THE BODY SHOP

Be [redacted] Seen

Be [redacted] Heard

Understanding young people's political participation

In collaboration with:

United Nations
Office of the Secretary-General's
Envoy on Youth

Foreword

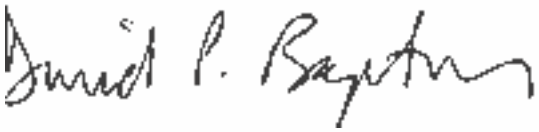
As our planet faces unprecedented challenges – from the COVID-19 pandemic to a reversal of decades of development progress and the ongoing climate crisis – it is clear that we urgently need to get the world back on track for a more sustainable, just and equitable future. Yet the world's political systems remain unfit for this vision. We continue to see an evident lack of diversity when it comes to the voices represented across our political systems, lack of trust in institutions, and very little political momentum or will to significantly change the way things have historically been done.

For too long, we have seen the same short-term decisions made by the same types of political leaders. To challenge the status quo and deliver the kind of solutions that will bring transformational change and accelerate progress, we need to ensure that political institutions truly represent the diversity of the people they seek to serve. This is especially true when it comes to youth representation and participation – while half of the world's population is under the age of 30, young people's voices are among the least represented in the political institutions where decisions are made.

There is no doubt that young people have the energy, knowledge and creativity needed to tackle some of the world's most pressing problems. The global community must nurture partnerships across sectors and generations, open the doors to decision-making spaces, and empower young people to leverage these skills through participation in public affairs, including in political and civic processes, platforms and institutions at all levels.

Young people deserve an equal say in their future. The *Be Seen Be Heard* campaign is our golden opportunity to change the paradigm. We hope you will join us in advocating for a future that recognizes young people's political participation as a driving force for positive change.

Jayathma Wickramanayake
United Nations Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth



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Executive summary

Young people care – about our planet, our future and our political systems. In the last decade, young people have initiated social movements, tackling issues that impact their own lives and those of communities around the globe. They have done so with hope and optimism about the future, at a time when we face extreme challenges. In a world where global conflict, climate change and socio-economic issues are becoming ever more acute, we need young people's fresh perspectives to guide political decision-making.

This report aims to outline how and why young people engage in political decision-making, and the challenges that sometimes prevent them from doing so. It puts forward policy and legislation recommendations for advancing the needs and rights of young people, ensuring their voices are meaningfully heard in public life and decision-making. The research from The Body Shop International and the Office of the United Nations Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth supports the *Be Seen Be Heard* campaign. Launching in 2022, this global campaign aims to increase young people's participation in political arenas and help make their voices heard across all spheres of public life.

The objective of the campaign is to seek to inspire a change in legislation or policy, or support initiatives, to promote youth participation in political life in all 75+ countries where The Body Shop operates.

The *Be Seen Be Heard Global Youth Survey* shows that 67% of people believe in a better future, with 15 to 17 year-olds being the most optimistic about this.

Young people have the right to be included in political decision-making. However, there are existing challenges that young people face on the road to meaningful engagement with the complex political systems of today. Youth voting patterns are impacted by administrative, legal and financial hurdles, a lack of trust in politicians and institutions, an absence of civic education, as well as a lack of candidates with whom young people can identify.

Despite these significant barriers, young people continue to work tirelessly to raise their voices on the issues they care about – youth political apathy is a myth.

Youth participation throughout the electoral process results in positive outcomes for both young people and societies as a whole. Lowering the voting age, as an example, has been found to increase trust within democratic processes, is habit forming, makes political systems more fair, inclusive and representative of populations, and demonstrates that young people have the capacity to engage with difficult political choices alongside their adult peers.

Beyond voting, young people should also be encouraged to run for political office, where they are severely under-represented today. Globally, only 2.6% of parliamentarians are under 30 years old, and less than 1% of these young MPs are women.[1]

This is not due to a lack of willingness; in fact, the *Be Seen Be Heard Global Youth Survey* found that a third of those under 30 would consider running for public office. However, there are a number of structural and legislative barriers that prohibit their eligibility, including minimum legal candidacy age limits. Worldwide, there is an average discrepancy of more than four years between when young people are eligible to vote and when they can run for elected office. Also, gender, race, ethnicity, disability, socio-cultural norms and financial resources further influence young people's opportunities to stand for election in different countries.

Beyond standing as candidates themselves, young people may also choose to engage with youth wings of political parties. However, although these forums are the first frontiers for political candidates, they are rarely well equipped to facilitate meaningful youth engagement and face a general decrease in new, young members.

The *Be Seen Be Heard Global Youth Survey* found that three quarters (76%) of under 30 years old think politicians don't listen to young people. This feeling is particularly acute in South Africa (90%), Spain (80%) and the UK (80%). It isn't just young people who feel this way – 65% of over 60s think so too.

The world is becoming an increasingly complex place. Beyond the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, young people are facing rising inequalities, the worsening global crises of climate change, and challenges that are associated with violent conflict.

