

WALKING THE WALK

PRIORITIZING YOUTH POLITICAL
AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN
RENEWING DEMOCRACY

PRODUCED BY

WITH SUPPORT AND ENDORSEMENTS FROM

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Global Hub for
Participatory
Democracy



**RESTLESS
DEVELOPMENT**

TOP TAKEAWAYS:

1. Young people are losing trust in institutional politics as they face unprecedented economic inequality and witness policy stagnation on critical long-term issues like climate change. This growing **crisis in global youth political and civic engagement** must be prioritized if we are to successfully reverse decade-long trends of democratic backsliding;

2. This lack of trust in institutional politics, however, should not be mistaken for apathy, or a lack of political interest. Young activists are taking urgent and real action by engaging in informal means, using **collective action to address concerns of shrinking civic space, digital disinformation, corruption, and participation in meeting community needs;**

3. A failure to recognize this informal action, and address the root causes of youth discontentment, leads to a vicious cycle: from young people, who feel that institutional politics cannot work, and from governments who struggle to understand the desires and motivations of the youngest generations and are unable or unwilling to engage with young people's informal political engagement activities. **The more governments fail to account for the opinions of young people, the more this substantiates young people's sense that their voices do not matter. Subsequently, young people are less likely to engage with institutional politics, and the less visible youth voices are to governments. The vicious cycle continues;**

4. Donors and governments committed to democratic progress are **leaving substantial returns on investment unrealized** by not addressing this cycle. There is an imperative to recognize informal methods of youth engagement, and create intentional youth-specific channels for investment on youth civic and political engagement. Thousands of national and locally youth-led democracy organizations could expand their impact if donors intentionally supported their development and work;

5. It is not only possible, but necessary, to **convert increased specific prioritization and investments in youth-led democratic engagement efforts into real outcomes**, simultaneously benefiting millions of youth, and democracy, rights, and governance technical outcomes.



Executive Summary

Democracy is at risk. Across the world, democracy, as a governing concept and societal organizing ideology, is at the proverbial tipping point.


In the midst of rightful concern about the future of democracy, the United States Biden Administration's Summit for Democracy is a welcome and needed event. The principal themes of defending against authoritarianism, fighting corruption, and promoting respect for human rights are critical levers in any effort to revive democracy. These themes are also insufficient.

Writing in the context of this critical moment, we propose that hope and progress can be found not only among the governing authorities who promise wide-ranging reforms, but perhaps primarily from young people who stand just outside the spotlight. Across the world, youth are taking umbrage and rising up in the midst of growing authoritarianism and closing civic spaces, protesting crackdowns on human rights, and bravely organizing in the face of increasingly hostile and corrupt political environments. **Young people are redefining and recreating democracy itself.**

Globally, young people are often generalized as apathetic and seen as increasingly turning away from democracy. We believe, contrary to this dominant narrative, that our youngest generations can be—and in many places are already—the primary drivers of democratic renewal. The collective hesitancy to recognize this advocacy and organizing is a product not of apathy itself, but rather of conceptual limitations about what actually counts as political action and civic engagement. True modes of political and civic participation have radically transformed in recent years as a result of youth innovation amidst a political landscape where formal civic spaces are closing and where the world's challenges—accelerating inequality, climate crisis, and racial injustice—have become existential in scale.

Young people are not turning away from democracy as an ideal, but rather, oppose the particular traditional forms of democracy that they are experiencing in their own lives. They are growing increasingly frustrated with governments who are unresponsive, and who fail to prioritize issues that young people find critical to their future.

This youth political discontent should provoke real and immediate action. It is critical that any effort toward democratic renewal focuses on young people. This bedrock principle includes elevating youth as critical actors in promoting democracy, understanding how they conceive of the idea of democracy, and seeking out ways they are informally engaging inside and outside of more traditional, formalized mechanisms. This principle also entails moving beyond paying lip service



to young people, and instead, investing serious resources in youth political engagement efforts around the world.

This report will articulate the ways that young people are distrustful of formal political institutions, explore the ramifications of youth formal political disengagement, and argue for the importance of involving young people in the democratic process. It will also explore emerging forms of youth democratic engagement based on interviews and case studies with youth activists and civic engagement practitioners from around the world, showcasing the ways that young people are participating in the democratic process in creative and often unexpected ways.

Released just prior to a Democracy Summit that will explicitly focus on commitments that governments can make to promote democracy and lead into a Year of Action, the report will offer concrete recommendations to governments around the world, international bodies, funders, and organizations on ways to ensure that young people are front and center in any democratic renewal efforts. **These recommendations include investing significantly financially in youth political engagement, providing concrete opportunities for young people to engage in the political process through lowering existing barriers to entry for participation and being part of government itself, training elected officials to recognize and appreciate youth political engagement, and officially and urgently elevating young people as a critical leverage point in efforts to promote democratic reform.**

It is the hope that this report is iterative and actionable, catalyzing a conversation, and potential formal alliance of youth-serving organizations, in the Year of Action that will follow the Democracy Summit. If we wish for democracy to survive, and thrive, young people must be not afterthoughts, but at the very center.

The new "Global Alliance for Youth Political Action" consulted significantly on the material in this report and subsequent recommendations. The Alliance consists of: Accountability Lab, Community of Democracy, Democracy Moves, International Foundation for Electoral Systems, the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, People Powered, and Restless Development.

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1

INTRODUCTION

THE PROBLEM OF DEMOCRATIC EROSION

Across the world, democracy is backsliding. Dictatorships are on the rise. Civil liberties are in rapid decline. Far-right xenophobic and racist political parties are quickly gaining traction and power across the globe in the midst of intensifying political polarization. The growing sense of economic and political dissatisfaction felt by the public is metastasizing into deep and enduring skepticism about whether democracy can actually work. This democratic decay and breakdown are all occurring amidst unprecedented economic and political inequality—all of which has been worsened throughout the global COVID-19 pandemic and its unequal response, in which more affluent countries dominated the early stages of vaccine distribution. In the eyes of many, democracy, compounded by concurrent policy crises of existential proportions, has failed to deliver on its promises of effective governance in regions across the globe.

As these crises unfold, many democratic leaders seem more concerned with capturing power than representing citizen interests, and they seem increasingly likely to undercut civil liberties to maintain control than to cultivate a truly democratic culture. A vitriolic form of polarization, in which individuals increasingly demonize people who do not think like them, is enabling the rise of authoritarian regimes. At the same time, vibrant civic spaces are encroached upon, as governments work to limit privacy and free speech norms at the heart of a democratic ethos, while simultaneously promoting elite interests. Given these realities, it is perhaps logical that individuals are becoming so cynical about democracy's capacity to deliver.


The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2020 report underscores this democratic erosion: less than nine percent of the world's population live in a "full democracy," while more than a third live under authoritarian rule. In a moment in time in which governments across the world have used the COVID-19 pandemic to impose restrictions on movement, curtail civil liberties, and consolidate power, these disconcerting landscapes continue to worsen. The index's average global score fell to its lowest ever since the index was first produced in 2006.¹

Echoing this index, a report published in March 2021 by the Swedish research organization V Dem found that the level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen is down to the levels last found around 1990, or around the end of the Cold War. By V Dem's measurements, the most common form of government has become an elected autocracy, "a political regime in which democracy is reduced to the unconstrained power of a majority." Their study finds that these electoral autocracies, along with 'closed autocracies' (who rule without even the veneer of popular elections) are home to 68 percent of the world's population. V Dem indicates that there are now only 32 liberal democracies in the world, equating to 14 percent of the total global population share.²

Perhaps as important as these statistics is the reality that many publics themselves are increasingly distrusting of democracy. A recent report from the University of Cambridge's Centre for the Future of Democracy analyzed data across 154 countries, including over four million respondents in their analysis. The results found that public confidence in democracy is at its lowest point since the conception of the time-series research in 1995. Throughout the US, Western Europe, Africa, and Latin America, this deep democratic decay is largely the result of economic shocks, corruption scandals, and policy crises.

