figure 12.2).[296]

Figure 12.2. Partisan stability and vote switching by generation

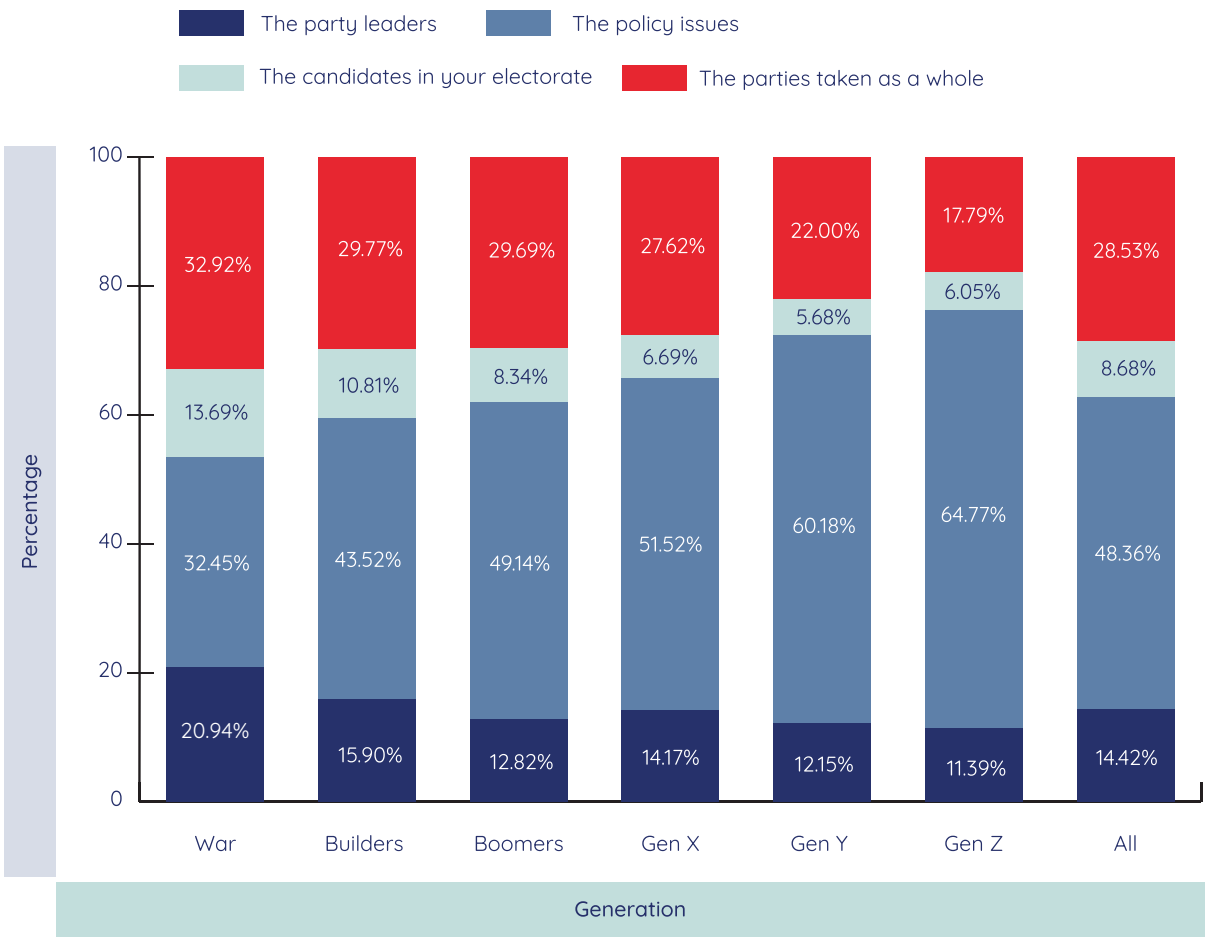



Source: Australian Election Study, 1987–2022.

The decrease in the major parties' primary vote share, the rise of minor parties, the erosion of previously strong predictors of electoral choice, the increase in issue-based voting, and the increase in swing and undecided voters all point to a fragmented but more responsive electorate. The decline in the number of people who identify with a political party provides stark evidence of voter volatility and partisan de-alignment.