Providing space for young people to safely express their views and opinions is imperative when embarking on journeys towards social and environment justice and peace. We urgently need a forum in which young people can engage with each other, and those in power, in structured discussions to establish long-term and meaningful solutions.

Outside of electoral processes, other forms of political engagement are not particularly welcoming of young people. There is a lack of trust between young people and political institutions, and a growing perception that political participation does not make a difference. To bridge this gap, young people need support to engage with their adult peers, on an equal level. Civic education is one important way to facilitate knowledge of how public institutions work, however not all young people have equal access to it, which often further disadvantages those who are already marginalized.

Young people also need safe spaces to voice their opinions and effect change. In places where there is limited space for youth participation in formal processes, young people resort to protest to speak out on issues that they care about. Their right to public protest should be respected and, at the same time, additional avenues should be created within formal institutions and processes.

According to the *Be Seen Be Heard* Global Youth Survey, the majority of people agree that the age balance in politics is wrong. More than two thirds (69%) of people across all age groups agree that more opportunities for younger people to have a say in policy development/change would make political systems better.

In order to improve young people's participation in public decision-making, efforts that promote policy and legislation changes should be supported, including:

- Lowering the voting age for local, municipal or national elections.
- Addressing legislative or policy barriers that directly or indirectly prevent people under 30 running for leadership positions, including removing barriers such as registration fees.
- Implementing comprehensive civic education programmes for youth.
- Recognizing, supporting and establishing youth-led organizations and networks locally and nationally, with a direct relationship to national legislatures.
- Establishing formal, transparent and diverse youth engagement mechanisms in national policy development, such as on climate change.
- Implementing simplified voter registration for young and first-time voters.
- Applying minimum financial quotas for political parties on youth focused expenditure, especially relating to marginalized young people including young women, youth with disabilities, indigenous youth and those from rural areas.
- Ensuring independence and financial sustainability for political youth wings from their parent parties.
- Implementing minimum parliamentary quotas for members aged under 30, including gender parity.
- Developing national youth strategies and youth laws with young people and youth organizations.
- Recognizing new forms of youth participation and activism, such as online mobilization and issue-based campaigning.
- Ensuring that youth political participation spaces give young people real power and influence, including in budgeting and programming.

1. Introduction: Young people want to make a change, but struggle to be seen and heard

Every day, policy-makers make thousands of important decisions about the future of our communities, countries and our planet. But young people[2] are often excluded from making these decisions, and this phenomenon is widespread.[3] They have limited voice, little power and minimal stake in shaping the world.

Young people lack meaningful opportunities for involvement in drafting policies, developing legislation and making the political decisions that will change the course of the world. The Body Shop and the Office of the United Nations Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth are collaborating to change just that.

This report is based on the findings of the *Be Seen Be Heard Global Youth Survey* conducted in December 2021. This large-scale qualitative and quantitative research surveyed 27,043 people across multiple age ranges, including 14,160 between the ages of 15 and 30, across 26 countries. To ensure high confidence levels and representativeness of findings, participant samples included quotas on age, gender, region and income. The survey additionally ensured a good spread of global geography, with 59% of the world population reflected in the sample.

Half of the people on our planet are 30 or younger, and this is expected to reach 57% by the end of 2030.

Another 10.9 billion people are likely to be born this century.[4] As the UN Secretary-General has pointed out in his report on *Our Common Agenda* from 2021, young people need a greater voice in designing the future. We will only achieve this if we think and act together on their behalf for the long term.[4]

Young people are not a homogenous group – they have diverse experiences and concerns, and respond to them in many different ways. When discussing political participation, or lack thereof, it is therefore important to recognize that young people whose identity intersects with other marginalized communities, such as Indigenous Peoples, people with disabilities, refugees and migrants, LGBTQI+ and women, face additional challenges in gaining political influence and representation.

Despite a popular narrative that young people are apathetic or uninterested in civic, social and political issues, they are leading change in their communities as advocates, entrepreneurs and innovators, and are taking to the streets to hold decision-makers to account. They are speaking up about corruption, gender, racism and socio-economic inequality, while they organize school strikes and lead mass protests. Young people's actions have moved the dial on political issues and are a key driver behind the level of attention the climate emergency receives.

Research, including the *Be Seen Be Heard Global Youth Survey*, indicates that young people are far more politically involved than they get credit for. All over the world, young people actively engage in politics, but in ways that go beyond the electoral process, suggesting that fewer consider elections the main legitimate instrument for political decision-making.

Both formal and informal engagement can be understood as political participation, and both are beneficial for a vivid and resilient democracy and should be supported. In this report, youth political participation is perceived as opportunities for meaningful youth engagement in decision-making processes, including elections, both as voters and potential political candidates, as well as in legislative processes and policy development processes at local, national and international levels.