¹ "Democracy Index 2020," Economist Intelligence Unit, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/>.

² Nazifa Alizada, Rowan Cole, Lisa Castaldi, Sandra Grahm, Sebastian Hellmeier, Palina Kolvani, Jean Lachapelle, Anna Lührmann, Seraphine F. Maerz, Shreya Pillai, and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2021. Autocratization Turns Viral. Democracy Report 2021. University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute.



Yet, despite rising distrust in democratic performance, studies also show that people around the world still see value in democracy. That is, while some reports show rising discontent with poor democratic governance, others highlight a widespread desire for the fundamental freedoms embodied in democracy. This apparent contradiction in attitudes might be best explained by drawing a sharp and real distinction between the promises of democracy and its imperfect institutional expression. Democracy in words only constitutes a much different lived reality for individuals.

The 2021 Democracy Perception Index indicates that of 50,000 respondents polled across 53 countries, 81 percent say that it is important to have democracy in their country, but only 53 percent of people say that their country is actually democratic. These numbers suggest that democratic decay and democratic dissatisfaction may be better understood not as a pessimism towards democracy in principle, but as discontent over their particular countries' practice.

For decades, citizens have been asked to trust in a governmental process that they have been told will protect their rights, give them a voice, and strive for greater economic and political equality. The reality, however, is that we are seeing more and more economic and political inequality. For many populations, policing has ceased to represent an institution of public safety, and has instead threatened marginalized communities with brutality, and been used to crush political opposition. Citizens around the world have seen wealth gaps widen both within their own countries and also between more and less affluent countries. Closing civic spaces means that many citizens are fearful to voice their opinions in the public arena. A worsening climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic have only reinforced a sense that citizen's voices are not being heard and that economic and social support is profoundly lacking. Why should people defend democracy when democracy has not improved their lives? This is a complicated question that this report cannot answer in detail.

We propose that part of the answer in solving for these democratic challenges may lie with an oft-ignored demographic: young people.

³ Foa, R.S., Klassen, A., Slade, M., Rand, A. and R. Collins. 2020. "The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020." Cambridge, United Kingdom: Centre for the Future of Democracy.

⁴ "Democracy Perception Index." Latana. <https://latana.com/democracy-perception-index/>.

A FOCUS ON YOUNG PEOPLE:

In the midst of this global democratic backsliding is another reality: this frustration with underperforming democracies has translated into real and intensive action- especially from young people, who are demanding a better, more just, and more equitable future, and in turn, seeking to redefine democracy itself. These young people exemplify a desire to participate in decisions affecting their welfare and an impatience with governments that exclude youth voices.

During 2020, in the wake of George Floyd's murder, millions of young Americans gathered on the street, demanding justice, racial equality, and overdue policy reforms. Young activists maintained protests for years in Hong Kong despite of crack downs from the Chinese government. Young people in Sudan and Myanmar are pushing back against the military-led coups to restore democratic government. Likewise, the youngest generations continue the push for democracy throughout the Middle East.

Young people of diverse identities and backgrounds are demanding democracy.

The legitimacy of these youth-led efforts often go unrecognized despite the obvious intensive action, young people are too often cast to the side as marginal players and left out of the concrete decisions surrounding political reforms. At best, they are tokenized, rather than taken seriously, by more powerful political actors that discount youth contributions. This is especially true for young women and young people of diverse identities and backgrounds, who face additional barriers to participate and are often discounted and excluded based on gender and identity. The disregard for youth participation may also stem from a perception that 'youth' is a temporary status or a belief that young people are unrealistic in policy demands.

The reality is that youth are revitalizing democracy through pushing back against authoritarian rule and closing civic spaces, fighting against corruption while promoting integrity and transparency, and clamoring for the expansion of human rights. Any real effort to renew democracy should recognize these efforts, and authentically engage and invest in young people- making space for them to re-envision and meaningfully participate in the creation of a more equitable democratic future.





GOING BEYOND YOUTH APATHY: UNDERSTANDING YOUNG PEOPLE'S FRUSTRATION WITH POLITICS

Rather than a symptom of democratic decay, youth disengagement can be better understood as a measure of true democratic shortcomings. The cynicism of young people towards institutional politics should not be read as another reason to be hopeless about democracy's prospects globally, but rather as an indicator that change is necessary if democracy is to be viable in their particular countries and regional contexts.

How can we reconcile youth-led democratic reform with the reality that young people are voting at lower rates around the world? What is the balance between young people distrusting democracy and institutional politics and envisioning a new form of political engagement?

To answer these questions, youth demands and their associated unconventional modes of political participation must be taken seriously. Below, we discuss a few common discontents expressed by young people across the globe.

YOUTH MISTRUST IN INSTITUTIONAL POLITICS

Clearly, young people are taking action. But despite this intensive youth action, the global democratic decay, and frustration with formal political institutions, is especially worrisome amongst our youngest populations. Indeed, 24 percent of U.S. millennials consider democracy to be a “bad” or “very bad” way of running the country. Young people in Europe demonstrated similar beliefs: 13 percent of European youth aged 16 to 24 expressed such a view, up from 8 percent among the same age group in the mid-1990s.⁵ Almost half of European youth (48 percent) no longer regard democracy as the “best form of government,” with majorities taking this stance in France (58 percent) and Italy (55 percent), with most skeptics saying that democracy is “just as good or bad” as other forms of government.⁶

While younger generations may often express frustration with politics, this level of dissatisfaction is historically anomalous. Globally, youth satisfaction with democracy is declining relative to how older generations felt at the same stages in life. This is the first generation in living memory to have a global majority who are dissatisfied with the way democracy works while in their twenties and thirties. By their mid-thirties, 5 percent of global millennials say they are dissatisfied with democracy.⁷

For example, in the United States, a recent survey demonstrated that one quarter of millennials agreed that “choosing leaders through free elections is unimportant.” Just 14 percent of Baby Boomers and 10 percent of older Americans agreed.⁸ Only approximately a third of US millennials view civil rights as “absolutely essential” in a democracy, compared with 41 percent among older Americans. In the European Union, the rates are 39 percent and 45 percent, respectively.⁹

⁵ Haerpfer, C., Inglehart, R., Moreno, A., Welzel, C., Kizilova, K., Diez-Medrano J., M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin & B. Puranen et al. (eds.), 2021. World Values Survey Time-Series (1981-2020) Cross-National Data-Set. Madrid, Spain & Vienna, Austria: JD Systems Institute & WVS Secretariat.

⁶ “Young Europe 2017 the Youth Study.” TUI Foundation. Accessed November 24, 2021. https://www.tui-stiftung.de/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/All-results-TUI-Stiftung_European-Youth.pdf.

