



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

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