Throughout the world, young people have a right to be included in public affairs, including political and civic processes, platforms and institutions at all levels.[5] When this right isn't realized, young people respond in different ways. Some continue trying to influence the system, some give up, and others find alternative ways to make their voice heard. This report underscores the importance of meeting young people's needs, and realizing their rights as equal citizens. It also aims to showcase why systematically including young people in decision-making is so important for them as individuals, and for whole societies.

2. Encouraging youth participation in the electoral process

The case for meaningful youth participation in political decision-making is often overshadowed by observations about low youth voter turnout, which can be perceived and portrayed as a lack of interest.[6]

The *Be Seen Be Heard Global Youth Survey* identified three main reasons why young people may consider voting pointless:

1) Impact - They feel their vote doesn't currently make a difference but would vote if it did.
2) Representation - They feel there's no person or party they want to vote for but would be more likely to vote if candidates resonated with them.
3) Education - They feel they would be more likely to vote if they understood the political system better.

This isn't surprising. **Political systems around the world are becoming ever more complex**. The UN Secretary-General has observed in his report on *Our Common Agenda* from 2021, that today's young people see their future being compromised in multiple ways, compounded by the severe socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising inequalities, people fleeing violent and destabilizing conflicts, and the worsening global crises of climate change.

Young people have never been more educated or more connected, yet they continue to face significant obstacles to achieving their full potential. **Some 267 million young people are not in education, employment or training, two thirds of whom are young women as a result of gendered expectations of unpaid family work and informal employment**. The pandemic has only made this worse.[7]

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Many young people have a lack of trust in the ability of existing institutions and leaders to meet their concerns. **The *Be Seen Be Heard* Global Youth Survey found that three quarters (76%) of under 30s think politicians don't listen to young people**. This feeling is particularly acute in South Africa (90%), Spain (80%) and the UK (80%). It isn't just young people who feel this way – 65% of over 60s think so too.

Globally, voter turnout for 18 to 25 year-olds remains lower than in other age groups.[8] In some African countries, youth voter turnout and partisanship (attachment to a particular party) are lower than that of adults, even though more than 60% of the population is under 30. Additionally, **the longer an incumbent party has been in office, the lower the voter turnout is**.[9] In Australia, voter enrolment increased in 2016 when young people signed up to vote for the same sex marriage survey.

However, in subsequent elections, young people failed to vote for candidates they did not feel represented them.[10] **This indicates that young people are more likely to vote when candidates represent their interests**.

Aside from their motivation for voting, **young and first-time voters face many structural barriers**. One barrier is the documentation needed to register to vote, such as national identification documents or driving licenses with photos, which not all young people possess. Another is young people reaching voting age slightly after voter registration deadlines. In the USA, the youth voter turnout has increased since 2016, largely because of systemic change in electoral laws and policies. States that automatically sent absentee ballots to registered voters, and those that eased registration for new voters (usually young people) saw a big increase in the youth voter turnout.[11] **Small systemic changes clearly have the potential to encourage young people to engage in political decision-making processes**.

Some politicians and spectators see young people as 'change seekers', who usually vote for non-establishment or fringe parties, though the evidence on youth voting patterns is unclear on this issue.

However, this perception can lead to established political parties either not courting the youth vote, or even actively discouraging it (sometimes implicitly).[12+13]

It is clear that current political systems inhibit young people's political engagement in various ways, including through a lack of diverse and representative candidates, inclusive registration systems and even an unwelcoming political culture. Despite these challenges, **young people tirelessly work to influence political decision-making around issues they care about – youth political apathy is a myth**.

2.1. Is lowering the voting age the answer?

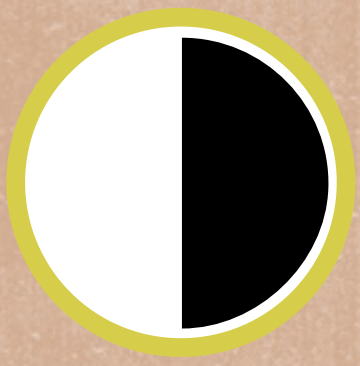
Many people aged 15 to 29 are not entitled to take part in the electoral process through voting and make their voice heard in this way. One of the most common measures discussed in relation to youth political participation is the possibility of lowering the voting age. Could this be the solution to enhance young people's participation in politics?

The Be Seen Be Heard Global Youth Survey **showed that, across all age ranges, 8 out of 10 people think the voting age should be 18 or lower.** And 90% of 15 to 17 year-olds think this should be the case.

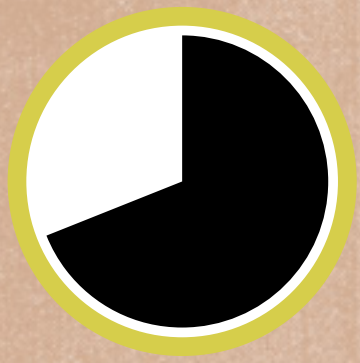
Most people around the world cannot vote in local or national elections until they turn 18. A few countries are exploring extending the right to vote to 16 and 17 year-olds in certain elections, but lowering the voting age to 16 remains a contentious issue. This discussion is strongly linked with societal norms regarding age, power and agency, and political positions on the matter are often influenced by religious, cultural or ethnic considerations.