This distrust in formal politics leads to less participation in the political process itself. Young people are increasingly turning away from voting, and more so than previous generations. Survey results from a sample of 33 countries indicate that only around 44 per cent of young adults aged 18 to 29 years “always vote”, compared with almost 60 percent of all citizens. Among those over the age of 50, the corresponding rate is more than 70 percent.¹⁰

Importantly, voter turnout among young people has decreased in all democracies since the 1980s. Amongst EU member states, almost 60 percent of eligible voters between 16 or 18 and 24 years old opted not to vote in their country's most recent national election. In Asia, the youth turnout rate in the region is generally 15–30 percent lower than that of people older than 35. In Africa, youth are about twice as likely (34 percent) to have skipped voting in their last national election as middle-aged (19 percent) and older (14 percent) citizens. This voting gap between youth and seniors is 30 percentage points or more in countries like Botswana, Lesotho, Côte d'Ivoire and Gabon¹¹

Relatedly, political parties are facing difficulties in attracting new party members, and in particular young people. The 2016 UN Global Youth Report demonstrates that political party membership is less prevalent among those under the age of 30 than among older adults¹²

Young people are increasingly turning away from formal political parties as a means of democratic expression.

Young people are often treated as either apathetic or uneducated to explain the increasing disillusionment with democracy. But the rationale for the frustration with the governmental institutions that have defined their lives run deep, and this frustration is, in many cases, logical. Amongst other reasons, this increasing distrust for democracy and institutional politics can be explained through the reality that young people have encountered historically challenging financial realities, feel that their government is not taking effective action on vital issues, and do not think that their government actively listens to their concerns.

7 Foa, R.S., Klassen, A., Slade, M., Rand, A. and R. Collins. 2020. “The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020.” Cambridge, United Kingdom: Centre for the Future of Democracy.

8 Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk, “The Democratic Discontent,” *Journal of Democracy*, July 2016.

9 Ibid.

10 “UN World Youth Report – United Nations.” https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2018/12/un_world_youth_report_youth_civic_engagement.pdf.

11 Asiamah, Gildfred, Ousmane Djiby Sambou, and Sadhiska Bhoojdhur. “Analysis | Are African Governments Doing Enough to Help Young People? Here’s What Afrobarometer Surveys Reveal.” *The Washington Post*, January 15, 2021.

12 UN World Youth Report – United Nations

A GENERATION INHERITING UNPRECEDENTED ECONOMIC PRECARITY

Due to a number of factors, including the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath, the propagation of inequitable economic policies, and the COVID-19 pandemic, younger generations are predicted to be worse off financially than their parents' generation. Accordingly, levels of wealth inequality are one of the few covariates of the democratic satisfaction "gap" between older and younger generations. There is also a strong relationship between past income inequality and the current generational gap in satisfaction with democracy.¹³

In the United States, for example, millennials make up close to a quarter of the population but hold just 3 percent of wealth – whereas baby boomers held 21 percent of wealth at the same age. Correspondingly, across the globe, controlling for fluctuations in overall employment, excess youth unemployment correlates strongly with youth perceptions of democratic performance. For example, younger citizens took the brunt of the recent Eurozone crisis, which sent youth unemployment rates 25 percentage points above the average. Accordingly, youth assessments of democratic performance soured.¹⁴

African youth similarly experience financial difficulties. Africa has the world's youngest population, and a median age of 19.7 years. But according to a recent African Development Bank report, one-third of Africa's 420 million young people between the ages of 15 and 35 are unemployed, another third is vulnerably employed, and only 1 in 6 are employed in the formal employment sector. A recent World Bank report found that on average 72 percent of the youth population in Africa lives with less than US\$2 per day. The incidence of poverty among young people in Nigeria, Ethiopia, Uganda, Zambia and Burundi is over 80 percent.¹⁵

It should be noted that young people in poorer countries are actually more optimistic about their economic prospects than those in wealthier countries. A recent UNICEF survey of 21,000 young people around the world found that about two-thirds of young people (15-24 year-olds) in low-income countries thought that today's children would be better off financially than their parents, compared to 43 percent of young Americans. This does not necessarily speak to optimism with democracy itself, but rather, a belief in their own ability to help build a better lives for themselves, and their families.

Throughout the world, young people are suffering economically, disproportionately to previous generations, despite democratic governments that have promised better results. It is perhaps logical that young people are distrustful of a system that continually leads to such dismal economic prospects for their generation.

¹³ Foa, R.S., Klassen, A., Slade, M., Rand, A. and R. Collins. 2020. "The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020." Cambridge, United Kingdom: Centre for the Future of Democracy.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "Final Briefing Note: Income Inequality in Africa." African Development Bank Group. <https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Policy-Documents/FINAL%20Briefing%20Note%205%20Income%20Inequality%20in%20Africa.pdf>.

INACTION ON VITAL LONG-TERM ISSUES:

Young people also often feel that governments and public officials opt for political expediency rather than taking action on long-term issues critical for them, and for broader society. In a recent survey of 10 countries, young people overwhelmingly rated their government's response to climate change negatively. Only 33 percent of respondents believed that the government is protecting future generations. More than half believed the government is betraying future generations (58 percent) failing young people (65 percent), lying about the impact of its actions (64 percent), and dismissing people's distress (60 percent). In all, 60 percent of those sampled disagreed with every positive statement and agreed with every negative statement. While results vary among countries, across all respondents, reports of democratic betrayal outweighed feelings of reassurance.

YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF GOVERNMENT



58%

believe the government is betraying future generations

65%

believe the government is failing young people

64%

believe the government lies about the impact of its actions

60%

believe the government dismisses people's distress



83%

believe the government has failed to care for the planet

75%

young people said humanity is doomed

92%

youth called the future frightening

Similarly, a recent survey of 10,000 young people across the world, conducted by researchers at the University of Bath, NYU Langone Health, and other institutions, found that 83 percent of young people said that the government has failed to care for the planet. In India, nearly 75 percent of young people said humanity is doomed. In the Philippines, 92 percent of youth called the future frightening.

In the United States specifically, young people are skeptical that the government is serious about addressing issues of racial inequity. In the wake of Ferguson and other racially charged conflicts, 49 percent of millennials said they had "not much" or "no" confidence in the American justice system.

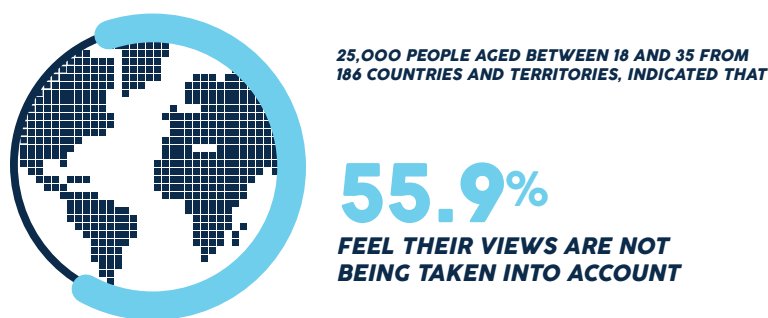
Young people do not feel like the government is serious about addressing long-term public challenges like climate and racial justice, and respond with overall cynicism and distrust.

¹⁷ Marks, Elizabeth and Hickman, Caroline and Pihkala, Panu and Clayton, Susan and Lewandowski, Eric R. and Mayall, Elouise E. and Wray, Britt and Mellor, Catriona and van Susteren, Lise, Young People's Voices on Climate Anxiety, Government Betrayal and Moral Injury: A Global Phenomenon. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3918955>.

¹⁸ Hickman, Caroline and Marks, Elizabeth and Pihkala, Panu and Clayton, Susan and Lewandowski, Eric R. and Mayall, Elouise E. and Wray, Britt and Mellor, Catriona and van Susteren, Lise, Young People's Voices on Climate Anxiety, Government Betrayal and Moral Injury: A Global Phenomenon. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3918955>.

