



Youth Participation in the EU: Influence, Activism & Network



Introduction

Youth participation is a cornerstone of democratic societies and is closely linked to EU values such as equality, solidarity, human rights, and the rule of law. With challenges such as declining voter turnout, political polarisation, and social fragmentation, empowering youth to engage actively in civic and political life has become more important than ever.

Young people are not only future leaders but also present agents of change. They influence their communities through both traditional and digital means – from voting and consultations to protests and grassroots organising. Their active involvement helps ensure that policymaking remains inclusive, representative, and future-oriented.



Key concepts and definitions

- ◆ Youth participation refers to the active involvement of young people in civic, political, social, and economic life. This includes formal actions such as voting, as well as informal activities like volunteering and campaigning.
- ◆ The **EU Youth Dialogue** is a key consultation mechanism that allows youth to contribute directly to EU policy discussions.
- ◆ **Youth-led activism** often takes place outside traditional political structures, enabling young people to act collectively on pressing issues.
- ◆ **Digital participation** involves using social media and other online tools to raise awareness, mobilise peers, and engage in policy dialogue.
- ◆ The **EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027** identifies participation as one of its central priorities under the call to “Engage, Connect, Empower.”



Real-world examples

- ◆ **Fridays for Future (EU chapters)** is one of the most visible youth movements. Through school strikes and demonstrations, it has placed climate justice at the forefront of political agendas across Europe.
- ◆ The **EU Youth Dialogue** brings together young people, youth organisations, and policymakers through regular consultation cycles. Its recommendations have shaped policies such as Erasmus+ and the Youth Guarantee.
- ◆ The **Federation of Young European Greens (FYEG)** connects green-minded youth organisations across Europe. It empowers them through advocacy, training, and active participation in elections.
- ◆ **Youth Participation Projects (YPPs)**, funded by Erasmus+, include youth parliaments, civic campaigns, and simulations of democratic processes, offering hands-on engagement with policymaking.
- ◆ **Digital initiatives** like the Youth Participation Pool and webinars organised by SALTO Youth broaden access to participation, particularly for young people in rural or underserved regions.



Data and statistics

- ◆ 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, **over 60% of youth** participate in informal activities such as protests, petitions, or volunteering, showing strong engagement beyond formal politics (European Youth Forum).
- ◆ Digital platforms are widely used: **more than 70% of young people** engage politically via Instagram, TikTok, or Twitter (Eyes on Europe, 2020).



However, **inclusion gaps** persist. Marginalised groups such as NEETs, minorities, and rural youth are less likely to participate, though targeted outreach and mentoring programmes are helping to address this.

Countries with stronger systems of non-formal education and youth councils – such as Finland, Austria, and the Netherlands – report higher levels of civic engagement, underlining the role of institutional support.



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

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