Voting age limits have often been set arbitrarily or in response to specific historical contexts. They are not fixed forever and have been frequently changed throughout history.

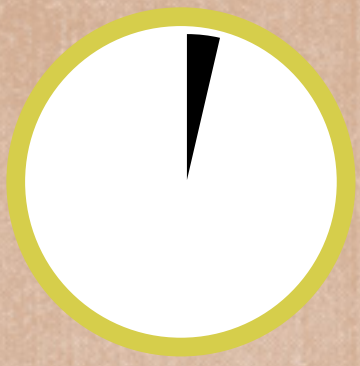
Youth in parliament



50% **of the world's population is under 30**



69% **of countries restrict young people from running for office, even when they can vote**



2.6% **of the world's parliamentarians are under 30**[1]

For example, in the USA, only men aged 21 or older were allowed to vote until the 1960s, when the voting age was reduced to allow men aged 18 and above to have a say in elections, as they were being called to fight in the Vietnam War.[14]

To respond to societal changes and to strengthen democracy, any voting restrictions should be revisited frequently. The COVID-19 pandemic and recovery period is one opportunity for governments to revisit this conversation and allow more space for young people to participate. For example, the European Union has announced 2022 as the year of youth, to highlight the importance of youth engagement in building a better future.[15]

Although few countries around the world have lowered the voting age to 16 (see box), many others are exploring the issue. **The Body Shop UK is supporting the British Youth Council, which leads a growing campaign supported by a UK parliamentary coalition on lowering the voting age to 16.** Among other issues, the campaign asserts that it is impossible to justify why 16 year-olds cannot vote, **when they can legally work, get married, become company directors and join the armed forces, and are liable for income tax.**

In time, we may see 16 year-olds around the world increasingly able to vote. There are different ways to drive this change. **Lowering the voting age locally is a good way to pilot this approach**, as local issues are closer to voters and challenges can be explored before scaling up the approach nationally. Some countries have implemented test phases before making it mandatory for 16 and 17 year-olds to vote, while others, like in the UK, have devoted time to improving civic education before approving this legislation.

Countries and territories with a voting age of 16 (specific conditions are listed below)

Argentina - voting is obligatory for people aged 18 to 70, but optional for those aged 16 to 17 (as of 2012)
Austria (as of 2007)
Bosnia and Herzegovina - 16 year-olds can only vote if they are in employment
Brazil (as of 1998)
Cuba (as of 1971)
Ecuador (as of 2009)
Estonia - only in local elections (as of 1990)
Germany - 16 year-olds can only vote in some states in municipal or state elections
Guernsey (as of 2007)
Hungary - only if they are married before the age of 18
The Isle of Man (UK) (as of 2006)
Jersey (UK) (as of 2008)
Malta (as of 2013)
Nicaragua (as of 1984)
Scotland - 16 year-olds can vote in Scottish parliamentary elections and local government elections (as of 2014)
Switzerland - only for cantonal and municipal elections in the canton of Glarus
Wales (UK) - 16 year-olds can vote in Welsh Assembly elections and local council elections (as of 2021)
USA - in the states of California, Florida and Alaska, and two districts in Washington

There is limited available data on the consequences of lowering the voting age to 16 as few electoral cycles have passed since countries adopted this approach. However, the early data that does exist is fairly consistent. **Studies from a municipal election in the USA, and national elections in Austria, show that 16 and 17 year-olds are keen political participants and that voting at an early age is habit-forming**.

Socialized into a culture of political participation, 16 to 17 year-old voters may become more politically active in later life than those who don't vote until they are 18 or 19.[16]

In Austria, one of the first countries to lower the voting age in 2007, **the youth voter turnout has increased in line with trust in democratic processes**,[17] and the voting patterns of people under 18 are similar to, or the same as, those of older people. **This indicates that young people do have the willingness, knowledge and capacity to engage with difficult political choices**, and that **lowering the voting age is not linked to specific party politics**.[18] In some countries, the party politics argument has been put forward as a reason not to reduce the voting age. When lowering the voting age to 16 was debated in Argentina, opponents characterized this as a way to help the politician who proposed it get re-elected.[19]

Some who believe that young people are politically disengaged argue against lowering the voting age from a risk perspective, claiming that young people are easily manipulated by adults such as politicians or their parents. However, evidence backs the notion that young people are enthusiastic and interested in the world they live in, and that lowering the voting age will further support their active participation. **Broadening the electorate to young people over 16 years will make political decision-making more fair, inclusive and representative of the wider population**. That should benefit society as a whole.

In the context of a growing global youth population and the unprecedented crises facing the world, giving young people the decision-making power that comes with electoral voting is an obvious way to recognize, listen to and encourage their political engagement. However, it is vital to ensure that lowering the voting age happens in a planned and sustainable way and is paired with robust national civic education programmes to prepare young voters.