A LACK OF FORMAL YOUTH REPRESENTATION AND VOICE

Perhaps at the foundation of their frustration with formal politics is the fact that many young people do not feel like the public officials actually listen to their voices and opinions. In a recent survey of 13,500 young people from 186 countries, respondents attributed the biggest political inclusion and representation challenges to the ignorance and indifference of people in positions of authority (50 percent), and the lack of support and commitment towards young people including support to youth branches of political organizations (49.8 percent)²⁰



A recent Global Shapers Survey, which included over 25,000 people aged between 18 and 35 from 186 countries and territories, indicated that nearly 56 percent of respondents believe their views are not being taken into account before important decisions are made.

These viewpoints are not just speculative- young people, especially young women, are quite literally not represented in their governmental institutions. According to UN Youth, people aged 15 to 24 year-olds make up one-sixth of the world's population but, in roughly one-third of countries, the eligibility for parliamentarians begins at 25 years old. Relatedly, only 1.6 percent of parliamentarians are in their twenties. Young people are largely being excluded and overlooked, both as political candidates and even as participants in political processes, giving them limited political control over their own futures.²¹

This inequity in representation leads to a system in which young people are often only able to speak from outside the structures of power. Stuck in a system of patronage and self-service, young see themselves as merely passive recipients of decisions and goodwill from elderly politicians. Accordingly, the distrust in politicians, frustration with the political process, and decaying trust in democracy itself, is understandable, maybe even logical.

²⁰ "Global Survey Report on Youth SWAP." <https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2018/02/Global-Survey-Report-on-Youth-SWAP.pdf>.

²¹ "Formal Representation for Young People Enhances Politics for All." Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank, November 3, 2020. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/09/formal-representation-young-people-enhances-politics-all>.

A VICIOUS CYCLE: RAMIFICATIONS OF YOUTH FRUSTRATION

There are serious ramifications to this youth frustration and disengagement from formal political institutions, for their own well-being, for communities, for governments, and for the broader institution of democracy. A failure to address the root cause of this discontent may lead to continued frustrations from both young people who feel that institutional politics cannot work, and simultaneously from governments who struggle to understand the desires and motivations of the youngest generations and are unable or unwilling to engage with young people's informal political engagement activities. Despite young peoples' efforts to carve out democratic spaces outside of these conventional spaces, a vicious cycle of inaction often renders these efforts powerless, thus feeding back into a youth rejection of formal politics.

The reality for young people is that democracy has become associated with a vicious cycle of inaction.²² Our youngest generations often continually feel like elected officials do not listen to their voices, as the government fails to engage with them or take action on pressing issues like climate change and inequality. In turn, young people do not participate in formalized political institutions that they feel like are systemically broken and corrupt.

When young people do not participate in formalized political structures, elected officials can grow frustrated that young people are not voting, showing up, or engaging in the traditional political process. Elected officials are prioritizing people who have power and resources and always vote, rather than people who are actually participating in politics in more informal ways. This leads to a reality in which elected officials are not prioritizing the perspectives of young people, or the issues that they deem as critical.

A VICIOUS CYCLE



The cycle continues as young people grow more frustrated with formal politics, and the democratic process itself. Governments generalize young people as unrealistic and impatient in their demands for political action. In turn, young people think that governments do not care about their issues, and are not taking action on the urgent issues that define the moment.

²² 42nd Harvard Youth Poll
<https://www.hks.harvard.edu/faculty-research/policy-topics/politics/harvard-youth-poll-finds-young-americans-gravely-worried>

²³ Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy, August 25, 2020. "Little Change in Public's Response to 'Capitalism,' 'Socialism.'"

²⁴ Pew Research Center, October, 2017, "Globally, Broad Support for Representative and Direct Democracy"

There is a danger that the disillusionment of young people goes beyond frustration and lends itself to an openness to alternatives to democracy itself. Studies have begun to show that young people, perhaps unconvinced that a deliberative, democratic process can actually lead to policy outcomes and results, are more apt to support alternative forms of government.

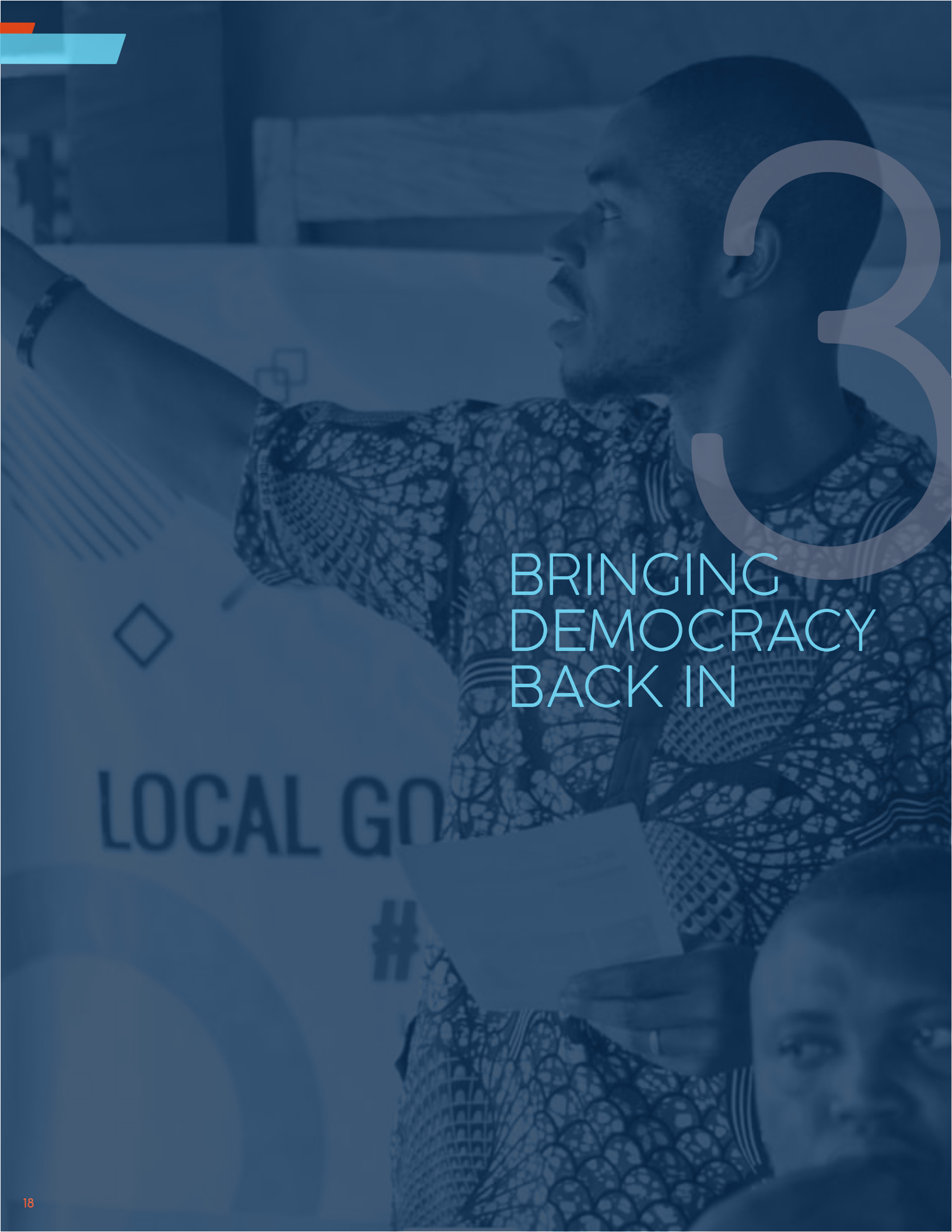
Firstly, young people seem more predisposed to authoritarianism than older generations. In a recent poll, 43 percent of older Americans voiced opposition to the idea of the military taking over when government is incompetent or failing to do its job. But only 19 percent of young people were opposed to the military taking over in such a situation. Relatedly, 29 percent of young Americans say that democracy is not always preferable to other political forms.