Alongside these trends, the political context of each election is crucial. Over the period of the AES, voting decisions have increasingly been driven by policy issues, with 48% of all Australians surveyed from 1996 to 2022 citing these as the primary factor (figure 12.3). This is followed by party affiliation (29%), party leaders (14%), and local candidates (9%). In 2022, 54% of voters reported policy issues as the main factor that influenced their vote choice. Across the generations, Gen Z is more issue aligned than party aligned.

Figure 12.3. Most important factors in voting decisions by generation




Source: Australian Election Study, 1996–2022.

These findings support the societal modernisation theory and the cognitive mobilisation thesis that a changing social context is characterised by long-term societal transformations that encourage young people to withdraw from traditional democratic processes.[297] As a result, there is conclusive evidence that the modern-day democrat is assertive, demanding, and punitive. Today's young people are fluid citizens who change their party loyalties and act based on political issues that directly impact their lives.

## Why young people are changing politics

The reason young people's politics have changed is that young Australians today face a vastly different set of challenges from their parents and grandparents. While they may earn more in nominal terms than previous generations, today's young people are burdened by rising living costs, escalating education expenses, insecure employment, and growing debt.[298] Structural shifts in the economy and the labour market have reshaped young adulthood, delaying key milestones like homeownership, long-term partnerships, and parenthood.

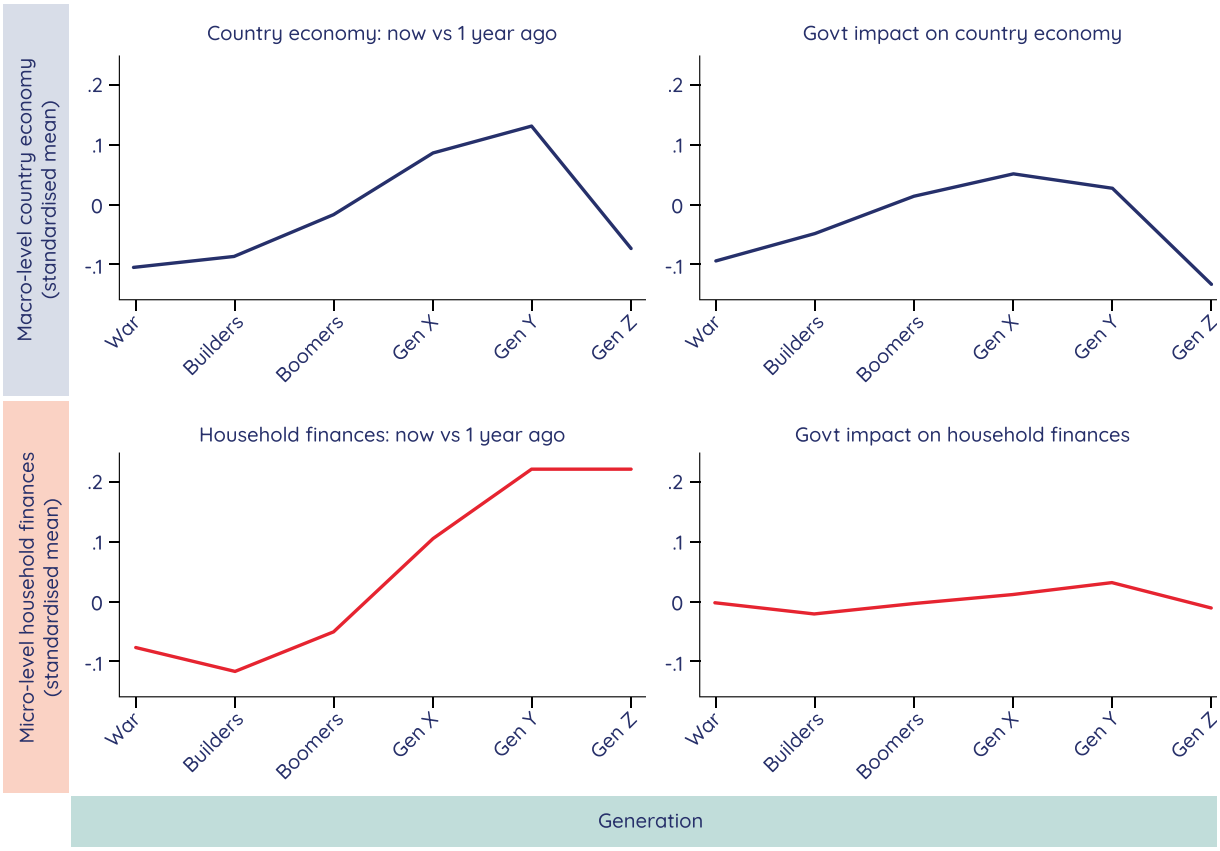
University participation has increased, but so too has student debt – well beyond what was envisaged when Australia introduced the Higher Education Contribution Scheme in 1989 as a fair, income-contingent loan system.[299] Indexation has historically outpaced wage growth, leaving today's 20-somethings with debts over A$10,000 (US$7,000) – higher in real terms than their counterparts two decades ago. Credential inflation has transformed the job market, with even low-wage roles now requiring a university degree.[300] Many graduates find themselves in jobs unrelated to their qualifications, with job mismatch rates among 25-year-olds rising from 28.5% in 1996 to 33% by 2019.[301]