2.2. Too young to run for office?

One would think that anyone who has the right to vote would also have the right to run for office, but this is not the case.

This 'candidacy age' for political office varies significantly across the world. According to the Interparliamentary Union, 69% of countries restrict young people from running for office, even when they can vote.[20]

Globally, the average minimum legal age of political candidates is 22.5, more than four years after the average age for being eligible to vote. For example, the candidacy age in Mexico is 21 for the lower house and 25 for the upper house. In Italy, the minimum age for joining the upper house is 40.[21] This is particularly problematic for countries with big youth populations, such as Zimbabwe, where 20% of the population is aged 15 to 24, but where people can't run for office until they are 21.[22]

The *Be Seen Be Heard Global Youth Survey* found that **a third of respondents under 30 would consider running for office**. Clearly, despite political systems that discriminate against young people, this demographic has a significant appetite for political engagement. Policy-makers around the world must respond to this demand.

This kind of legally imposed exclusion has far-reaching effects in terms of political representation. Globally, only 2.6% of members of national parliaments (MPs) are under 30 – when that age group comprises half of the world's population.[23] One quarter (25%) of lower houses of parliament, and 75% of upper houses of parliament, have no MPs under the age of 30.[24] Furthermore, less than 1% of these young MPs are women.[25]

Age gaps between voters and political candidates can have significant consequences on youth political participation overall. Demands for an increased youth vote will become redundant if they don't lead to greater representation of young people. Unless this representation challenge is resolved, the **lack of trust between young people and political institutions will continue to increase**, alongside a growing perception that **political participation doesn't make any difference**. In such settings elected leaders will have very little, or even no, accountability towards young people.

India, the most populous democracy in the world, has an average age of 29. More than 50% of the population is under 25 and two thirds is under 35. However, the lower house (Lok Sabha) has no members under 25, and only 2% are aged under 35. The upper house (Rajya Sabha) contains no members younger than 35.[26]

The *Be Seen Be Heard* Global Youth Survey found that the majority of people believe that the age balance in politics is skewed, and more than two-thirds (69%) of people across all age groups believe that more opportunities for younger people to have a say in policy development and change would make political systems better.

Lowering the candidacy age will lead to more choice for voters, more diverse representation and increased youth participation. Crucially, it will bring about equal representation rights for young people who are already expected to assume adult responsibilities in society at 16 or 18. And it will inevitably enrich political arenas and discussions with an array of fresh ideas and perspectives from the younger generations.

Changing the age limit for public office must go hand in hand with lowering the voting age, and they should be equal wherever possible. Put simply, everyone who is eligible to vote should be eligible to run for political office.

Some countries, such as Kenya, France and Belgium, have recognized the importance of this issue and have started lowering the required minimum age to stand for office.[27] **In Turkey, the candidacy age was lowered twice**, from 30 to 21 years-old in 2007, and then to 18 years-old in 2017, thanks to a grassroots campaign led by young people and youth organizations. **This resulted in Turkey's first ever 18 year-old MP entering parliament**.[28] Nigeria has a similar story, with the youth-led grassroots campaign *Not Too Young to Run* advocating for a lower candidacy age, a lower candidacy fee and the opportunity for independent candidates to run. This successful campaign not only led to legislative change but also an increase in youth voter turnout.[29]

Candidacy age becomes more complex when examined in relation to factors that inhibit youth representation in politics. **Gender, race, ethnicity, disability, socio-cultural norms and financial resources all influence people's opportunities to stand for election in different countries.** Data from the Interparliamentary Union shows that, globally, young women are the least represented demographic group in parliaments.[30] Similarly, young people who belong to minority cultural and religious communities that aren't well integrated into the political landscape are also not

well-represented in their respective parliaments. This causes a domino effect that further discourages young people from under-represented communities from taking part in political life.

The stark reality is that young people around the world have very limited, almost non-existent, routes to stand as political candidates. The *Be Seen Be Heard Global Youth Survey* showed that 9 out of 10 people globally see discouraging aspects affecting their interest in entering politics. These vary, but include politics being too dishonest (33%), bureaucratic (25%) and complicated (22%).

2.3. What is the role of political parties in all of this?

Political parties are usually the entry point for young people who wish to stand for election. They remain one of the most enduring mechanisms for political engagement. But they are often very traditional, valuing political loyalty over merit. They also tend to respect hierarchy and protocol, such as having to be involved in the party for a certain period before being able to stand for election. **This means that joining a long-established political party is not attractive to most young people seeking change**.

Political party membership is less prevalent among people under 30 than among older adults. Globally, only 4.1% of 18 to 29 year-olds are active party members.[31]

Political parties traditionally engage young people through their youth wings, which are ideally supposed to be financially and politically independent, and able to challenge their parent party when needed. However, the reality of how political youth wings operate helps to explain the low number of youth MPs and political candidates.