Additionally, statistics demonstrate that young people have become more attracted to technocracy, a form of government in which technical experts make decisions, rather than decision making through the democratic processes of deliberation and compromise. In the United States, 46 percent of 18-29 year olds indicate that it would be a good thing for experts, not elected officials to make decisions, whereas only 36 percent of those over 50 years of age indicate that belief. This same age differential between approval of experts, rather than elected officials making decisions, is even greater in Australia (19 points), Japan (18 points), the UK (14 points), Sweden (13 points) and Canada (13 points).

Furthermore, young people have indicated a greater recovery in satisfaction with democracy when populist leaders come to power. On average, individuals aged 18 to 34 articulated a 16 percentage-point increase in satisfaction with democracy during the first term in office of a populist leader, irrespective of whether this leader expressed left-leaning or right-leaning tendencies. Many populists do gain power railing against the elites and the inaction of entrenched governmental institutions, speaking to the experience of many young people. Populist proclivities, however, tend to be less about deepening democracy, and more about consolidating power, as seen in countries like Venezuela, Brazil, and the United States itself.

This glamorization of populists, technocrats, and other governing models might post another challenging reality of youth engagement in this moment. Young people are hungry for real, demonstrable change in a moment in which they have been so frustrated with a lack of real action from their elected officials. But they are beginning to associate this lack of action not only with institutional politics, but with democracy itself: perhaps viewing democracy as inextricably intertwined with corruption and a lack of real and intensive policy action.²⁵

²⁵ Foa, R.S., Klassen, A., Slade, M., Rand, A. and R. Collins. 2020. "The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020." Cambridge, United Kingdom: Centre for the Future of Democracy.



BRINGING DEMOCRACY BACK IN

BREAKING THE CYCLE: (RE) DEFINING DEMOCRACY

"Tell me what democracy looks like!" has become a common chant in protests across the United States and world in recent years. It was heard as activists took to the streets in response to former President Trump's election, in response to school shootings in recent years, in response to George Floyd's murder- and other incidents of police brutality.

But for young people, what does democracy look like? What does democracy even mean?

Does it look like citizens in the streets, demanding better, more equitable policies? Does it look like citizens in dialogue and compromising in town hall meetings on public issues like zoning and housing? Or does democracy actually manifest in populists like Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, and Narendra Modi being elected president through the will of the people?



Although democratic institutions represent a western concept for many people, the 'democracy' that young activists are fighting does not. Democracy is about voice, and individuals having the ability to participate, and have their opinions heard, and valued.

While young people may be turning away from poorly performing democratic institutions and processes, they are participating politically in new, vibrant, and creative ways. Understanding how young people view political participation, and meeting them where they are, is a vital component of any democratic renewal effort.

Studies have demonstrated that young people often engage in politics on a case-by case basis, embracing personally meaningful causes or issues that are often manifested through peer networks connected by new communication technologies. To that end, rather than voting, or other forms of established political engagement, globally, the top three forms of "issue-based engagement" are joining boycotts, signing petitions, and participating in demonstrations.

As an example, young Americans are increasingly turning to street demonstrations, with 27 percent of young people having said they engaged in a march or demonstration in 2020, a dramatic increase from when a similar question was asked to the same age group before the 2016 and 2018 elections (5 percent and 16 percent, respectively). Similarly, African youth are less likely than older generations to report attending a community meeting, contacting a political leader, or identifying with a political party. The exception is protest: nearly 20 percent of African youth say they participated in a protest in 2020, about 50 percent higher than those aged 56 or older.²⁸

The power of recognizing this new way that young people are engaging in democracy is that elected officials can learn about the concerns of their youngest constituents in new, more vibrant ways. Democracy can begin to be re-imagined beyond solely a process of voting. Instead, democracy becomes a more vibrant form of engaging individuals, and young people specifically, in the process of governance itself. Indeed, a broad swath of youth political engagement exists in the current moment, including national youth councils, youth parliaments, deliberative mechanisms (e.g., participatory budgeting), demonstration, and other forms of collective action.

²⁶ Haerpfer, C., Inglehart, R., Moreno, A., Welzel, C., Kizilova, K., Diez-Medrano J., M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin & B. Puranen et al. (eds.). 2021. World Values Survey Time-Series (1981-2020) Cross-National Data-Set. Madrid, Spain & Vienna, Austria: JD Systems Institute & WVS Secretariat.

²⁷ "Poll: Young People Believe They Can Lead Change in Unprecedented Election Cycle." CIRCLE at Tufts University, June 30, 2020. <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/poll-young-people-believe-they-can-lead-change-unprecedented-election-cycle>.

²⁸ Asiamah, Gildfred, Ousmane Djiby Sambou, and Sathiska Bhoojedor. "Analysis | Are African Governments Doing Enough to Help Young People? Here's What Afrobarometer Surveys Reveal." The Washington Post, January 15, 2021.



EXAMPLES OF CURRENT METHODS OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT:

In order to understand how young people are participating politically and how they conceive of democracy, the authors of this report conducted interviews and focus groups with a variety of youth activists and civic engagement practitioners from 32 countries across East and West Africa, Latin America, Central Asia, Eastern and Western Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and North America.

Through this process, we gained rich insight into the wide variety of programs that successfully engage young people in meaningful and powerful political participation. We spoke with young leaders working on civic education, youth assemblies, disability advocacy, free artistic expression, co-networking spaces, leadership training, campus organizing, and protesting inequitable policies. We plan to continue these conversations, as there are countless other examples of democratic engagement and creativity not yet represented in this report. This analysis should be seen as only a start into a broader exploration of youth political engagement in the current moment.

**BUILDING A TRUE DEMOCRATIC CULTURE,
BEYOND ELECTIONS AND GOVERNANCE**

**EDUCATING FOR A REAL,
CULTURALLY RELEVANT DEMOCRACY**

**INCLUDING AND PRIORITIZING
A DIVERSIFIED YOUTH LEADERSHIP**

**POLICYMAKING STARTING
FROM THE GRASSROOTS**

**YOUTH POLITICAL IDENTITY IS
TIED TO ISSUES, NOT PARTIES**

1. BUILDING A TRUE DEMOCRATIC CULTURE, BEYOND ELECTIONS AND GOVERNANCE

The authors of this report interviewed numerous organizers from countries where political corruption is extreme, where the integrity of voting mechanisms is crowded out by bribery, or where local conflict or dictatorial governance has made participating in formal politics improbable and ineffective. A common strategy to promote democratic engagement, in these contexts, is to turn to informal political venues—for example: political and dissident art, “socially-conscious” music, and hyper local mutual aid. Democracy, for many of these civic practitioners, is about something more than elections or engagement with representatives.

“Democracy,” says Daniel Orogó, a Kenyan, “is a culture as much as it is about voting. Democracy is impossible in a community without certain values of integrity, accountability, and commitment to equality.” (Daniel Orogó, Kenya, Uwazi Consortium).

For young people, democracy cannot solely be a governance concept. It needs to be cultural: an ideal infused in governmental parties, companies, and government alike.

