



## Participation in Democracy: Civic Engagement & Youth Activism



### Introduction

**Youth participation** and **civic engagement** are essential for building inclusive, strong, and sustainable democracies. They contribute to social cohesion and should be accessible to all, regardless of gender, age, or socio-economic background.

The **European Union** emphasises youth inclusion as a way to foster active citizenship, integration, and solidarity. The **Council of Europe** underlines that participation is not an end in itself but a means to improve young people's lives and strengthen society.

Young people represent **16.3% of the EU population** (Eurostat, 2021). Their right to take part in decisions that affect them is guaranteed by the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)**. Engaging them in civic life develops responsibility, critical thinking, and trust in institutions, while helping to shape fairer policies that reflect real needs.

The notion of **youth** is defined differently depending on the context. The United Nations applies the age range 15–24, focusing on the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Erasmus+ uses a broader definition of 13–30, recognising that young people's social, educational, and professional pathways are often extended. These variations show that "youth" is not just a biological stage but also a social category shaped by cultural and institutional factors.



### Key concepts and definitions

**Participation** goes beyond voting or standing for election. It means having the right space and opportunity to influence decisions and contribute actively to society, both individually and collectively. Meaningful



participation also requires access to information, opportunities for dialogue, and support mechanisms that enable young people to express their views and see them reflected in policies.

**Active citizenship** refers to the knowledge, skills, and competencies needed to engage fully in democratic life and contribute to the development of society. It includes awareness of rights and responsibilities, the ability to work with others, and the confidence to challenge inequalities. By practising active citizenship, young people strengthen democratic culture and build trust in institutions.

Finally, **youth policy** is understood as a set of public strategies that create favourable conditions for young people's personal and social development. It ensures opportunities in education, employment, health, and youth work, while also promoting inclusion and equal access. Effective youth policies recognise young people as both beneficiaries and active partners in shaping their communities and societies.

A key milestone in this area is the **EU Charter on Youth and Democracy**, which strives to build and consolidate a more youth-friendly democratic space and ensure that young people's voices are formally, continuously, and permanently represented in the EU. In parallel, the **European Youth Forum**, as the largest platform of youth organisations in Europe, plays a vital role in representing young people's interests, strengthening their democratic participation, and advocating for their rights at the EU level.



## Real-world examples

Many European countries have translated these frameworks into practice. **Youth councils and parliaments** provide spaces for open debate and foster democratic culture. Some governments have reformed electoral law by **lowering the voting age** (e.g., Austria, Estonia, Germany, Greece), thereby directly strengthening young people's influence.



Local and national programmes also make a difference. For example, Finland and the Netherlands have strong systems of non-formal education and youth councils, leading to higher levels of civic engagement. In contrast, rural areas or groups such as NEETs often need targeted outreach and mentoring programmes to overcome barriers to participation.



## Data and statistics

Despite significant efforts, gaps in youth participation persist. In the **2019 European Parliament elections**, only 36% of young people aged 15–30 voted, significantly below the general turnout (European Parliament, 2023).

At the same time, more than **60% of young people** take part in informal activities such as protests, petitions, or volunteering (European Youth Forum). Over **70%** engage politically on digital platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or X (Eyes on Europe, 2020).

Nevertheless, inequalities remain. **24.1% of young people aged 15–29** in the EU are at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Eurostat, 2024). Marginalised groups, including NEETs, minorities, and rural youth, face structural barriers that reduce their chances to participate equally in democratic life.



## Challenges and controversies

Despite progress, several obstacles remain:

- ◆ **Low electoral participation:** Linked to distrust of political institutions, weak civic education, and perceptions of limited impact.
- ◆ **Underrepresentation of marginalised groups:** Structural barriers limit access to information and opportunities for participation.
- ◆ **Digital risks:** Online platforms expose youth to disinformation, hate speech, and polarisation, which can discourage engagement.



- ◆ **Tokenism:** Consultations sometimes fail to influence real policy, creating frustration and apathy.
- ◆ **Institutional gaps:** Lack of sustainable funding and long-term strategies weakens continuity, especially in local contexts.



## Further reading and resources

- ✦ Bielecka, E. (Ed.). (2022). *Youth participation and solidarity: Handbook for students and teachers of social professions*. Wydawnictwo Akademickie. [https://young.uwb.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Bielecka-E.-ed.-Youth-Participation-and-Solidarity\\_2022.pdf](https://young.uwb.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Bielecka-E.-ed.-Youth-Participation-and-Solidarity_2022.pdf)
- ✦ Council of Europe. (2015). *Have your say! Manual on the revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life*. <https://rm.coe.int/16807023e0>
- ✦ European Center for Not-for-Profit Law - ECNL. (2023). *New dimensions for public participation: Models to enhance engagement in the European Union*. [https://ecnl.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/ECNL\\_New%20dimensions%20for%20public%20participation\\_Nov%202023.pdf](https://ecnl.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/ECNL_New%20dimensions%20for%20public%20participation_Nov%202023.pdf)
- ✦ European Committee of the Regions. (2022). *Charter on youth and democracy*. [https://www.youthforum.org/files/EU-Charter-on-Youth-and-Democracy\\_signed.pdf](https://www.youthforum.org/files/EU-Charter-on-Youth-and-Democracy_signed.pdf)
- ✦ European Youth Forum. (n.d.). *Policy and advocacy resources*. <https://www.youthforum.org>
- ✦ Golombek, S. (Ed.). (2002). *What works in youth participation: Case studies around the world*. International Youth Foundation. [https://iyfglobal.org/sites/default/files/WW\\_Youth\\_Participation.pdf](https://iyfglobal.org/sites/default/files/WW_Youth_Participation.pdf)
- ✦ Gretschel, A., Kiilakoski, T., & Levamo, T.M. (2015). *Youth participation: Good practices in different forms of regional and local democracy*. Finnish Youth Research Society. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.4315.0806>



- ✦ Moś, B. (2021). *Practical dimensions of youth policy implementation in Poland on the example of the Europe4Youth Association*. Europe4Youth. <https://rep.up.krakow.pl/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11716/10791/YCEE-2020-05--Practical-dimensions--Mos.pdf>
- ✦ European Democracy Youth Network & European Partnership for Democracy. (2023). *Youth Participation Handbook*. [https://youthdemocracycohort.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/YDC\\_Handbook\\_web.pdf](https://youthdemocracycohort.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/YDC_Handbook_web.pdf)
- ✦ Critical Thinkers Project. (2022–2023). *Toolbox: Educational materials on critical thinking and active participation*. [https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/toolbox\\_tool\\_download-file-3393/Toolbox%20A4\\_compressed.pdf](https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/toolbox_tool_download-file-3393/Toolbox%20A4_compressed.pdf)

All sources accessed September 15th, 2025.



**Co-funded by  
the European Union**

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

Project code: KA220-YOU-000286883