Youth wings are often not regarded as independent entities, but as an extension of the parent party that is used for campaigning and recruiting members. If the parent party disagrees with the youth wing on a policy, it tends to disregard the youth wing's position.[32] And youth wings rarely have their own budgets – the key to being able to function as independently as possible. Their ability to implement programmes usually depends on financial support from their parent party, which results in initiatives tailored to that party's preferences.

Since the early 2000s, political parties have faced difficulties in attracting new party members, particularly young people.[33] And young people face additional barriers if they decide to run for political office, having to either join a political party and 'wait their turn', establish their own political party or run as an independent candidate. **Young people are not always eager to wait for their turn**. Establishing a new and successful political party is far from easy, requiring extensive networks, lots of citizen support and financial capital, just in order to register.[34] The same applies to people running as independent candidates.

Furthermore, running political campaigns can be incredibly expensive. The cost of nomination fees alone may prevent many young people from standing for office. Even more so in contexts where corruption has infiltrated political parties and no mechanisms control levels of political donations and party expenditure. **Accessing campaign financing is also more difficult for marginalized (including young) communities, due to cultural and social barriers**.

Some countries recognize this problem and have introduced legislation that seeks to support youth participation. For example, in Ireland, political parties must spend a portion of their funding on including young people and women.[35] Despite such initiatives, young political candidates face challenging conditions. A good example is Emmanuel Macron, elected as the youngest ever President of France aged 39, who managed it by taking financial loans to fund his new party's election campaign.[36] This said, funding doesn't guarantee political victory and is a risk not everyone wants to or has the ability to take. As a result, young people do not have many options to stand for political office while they are still young.

3. Even in challenging environments, young people want to make a difference

According to the *Be Seen Be Heard Global Youth Report*, 8 out of 10 people around the world think that current political systems need drastic reforms to be fit for the future. Across the board, 84% of people described politicians as 'self-interested' and 75% think politicians are untrustworthy. Three quarters of people under 30 feel that politicians and business leaders have 'messed things up' for people and the planet. It is clear that political systems need to change.

In some countries, young people don't associate existing political systems with solving social problems, so they tend to look to civil society or social movements for solutions, rather than governments. *The Be Seen Be Heard Global Youth Survey* results point to young people's distrust towards public institutions and politicians as an important factor in this. They do not trust that public institutions will include them meaningfully, or that politicians want young people to be engaged in politics, particularly when there are no imminent elections.

As well as establishing mechanisms to engage diverse youth voices during elections, by encouraging them to vote and/or be candidates, governments should find ways to meaningfully engage with young people outside of election cycles as well.

3.1. Is civic education the enabling factor?

No one is born with the skills to interact or engage with today's local, regional, national or global political systems. If we expect young people to be politically engaged, we need to give them the support they need to engage with others, including older people, on an equal level.

When examining why it sometimes seems as if young people care more about issue-based politics than getting involved in formal political systems, the lack of civic education may play a large role. A recent study on the decrease in overall political engagement in the USA[37] shows that **schools play a crucial role in facilitating relevant knowledge through civic education classes that explain how public institutions work**, embedding democratic values and principles within young people early in their lives. Youth workers and youth organizations around the world are trying hard to fill this void by offering informal civic education. However, **not everyone has equal access to opportunities, which often further disadvantages young people who are already marginalized**, such as young women and girls, youths with disabilities, indigenous youths, and those living in rural areas or crisis-affected territories.

Young people face multiple barriers to becoming, and being recognized as, autonomous citizens. Lack of inclusive and accessible opportunities for employment, unpaid internships, the gap between the education system and the labour market, a lack of opportunities for civic education and the lack of skills to become financially independent all limit young people's ability to effectively participate in political decision-making.

3.2. Protest as participation?

Decision-making bodies should allow multiple and diverse options to channel the voices of young people to those in power. While voting is the most direct form of engagement in electoral politics, low youth voting levels often indicate a need for alternative ways to participate and express concerns and priorities on issues that affect their lives.

Systematic exclusion from political decision-making processes leads to young people increasingly taking to the streets, demanding to be heard.[38] It is absolutely key for governments or authorities to ensure that young people can safely enjoy their rights to freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, although the opposite trend has been noted.[39]

The Be Seen Be Heard Global Youth Survey notes young people's high level of engagement in peaceful protest; 15 to 23 year-olds participating in the survey are four times more likely to have taken part in protest movements than older people.

Protesting is not the only way for young people to express their concerns and priorities, but in an exclusionary political system it is often the case. A striking example of this dynamic is youth-led protests in Belarus, where young people's democratic influence is being diminished by systematic imprisonment and refusal to recognize youth organizations.[40]

3.3. Can meaningful participation increase trust?

The Be Seen Be Heard Global Youth Survey shows that 67% of people across the board believe in a better future, with 15 to 17 year-olds being the most optimistic about this prospect. Similar patterns are reflected in the outcomes of the world-wide consultations conducted in 2020 on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the United Nations.[41]

Young people's ability to influence the decisions that affect their lives is the most important element of their political participation. While many decision-makers and policy-makers have become better at publicly encouraging youth participation and at listening to youth voices, they have generally been less successful in allowing young people to gain real influence.