Examples of this informal, disruptive political engagement in the face of oppression includes:

1. In Colombia, art collectives promote freedom of expression by providing a relatively safe venue and genre to voice opposition or raise awareness. Musicians, performance and visual artists thus cultivate and educate young leaders through artistic expression in a political landscape that might otherwise be hostile to them. (Bonnie Devine, Colombia, La Múcura)
2. In Chile, “common pots” or local soup kitchens and community based agricultural projects simultaneously provide mutual aid that is sensitive to local needs and give young leaders an opportunity to participate in democratic decision making with regards to the local community, its needs and their solutions. (Nacha Hernandez, Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad Católica de Chile)
3. In Nigeria, organizers have collaborated and co-created programs with regional musicians to spotlight socially conscious singers, songwriters, and producers, who use music to express values of integrity and accountability. For many young people, these spaces first sparked their interest in mechanisms of democratic governance—via music unions, for instance—in a context that is more approachable, interesting and hopeful than their formal political infrastructure. (CiviActs, Accountability Labs)
4. In Nigeria, organizers piloted the *Integrity Icon program* that spotlights leaders who exemplify values of integrity and transparency, opting for a strategy of “naming and faming” to provide a counterweight to discourses of despair. Focused on influencing a culture of democracy among politicians and leaders, such a strategy seeks to repair discourses among young people that formal politics is hopelessly corrupt. (Odeh Friday, Nigeria, Accountability Labs Nigeria)

5. Additionally, for young people, it is not sufficient for opposition parties, for example, to be against authoritarian governments if their structure itself is not democratic. Namatai Kwekweza, a young activist who founded Zimbabwean organization WeLead at the age of 18, an organization focused on youth leadership and development across the country, indicates that there is a deep distrust that the opposition is actually aligned with democratic values. Many young people fear that the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) exists solely as an alternative to the government itself. Namatai notes that the opposition members themselves “stick around for too long” and are generally older activists that do not heed the perspectives of the younger generation of movement leaders. Namatai asserts that the MDC itself is more interested in gaining power than promoting democratic reforms. She thinks they are almost as part of the entrenched systems as the ruling party itself.

Namatai notes that democracy must be a “way of living,” rather than just a system of governance. Whereas democracy for Kwekweza implies a contract that encapsulates inclusion, especially with respect to decision-making, she notes that many movements for democracy in Zimbabwe are exclusionary and sexist themselves, dominated by men who assert that their philosophy and decision-making approach is the right one. Namatai is skeptical that democracy itself can manifest itself through pure political change, but rather, needs to be nurtured and promoted throughout a broader populace. This youth push for a more democratic culture in Zimbabwe intersects with similar efforts in countries throughout the world, including the United States.

These examples demonstrate the virtues of adopting a more expansive understanding of democracy. Understanding democratic values as the foundation of political action, an ethos that underpins effective democratic participation, broadens the space that organizers can target in developing youth programs. By cultivating spaces where young people can feel safe engaging in politics, spotlighting values that are integral to a democratic culture, young people can begin to experience their participation as possible and powerful, cutting through otherwise common experiences of despair and hopelessness that can accompany conflict, crisis, and corruption. Democracy can and must become a cultural ideal, rather than solely a governance staple.



2. EDUCATING FOR A REAL, CULTURALLY RELEVANT DEMOCRACY

Among those interviewed, there was near universal agreement that access to high quality political education is a fundamental precondition towards deepening democracy in their countries and communities. An equally important secondary insight concerns the way in which this education is implemented. Organizers have found that political education programs are most effective when they meaningfully engage with youth skepticism towards democracy.

Calls for civic education are often associated with addressing democratic deficits. Civic education for young people is critical- but too focused on youth understanding how government works. This type of action risks being perceived as paternalistic in nature, and catering to the existing, more traditional forms of democratic engagement, like voting, or meeting with elected officials. Voting is a critical, but insufficient mechanism in engaging with the political process. Young people are calling out for a more comprehensive, holistic form of political that addresses the often oppressive nature of democracy in their communities and countries. Effective civics education must address why young people are skeptical of politics in the first place. Indeed, young people often have valid reasons to avoid adopting a dominant understanding of democracy, or to avoid traditional mainstream political education at all.

The skepticism of young Black Americans towards the history of democracy as taught in core curriculums, for instance, must be understood, respected, and addressed in any meaningful effort of political education. Interviewees in Mali, India, and Cameroon similarly described a rightful resistance by young people to models of democracy that are imported from the West. The most successful efforts of political education by these organizers are those that spend resources and time on adapting democratic principles to already historically rich political and social landscapes. In the words of one interviewer, the director of a think tank specializing in youth in conflict resolution,

“At first I was frustrated when young people always wanted to talk about traditional rulers and the traditional model of governance, but soon I learned to transform these into opportunities to discuss fears about their cultural heritage, how traditional rulers govern their village, about what the best practices are in their communities. I think that a truly modern democracy is one in which young people can feel their own traditions in politics, where they’ll see something very similar because democracy is about rule by the people, about giving power to the people, for the people.”

– El Hadj, Mali, Timbuktu Center for Strategic Studies on the Sahel.



In effective civics education programs, operative narratives (for example, about democracy and freedom) are rarely ever imposed. Rather than prescribing a universal model of governance or way of thinking, the young people prefer to engage in a synthetic and collaborative approach that acknowledges the agency and reasons that every young person has about political governance. To avoid this kind of paternalism, practitioners found the most success when they:

1. Spend significant time acknowledging discussing young people's hesitations and frustrations with their political landscape;
2. Acknowledge difficult histories of oppression, imperialism, and colonialism in communities and countries;
3. Bring in culturally relevant and customary leadership into their mentorship programs, including local and indigenous leaders;
4. Ensure that civics education is experiential in nature, and that young people are learning how to take action to improve their communities, rather than just taking in civics knowledge;
5. Center community based knowledge generation rather than top-down imposition of political models- acknowledge that young people have specific civic knowledge to bring to the table, rather than imposing governmental knowledge on them;

Organizers often understand their democratic and political work as a co-constructive project. They plan *with* young people instead of merely *for* them. This means elevating young leaders as well as adopting inclusive and participatory methodologies such as community self-census, community-owned data, feedback loops, etc. Regardless of the particular context and application, at the end of the day, such practices assume the fundamental principle that young people are equal partners and stakeholders in the process of civic engagement.



3. INCLUDING AND PRIORITIZING A DIVERSIFIED YOUTH LEADERSHIP

“Youth are not a homogeneous group. We must accept that because you might work with a young person who is working, another who is not working; there may be youth from rural areas, others from urban ones. All these dynamics have to be captured somehow.” – Anne Rose Osamba, Kenya and Uganda, East African Youth Peace Network (EAYPN).

Increasing youth representation in key decision making spaces is crucial –the perspectives of younger generations are invaluable to good governance and the overall health and sustainability of democratic systems requires that youth needs are genuinely taken into account. Many of the youth organizers interviewed for this report understood their work to be counter to political trends in their own countries to tokenize young people.

Just as many false promises are made to young people during election years, similar political optics drive appointments of young people to symbolic roles that grant little power or opportunity to effect change. Against these tendencies, organizers emphasize meaningful involvement in policy making, from policy formulation to its monitoring and evaluation. This means:

1. Placing youth at the center of the policymaking and implementation process; giving them direct experience in politics by eliminating the need for middlemen. This includes creating specific opportunities for young people in policy-making committees, and engaging in comprehensive training programs for young people to run for political office. Relatedly, the tokenization of young people in political debate should be minimized;
2. Providing material financial and educational resources as well as mentorship to young leaders in a collaborative, non-competitive manner.
3. Cultivating a generation of young leaders that are truly representative of the community.