Housing affordability has also deteriorated. In 2000, the average house in Australia cost around nine times the average household income; by 2024, that figure had risen to 16.4 times.[302] Since 2001, property prices have outpaced incomes by a factor of 2.3.[303] This was driven in part by tax incentives like the capital gains tax discount introduced in 1999 by the government of Prime Minister John Howard and, more recently, by demand in the era of the Covid-19 pandemic.[304] While schemes like the First Home Owner Grant offer some support, saving for a deposit remains a years-long challenge for most.

For many in Australia, intergenerational wealth is now the key to homeownership. Since 2002, the total value of wealth transfers has more than doubled in real terms, with inheritances expected to quadruple by 2050.[305] Yet because parental wealth is unevenly distributed, inheritance is set to deepen inequality within the youth cohort.

In short, young Australians are staying younger for longer. The traditional path to adulthood – stable work, savings, and homeownership – has been disrupted and delayed. It is no surprise, then, that many young people feel let down by government policy. According to the 2024 Australian Youth Barometer, 62% believe they will be worse off than their parents.[306] As for different generations' perceptions of the national economy (figure 12.4, top row) and of household finances (figure 12.4, bottom row), Gen Z seem to be most unimpressed by the impact of government policies.

Figure 12.4. Perceptions of the national economy and of household finances by generation