This is the difference between tokenistic and *meaningful* youth participation.

When youth participation initiatives are being established, young people are often seen as having an advisory role. However, in reality participation is only meaningful when a certain level of formality – and responsibility – is applied, as this simultaneously fosters accountability. Applying the principle of consensus in decision-making processes is one way to ensure that the perspectives and opinions of young people cannot be overlooked.

Principles of meaningful youth participation[42]

- Institutionally mandated
- Rights-based
- Safe
- Designated
- Resourced
- Transparent
- Accessible
- Voluntary
- Informative
- Reciprocal accountability
- Consideration for diversity and inclusion

To be meaningful, youth participation should be long-term and give young people as much direct influence as possible.

The aim must be to create processes where young people have an equal footing with decision-makers and as such have the power to co-create and co-decide on issues that affect them. In all contexts, this means that young people should have a direct say on the decisions that affect their lives, and/or that such decisions should not be taken without including young peoples' views.

In the Brazilian municipality of Porto Alegre,[43] the municipality has successfully implemented participatory budgeting, which involves people from all sections of the community, including children and young people, to the extent that it has now spread as an effective mechanism of enhanced youth participation.

The process of inviting and allowing this kind of youth power is closely linked with building trust, empathy, and solidarity between younger and older generations, and fostering their mutual interests. It is not just young people who gain from this, but policy and decision-makers too. Young people are by nature forward-thinking, unencumbered by the limits that older age tends to place on ambitions and possible solutions. This allows them to bring fresh perspectives to existing issues that many experienced politicians would potentially overlook, ultimately benefiting wider society.

Building trust in, and among, young people and giving them real power will result in reframing their political role from activists to equal partners who can engage with the whole political system, not just single issues.

4. Young people's meaningful participation can take place at all levels

Today, decisions that affect young people's lives are made locally, nationally and globally. Social issues, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, transcend national borders and require more of a multilateral approach to be solved sustainably.

Developing independent and sustainable youth participation mechanisms that are based on single issues can have a positive influence on youth voter turnout at large, and will likely help to remove barriers for young political candidates. For example, some local youth councils in the UK are creating youth climate panels to allow young people to have a say on decisions related to climate change.[44]

4.1 How can young people participate at the local and national levels?

National youth councils (NYCs) play a crucial role in facilitating young people's political participation at the national level, acting as a bridge between youth and decision-makers. These networks, mostly comprising youth organizations, student unions and national youth parliaments, are sometimes officially recognized by the national government as one of the main ways to incorporate youth perspectives in relevant government decisions.

Although not all countries have or recognize NYCs, where they exist, they help to institutionalize youth participation in politics and make it accessible to a wide range of young people. In some instances, decision-makers prefer to liaise with youth representatives from NYCs due to their legitimacy, as well as their representative nature. They do not just represent young people, but also youth organizations.

There are different ways to recognize and include NYCs nationally. In Cyprus, for example, the NYC monitors the implementation of the country's youth strategy.[45] And Estonia's NYC helps the government develop its decision-making systems to include young people, and support funding distribution for youth organizations.[46]

Despite the many good examples, NYCs are not (and should not be) the only route for young people's political engagement. In aiming to increase youth participation in political decision-making, it's important not to overlook the local level. Just as at the national level, local youth participation in this arena can be diverse, reflecting local issues, participation mechanisms and access to resources.

According to the *Be Seen Be Heard Global Youth Survey*, young people in rural areas feel less optimistic about the future than their urban peers, and are less likely to have participated in political activity. The increased presence of technology and educational resources mean that young people participate in politics in different ways, including digitally.

For example, The Body Shop Greece has partnered with ActionAid Hellas to promote the creation of youth councils at the community, municipal and national levels. In the UK, the Young Mayors programme, led by the British Youth Council, enables young representatives from local youth councils to shadow their area's mayor. Some young mayors have decision-making power and their own budget.[47]

4.2. What does youth participation in the international sphere look like?

Clearly, young people's political participation is not limited by national borders. International and intergovernmental institutions, such as the United Nations (UN), The Council of Europe, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union, among others, to a large extent make decisions that directly affect young people's lives. But for young people, **getting involved in these forums can be significantly more complex than participating close to home**.

International youth organizations and movements, such as the Scouts, The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, The European Youth Forum, Fridays For Future, the International Coordination Meeting of Youth Organisations (ICMYO), and many others, support participation by acting as a bridge between young people and these institutions. The national branches of these organizations also help to close the gap between the local and international levels. And they're well-equipped to provide young people with the necessary knowledge and support to participate in complex and potentially intimidating international political institutions.

The fact that young people from multiple countries take part in global movements, organizations and institutions **facilitates shared learning and builds intercultural knowledge and relationships**.
These institutions also tend to work within structures and regulations that aren't legally binding, which means **they are well-suited to testing different models of youth participation**.