Youth representatives cannot only hail from elite institutions, those with formal education, urban areas, literate backgrounds. Too often, international democratic engagement efforts focus on the same young people from more established and elite backgrounds. International political and democratic bodies must include and center youth voices from the Global South. Regional and country-level efforts must be representative of diversity of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds in their communities. Bringing diverse groups into conversation with the assumption that there is something to be learned by everyone is the bedrock of many of the successful initiatives we encountered in preparing this report.



4. POLICYMAKING STARTING FROM THE GRASSROOTS

Many of those interviewed were eager to share successful forms of grassroots policymaking as throughways into deepening youth participation in democratic processes. Methods discussed range from building local assemblies to facilitating community data collection and self-census. Such activities can be key components in a 'feedback loop' model of governance, where emphasis is placed primarily on building "a culture of feedback among stakeholders," "building trust and an environment conducive to collaboration between citizens, government and other stakeholders."²⁹

1. In Nepal, the *Civic Action Team* facilitates community sourced data, created and gathered by the community—in this case, more than 1500 migrant workers who are vulnerable to exploitation—which is later analyzed and used to amplify the voices of that community through infographics, local radio stations, and town hall meetings. This form of community self-census gives local government and communities material to come together and "discuss findings, validate data and co-create solutions to challenges," moving towards real time mechanisms of grievance redressal.
2. In Taiwan, a youth labor organization called YLU95 (Youth Labor Union 95) has found success in using community self-census methodologies not only to spread awareness about local labor protection laws³⁰ but also to build solidarity and political consciousness around their identity as young workers—an especially precarious category insofar as they are largely employed in temporary, part time work without benefits. The chairperson of the organization describes one successful effort to survey a college campus town, building solidarities through community geo-mapping.

"We surveyed students with part-time jobs about their employers' compliance with labor laws and their general working conditions. From there we have a physical map of the university campus and surrounding commercial areas that show students comparisons between their wages and highlight locations where illegal practices and dangerous working conditions had been reported."

The exercise of bringing young people together towards political self-understanding and collective grievance expression builds a foundation of political discourse that is integral to democratic cultures of political action. Organizers at the YLU95 remember this pilot program as the first key step towards recruiting students and workers into programs that aim to bring democracy into the workplace and into the classroom.

3. Turning to Kenya and Uganda, we interviewed Anne Rose Osamba, a champion of young people for peace and gender equality, on her experiences in successful local assemblies. With years of experience in facilitating need assessments, Osamba has found that baseline surveys—on, say, school and work opportunities—are an essential way to connect local policymaking efforts to the grassroots. Conducting these surveys in informal spaces can inform local assemblies on critical issues and choice points in the community. One of these surveys,

²⁹ Soni Khanal, "Lessons from Civic Action Teams on Building Accountability" Feedback Labs, February 13, 2020.
URL: <https://feedbacklabs.org/blog/2020/02/13/lessons-from-civic-action-teams-on-building-accountability-through-feedback/>

for instance, “incubated the idea of bringing services for national identity card applications directly to young people instead of having to go to physical offices themselves.” Such insights became central to that local assembly in efforts to “demand accountability from politicians since the incubators helped structure the assembly by clear goals, helped connect them to formal mechanisms, and educated young people on a combination of methods like advocacy, movement building, and analysis of power dynamics.”

Organizers and civic engagement practitioners are innovating on mechanisms of grassroots policy making everyday—these are but a few bright spots that illustrate the wide reach of such programs. In Nepal, Taiwan, Kenya and Uganda, communities are using self-census and community survives towards a variety of democracy initiatives: in developing more effective local assemblies, engaging youth in local governments, steering political leaders towards integrating robust mechanisms of democratic participation, building youth solidarity and political consciousness, and creating spaces where young people can learn about what democracy really is.



5. YOUTH POLITICAL IDENTITY IS TIED TO ISSUES, NOT PARTIES

Young people are increasingly engaging in emerging, transnational activism for democratic change. These movements are elevating common challenges, like fighting authoritarianism and climate change, promoting solidarity between like-minded groups, and exploring best practices, like bringing attention to issues through digital activism and the arts. **Young people identify more with issues than with traditional political parties.**

Grace Gondwe, a Zambian activist and the Founder of an organization called Be Relevant, helped to organize young people in the midst of the 2021 Zambian election, which resulted in the election of opposition candidate Hakainde Hichilema. Over 50 percent of the Zambian electorate is under the age of 35, and they turned out in droves to force out the ruling party.

But according to Gondwe, this youth surge should not be associated with support for Hichilema himself. “The issues of livelihoods and economic and financial empowerment supersedes political affiliations,” according to Gondwe, “We know that if these guys don’t deliver, we can get them out. We know that we have that power in our hands.”

We see this commitment to action and issues throughout the world, and it provides the potential for youth solidarity across borders. We see this type of transnational youth activism throughout the Arab Spring, when young people throughout the Middle East captured stories of government brutality and shared them on social media, broadcast a common message, and shared techniques of nonviolent resistance.

We see it currently with #EndSARS, a Nigerian youth movement protesting police brutality in Nigeria. Rather than serving as solely a Nigerian campaign, the effort has gained transnational attention, combining forces with #BlackLivesMatter protests across the US. In Canada, Germany, and New Zealand, young people have used legislative and judicial processes to lower the voting age to 16. We are seeing it with a growing movement to end vaccine nationalism.

These transnational movements are not just about shared experiences or an affiliation of political parties, but about shared demands. The cumulative effect is pressure that was previously unimaginable. The solutions, from climate to suffrage to global access to vaccines, are similarly transnational in nature.

There may not be a more critical moment to focus on youth democratic engagement. Throughout the world, the COVID-19 pandemic caused serious disruptions in education, employment, food security, and the ability to find good-paying and sustainable employment opportunities. It is high-time, however, to see young people not just as the victims of the pandemic, but as potential purveyors of the keys to a new, more vibrant democratic future.




4

RECOMMENDATIONS

We hope that this report catalyzes a broader, more nuanced conversation on how young people are conceiving of democratic engagement at this critical moment in time and leads to concrete impact and investment. Too often, young people are criticized for being apathetic and turning away from democracy, when the reality is more complex: young people are pushing back, in creative, organic, and increasingly urgent ways, against formal political institutions that they feel have led to closed civic spaces, authoritarian leaders, and heavy corruption. We also recognize too many recommendations on young people are too broad in nature, and center on ensuring that they are brought to the proverbial table.



A blue-tinted photograph of a city street scene. In the foreground, a person wearing a dark jacket with white sleeves and dark pants is holding a megaphone to their mouth, appearing to shout or speak. To the left, another person is partially visible, holding a sign. In the background, there are more people and a building with a sign that reads "CALZ. TAXQUEM".

To that end, recognizing that the Summit on Democracy will involve governments around the world making specific commitments on how they plan to promote democracy over the course of a next year of action, we humbly offer the following specific recommendations following the themes of the report. We are hopeful that these recommendations could be taken up by the governments involved in the Summit for Democracy, including the United States, and other prominent funders.

We should note that governments should recognize that the terms “youth” and “young people” do not always reflect the diversity of the youth population. Many young people hold diverse identities who face additional barriers to participation and representation, including, but not limited to, young women, young people with disabilities, LGBTQI+ youth, ethnic and religious minority youth, and Indigenous youth. All young people also face different starting points to political engagement based on their environment (for example, rural and urban youth, those affected by conflict), which should be an additional consideration for all of these recommendations.

