

Young people's participation in European democratic processes

How to improve and facilitate youth involvement¹

ABSTRACT

This study, commissioned by the Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs at the request of the AFCO Committee, examines young people's participation in democratic processes, with a special focus on the European elections. The study inspects the meaning of political participation for contemporary democracies and the dilemmas behind young people's participation and representation. It also assesses, from a youth perspective, the ongoing legislative proposals on European elections and the electoral participation of EU mobile citizens as well as the Citizens' Proposals adopted in the plenary of the Conference on the Future of Europe in May 2022.

Voter turnout – one of the most important forms of political participation – has been declining since the 1950s, posing a major challenge to democracies around the world. Various studies consistently show alarmingly low voter turnout among young people at different levels and in different regions and countries (Martin 2012; Garcia Albacete 2014; Bouza 2014; Deželan 2015; Deželan and Moxon 2021). European Election Studies (see Schmitt et al. 2014; Schmitt et al. 2019) reveal a shocking landscape of voter abstention in EU Member States, especially among the youngest cohorts of eligible voters, where abstention in European elections is particularly high (over 70 per cent). Moreover, the gap between young and older voters has widened significantly across the democratic world, pointing to a problem with low political participation among young people not only in elections but also in institutional politics.

Political participation is essential for any functioning democracy. Government action should be controlled to prevent arbitrariness, and voting and other forms of participation are one form of this external control. The question of who participates in political decision-making is one of the defining features of democracy. A situation in which only a few participate in the political process or in which certain groups are excluded from decision-making therefore imposes clear limits on democratic rule. Political participation is also the best

¹ Full study in English : [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/745820/IPOL_STU\(2023\)745820_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/745820/IPOL_STU(2023)745820_EN.pdf)



mechanism for the articulation of interests, it fulfils an educational function for citizens, affects life satisfaction, provides a form of checks and balances on decision-makers and is directly related to the responsiveness of government. The absence of youth in institutional politics also affects youth representation, as low youth participation in politics means that they have relatively little to expect from government, as there is little incentive for politicians to focus on policies that benefit youth. Studies show that the percentage of MPs younger than 30 in parliaments rarely exceeds two per cent and is particularly unfavourable to young women (see Deželan 2015; Tremmel 2006).

There are many reasons for the current situation in young people's political participation. Young people are indeed underrepresented in numbers. However, also the arenas of expression need to be reassessed in terms of their relevance to young people's citizenship. The factors contributing to low participation include the changing relationship between young people and the political sphere, political socialisation and key events during socialisation, and the changing citizenship norms of young people, which are also related to the way we define political participation.

The [Citizens' proposals 36–38 adopted in the plenary of the Conference on the Future of Europe](#) include several recommendations on how to engage youth in democratic processes. For example, Proposal 36 on "Citizens information, participation and youth" aims to "increase citizens' participation and youth involvement in order to develop a 'full civic experience' for Europeans, ensure that their voice is heard also in between elections, and that the participation is effective". It also calls for more structural support for youth civil society and local youth councils, and for introducing a 'Youth-check' of such legislation that can have an impact on young people.

In its [resolution on the follow-up to the conclusions of the Conference](#), the European Parliament has stressed the importance of "continuous involvement of citizen participation and consultation in the EU decision-making process". Parliament also adopted in May 2022 a [legislative resolution proposing a new Council Regulation on the elections of Members of the European Parliament aiming at a single harmonised age for voting and standing as a candidate throughout the Union](#), and its Committee on Constitutional Affairs is working on two Commission proposals for Council Directives on the [electoral participation of EU citizens](#).

The ongoing proposals on European elections generally address the problem of youth political participation and offer steps forward. However, these steps are often subject to serious limitations (e.g. Union-wide unit, national legislation), are not very ambitious (e.g. introduction of a quota system for young people/age groups, very soft introduction of the right to vote for young people under 18) and in some cases could also work against youth participation (e.g. different age thresholds for voting age and candidacy, 9 May as election day). The Citizens' proposals, on the other hand, offer a very wide range of ideas for improving European democracies. These relate to the provision of information, the ability to process information and the access to and strength of democratic institutions and processes.

Acknowledging the ongoing processes, **the recommended actions target the areas of information provision, information processing capacity and increased access to and strength of democratically elected institutions and political processes.** Among others, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Support for voter information and education campaigns;
- Creation of and support for tools for youth-friendly information-sharing and feedback;
- Promotion of community media;
- Promotion of youth juries, mock trials and other deliberative models of youth participation;
- Support for media education and digital literacy;
- Lowering the voting age and age of eligibility for office;
- Automatic voter registration and up-to-date electoral rolls;
- Promotion of youth participation in election management;
- Creation of e-voting and other alternative forms of voting at home and abroad;
- Introduction of youth quotas and the presence of youth in important political bodies; and
- Improvement of consultation and co-management of youth-related issues and introduction of mechanisms of direct and participatory democracy.

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