As an example, the Council of Europe, a European intergovernmental organization,

employs a celebrated youth participation model called 'co-management', through which youth representatives and policy-makers from all the countries in Europe jointly agree on the organization's programmes and budget components based on consensus. Unusually, young people's and policy-makers' votes carry equal weight in this forum. Some European countries have tried implementing this model themselves. For example, North Macedonia enshrined a youth participation system with equal voting power in its 2020 Youth Law.[48]

Youth participation in political decision-making is a complex process. In many contexts, making progress in this area will require multiple measures, tailored to specific contexts, at the same time. Just as countries – and young people – can learn from international institutions' approaches to youth participation, neighbouring countries can share expertise and good practice with each other, and develop similar models or standards to support youth participation in decision-making. International youth participation in decision-making can also lead to global or regional youth participation standards that trickle down to the national level. For example, the UN Resolution on Youth Peace and Security (2250) has pushed some countries to value the importance of youth participation in peacebuilding and develop national action plans on the topic.

4.3. Do national youth participation standards help?

Some countries see national-level participation of young people in political decision-making as a way to mitigate negative youth trends. In Papua New Guinea, increasing young people's participation in local and national decision-making is considered one way to reduce high crime rates.[49] And in Ghana, youth participation in decision-making is seen as intrinsic to young people learning, and applying, democratic values.[50]

Young people's participation in national decision-making has encouraged some governments to create specific youth policy standards, including national youth laws or strategies to guide youth participation in the political sphere. Youth laws can cover anything from meaningful mechanisms for youth participation in decision-making to employment strategies, as well as funding for youth organizations. Such national standards guide a country in improving its youth participation and inclusion, and can be helpful in sharing best practice, and aligning and formalizing approaches across a country's youth inclusion initiatives. But to be sustainable and relevant, it's crucial that these youth laws or strategies are drafted, developed and implemented with young people and youth organizations at the forefront of these processes.

Depending on a country's stage of democratic development, a youth law may be viewed as either necessary or excessive. Countries with strong democratic values and a history of sustainable youth inclusion, such as Denmark, may not feel the need to pass a youth law. However, in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, a youth law may be considered necessary to protect youth inclusion in political decision-making against a political climate with frequent leadership changes.[51]

5. Call to action – the *Be Seen Be Heard* campaign

In his recent report *Our Common Agenda*, the UN Secretary-General announces concrete recommendations for increased meaningful, diverse and effective youth engagement in political decision-making globally.[52] While systematically increasing youth engagement will take a lot of work, research shows that young people want, and are ready, to be included as soon as the system allows.

Efforts to include and engage people under 30 in politics must be comprehensive, holistic and integrated. Including young people between electoral cycles, rather than immediately before elections only, will help build their democratic skills and increase their engagement in politics. Moreover, balancing the minimum age for voting and standing for office will give more young people the opportunity to vote for someone who represents their interests, encouraging them to participate in elections.

The Body Shop and the Office of the UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth are collaborating on *Be Seen Be Heard*, the largest global campaign to date focused specifically on amplifying youth voices and supporting young people's participation in politics.

Through this collaboration, the campaign will advocate for systemic change to ensure that young people are better represented in political decision-making at all levels, and that their needs and rights are addressed.

The campaign objective is to change one piece of legislation or policy, or support initiatives, to promote youth participation in political life in all 75+ countries where The Body Shop operates.

In order to advance the needs and rights of young people and ensure that youth voices are meaningfully heard within public life and decision-making, efforts that promote policy and legislation changes should be supported, including:

- Lowering the voting age for local, municipal or national elections.
- Addressing legislative or policy barriers that directly or indirectly prevent people under 30 running for leadership positions.
- Implementing comprehensive civic education programmes for youth.
- Recognizing, supporting and establishing youth-led organizations and networks locally and nationally, with a direct relationship to national legislatures.
- Establishing formal, transparent and diverse youth engagement mechanisms in national policy development, such as on climate change.
- Implementing simplified voter registration for young and first-time voters, including removing financial barriers such as registration fees.
- Applying minimum financial quotas for political parties on youth-focused expenditure, especially relating to marginalized young people including young women, youths with disabilities, indigenous youths, and those from rural areas.
- Ensuring independence and financial sustainability for political youth wings from their parent parties.
- Implementing minimum parliamentary quotas for members under 30, including gender parity.
- Developing national youth strategies and youth laws with young people and youth organizations.
- Recognizing new forms of youth participation and activism, such as online mobilization and issue based campaigning.
- Ensuring that youth political participation spaces give young people real power and influence, including in budgeting and programming.

Part of the *Be Seen Be Heard* campaign will involve supporting programmes to develop young people's capacity to lead change. All campaign work at the national level is taking place in partnership with local organizations who are experts on issues of youth participation in their country.

Want to know more about the global campaign?
Get more info at www.beseenbeheardcampaign.com and follow #BeSeenBeHeard to join the conversation.

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