**ELEVATE THE IMPORTANCE OF
YOUTH IN THE GLOBAL CAMPAIGN
FOR DEMOCRACY**

**MEET YOUNG PEOPLE
WHERE THEY ARE**

GET CREATIVE

**INVEST SIGNIFICANTLY IN YOUTH
POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT**

**ENSURE YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE REAL
DECISION-MAKING POWER**

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

- 1. Elevate the Importance of Youth in the Global Campaign for Democracy:** Too often, young people are not explicitly mentioned as key actors in the movement for democracy, cast to the side, or regarded as one of a host of marginalized groups.

Young people, while transient in definition, need to be elevated as a key pillar of democratic renewal efforts and recognized for their current efforts as they work to advance democracy today. Governments should explicitly and frequently recognize the challenges that they face, especially in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and look for creative and authentic ways to engage them in real decision-making, harnessing and supporting ongoing movements which are already bringing positive change.

This can include explicitly mentioning young people's ongoing leadership and action in speeches on democracy, explicitly including them in nation-wide commitments to democracy, and ensuring that departments are adequately staffed to work with young people on issues of democracy.

- 2. Invest Significantly in Youth Political Engagement:** Often, democratic renewal efforts are focused on political parties and institutional reform, and youth development efforts focus on issues like education, health, and climate justice. These are all critical investment areas, but youth civic and political engagement is rarely prioritized for significant investment. Governments should invest robustly, domestically and internationally, in youth political and civic engagement efforts.

US governmental actors like USAID and the Department of State should work to advance young people's role in revitalizing democracy, rights and governance to address worrying signs of disengagement and polarization. For example, the Department of State currently runs influential programs like the Young African Leaders Initiative and the Young Leaders of the Americas Initiative to bring leaders across the world to the US and provide concrete training and support. These efforts should be supported, and should include additional training around political and civic engagement. The United States government should also substantially increase funding efforts specifically on civics education efforts abroad to ensure and build a new generation of young democratic leaders. Domestically, Congress should pass the Civics Secures Democracy Act, and putting up to \$1 billion towards domestic civics education efforts.

Other initiatives that merit additional support include the European Democracy Youth Network (EDYN), the International Republican Institute's Generation Democracy network, and USAID's Global LEAD initiative, which aims to support one million young changemakers over the coming five years. These initiatives should have increased access to education, civic and political engagement, and leadership opportunities.

The US specifically could consider supporting local, youth-led political engagement and democracy efforts through creating a large incentive fund for youth revitalizing democracy, human rights, and governance. There is the opportunity to work collaboratively with funders throughout the world, including international actors, and large institutional foundations focused on democratic renewal.

- 3. Meet Young People Where They Are:** Yes, traditional forms of political engagement are important. But governments and elected officials must attempt to meet young people where they are, rather than lambasting their creative methods of engaging in the political process.

This should include efforts to authentically understand how young people view democracy, and elevating ways that they are expressing their political viewpoints, especially in the digital space. Investing in youth engagement and leadership in the digital space is especially important as a concrete mechanism to counter increasing efforts to close civic spaces.

Specific ways to meet young people where they are include building a healthy digital space for young people include training elected officials to engage with young people and with technology, and positively amplifying their efforts, rather than portraying young people in a negative light. Reforms should also be adopted to ensure that digital spaces are more accessible for young people with disabilities. Governments should also invest significantly in digital citizenship and literacy in existing and new initiatives, and counter increasing amounts of disinformation, including through promoting the careful regulation of social media companies that are at risk of spreading harmful propaganda to young people and creating safety guidelines in particular for minors engaging online.

Additionally, governments and institutions should invest in training programs specifically for elected officials to understand how to engage with young people. Many elected officials assert that they would like to work and understand youth issues, but are not fluent in digital media, and do not often reach out to youth actors. Specific training and exchange programs would better break the aforementioned vicious cycle, and ensure that elected officials are adequately and authentically paying attention to youth issues.

- 4. Ensure Young People Have Real Decision-Making Power:** Too often young people are tokenized in formal political engagement efforts, rather than obtaining real decision-making power. While it may sometimes be uncomfortable to invite young people to the decision-making table, it is necessary: they have real lived experience that is vital towards making better policy, and are an increasingly large part of the global population, especially in places like Africa.

Specific ways to ensure that young people are at the table can include efforts to ensure that young people are part of formal governmental bodies, hiring them into international and domestic governmental and ministerial positions, and committing to and putting in place policies that make it easier for young people to run for, and obtain, elected office. International institutions should invest serious resources into training programs for young people to run for and obtain political office.

Another way to ensure that young people can provide real influence is to invest in youth-led research, recognizing its value in capturing youth insights into democratic challenges and solutions.

- 5. Get Creative:** These are all just suggestions: we hope that governments and philanthropic actors, led by young people, can get creative about different ways to promote youth political engagement amidst democratic decay.

Potential creative ways to invest in young people as the very foundations of democracy include lowering the voting age, sponsoring multilateral conferences and summits of young people pushing for democratic change, and curating a specific forum and form of the Summit for Democracy specifically focused on and comprising young people. Young people are not as

constrained by traditional borders as previous generations- there is the possibility of pro-actively creating networks of youth democratic actors around the world, ensuring they are in solidarity with each other, and learning best practices.

- 6. Continue the Conversation:** Above all, we hope that this report sparks an ongoing conversation on the importance of youth civic and political engagement and participation. For far too often, young people have been seen as marginal actors in democratic renewal efforts. At this moment in time, there is perhaps no demographic more important in a global future that espouses and promotes democracy.

Yet critically, we need to listen to and invest in young people as they re-imagine what democracy can actually become. Democracy as a concept can still work. But it has failed too many young people. For democracy to succeed, young people can, and must, lead to a better, more equitable, more democratic future.



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Interviewees:

Blair Glencourse, USA, *Director of Accountability Labs*
 Odeh Friday, Nigeria, *Country Director, Accountability Labs Nigeria*
 Primal Tale, India, *Student of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences*
 Emmanuel Otieno Obwanga, Zimbabwe, NA
 George Bolton, UK, *DPhil Candidate at the University of Southampton*
 Oryema Edison, Uganda, *Recreation for Development and Peace Uganda*
 Innocent Indeje, Kenya, *Regional Trainer for the Global Alliance
 For Universal Health Coverage In Africa*
 Daniel Orogoo, Kenya, *Uwazi Consortium*
 Anne Rose Osamba, Kenya and Uganda, *East African Youth Peace Network (EAYPN)*.
 El Hadj Djitteye, Mali, *Founder and Executive Director of Timbuktu Center for
 Strategic Studies in the Sahel*
 Bonnie Devine, Colombia, *La Múcura*
 Aqaba Simbula, Uganda, *Vice Chairperson of the Bundibugyo District Youth Council*
 Mercy Mashable, Tanzania, *Her Ability Foundation and Light for the World International*
 Erik Ombija, Kenya, *Grassroots Transforming Network*
 Amina Mahia, Tanzania, *Restless Development*
 Ronald Lubaga, Tanzania, *Program Design for SRHR Advocacy Remie Sessimba,
 Uganda, Open Space Centre*
 Williams Omonde Mutimanwa, DRC, *Good Samaritan for Education*
 Gabriel Marmentini, Brazil, *Polize*

Past reports:

Rodrigo Echecopar, Chile, *Latin American Network for Innovation in Politics,
 Former President of the Revolución Democrática*
 Brian Hioe, Taiwan, *Founding Editor of New Bloom*
 Catta Chou, Taiwan, *Curator of Taiwan International Labor Film Festival and Organizer of the Youth
 Labor Union 95*
 Ray Cheng, *Chairman of the Youth Labor Union 95*
 María Ignacia Henríquez Pinto, *President of the Federations of Students of the UC (FEUC)*

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