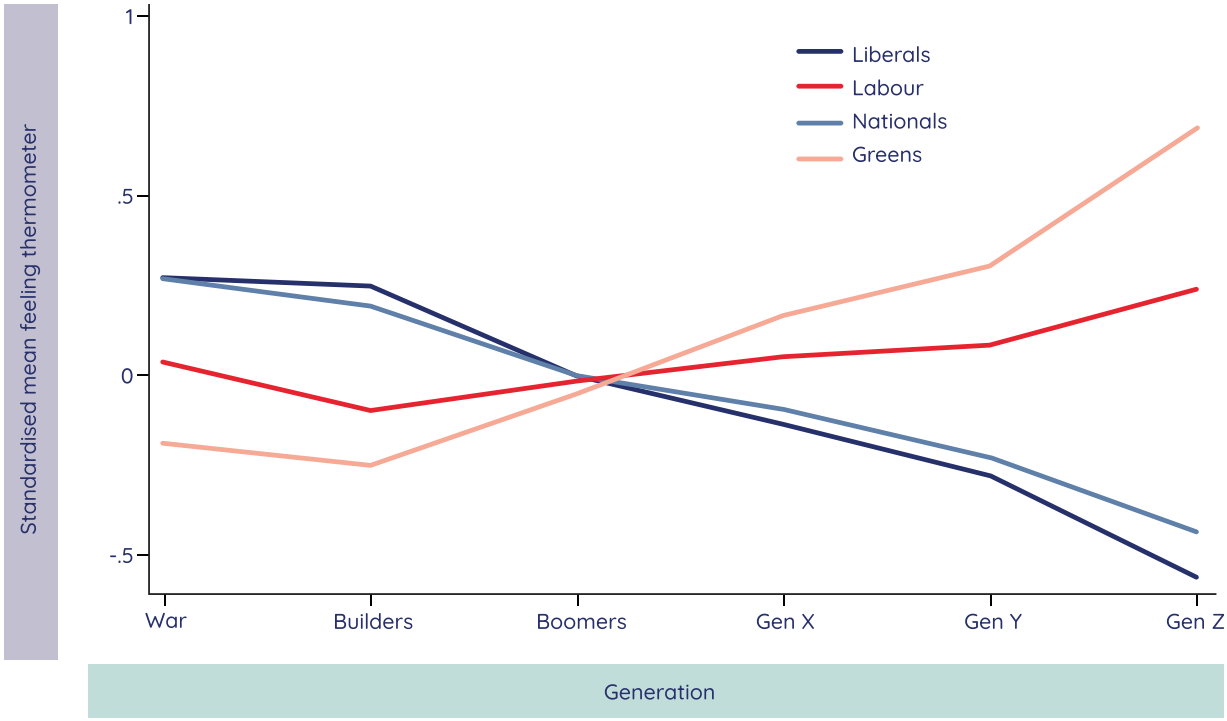

Source: Australian Election Study, 1987–2022.

## Implications for party politics

Australia's demographic shift has enabled the Greens to capitalise on generational replacement as younger voters gradually displace older generations at the polls. Young people's de-alignment away from the major parties represents a critical disadvantage to the centre right.[307] Meanwhile, Labor has positioned itself as the preferred party in Australia's two-party system when it comes to addressing these critical issues, alongside the rising cost of living.

Across the generations, the Coalition partners – the Liberal Party and the centre-right National Party – have become increasingly unfavourable as younger generations tend to feel more positively towards left-of-centre parties (figure 12.5). With centre-left issues gaining traction, the Coalition is likely to see a further erosion of its support among younger voters.[308]

Figure 12.5. Generational trends in feelings towards political parties




Source: Australian Election Study, 1987–2022.

## Conclusion

Australia's younger generations are reshaping the country's politics not only through their values but also through their lived experiences. Members of Gen Z, like their millennial predecessors, are navigating a delayed and disrupted transition to adulthood, marked by insecure work, rising debt, unaffordable housing, and climate change anxiety.[309] These conditions have fuelled disillusionment with the major parties and driven a shift towards issue-based, swing voting. In a political landscape where stability feels out of reach, young Australians are demanding something different, and their politics are starting to reflect it.

The root cause of youth disengagement from major parties may be the fact that generational change was not accompanied by political reform, widening the gap between the elites and the underrepresented. Unlike previous generations, today's young people hold more postmaterialist and progressive values and are less likely to align with political parties. Instead, they choose to act based on specific issues, like climate change, education equity, and housing affordability – issues often sidelined by mainstream parties.

This benefits minor parties, but in a two-party system like Australia's, young voters' shift away from major parties has significant implications. It must be acknowledged that disengagement in any form is not good news for democracy. Young citizens may choose to disengage and remain

apathetic, perhaps because of a reduced belief in the efficacy of the government system. However, disillusionment leads to misrepresentation, and this is harmful both for young constituents and for the overall health of the democratic system.

This disconnect highlights a deeper problem: traditional institutions, such as political parties, are failing to adapt to the priorities of younger generations. The entry of a younger, more diverse electorate will influence political priorities. If parties fail to respond to voters' concerns, there is a growing risk of political disengagement or backlash, particularly through support for minor parties and independents. There were already signs of this in the 2022 federal election, and again in the 2025 election, when the primary vote in the lower house was divided almost evenly three ways between Labor, the Coalition, and minor parties and independents.[310]

To stay in the game, major parties need major resets. Party systems are highly adaptive and have done this before. An influential 1967 perspective that described the evolution of democratic party systems focused on cleavages: the deep social, economic, and cultural divisions that structure political competition and shape the emergence of key party units.[311] For example, labour parties emerged to represent working-class interests. With younger generations quite distinct from older ones in their economic and social experiences and prospects, a new generational cleavage has emerged. Younger and older voters have different policy priorities, which shape new political divisions and party strategies. What is more, these priorities change from election to election.

In the immediate future, Australia may well see more minority governments and a fragmentation of the two-party system. A big challenge for the country's major parties is to take the pulse of the nation, which now comprises a more volatile voter base, to build and then rebuild coalitions of electoral support at each contest.

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