


**ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL**

 Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol. 5 No. 02 Apr-Jun 2026. Page# 332-341

 Print ISSN: [3006-2497](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19788512) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19788512)

Platform &amp; Workflow by: Open Journal Systems

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19788512>

**Youth in Politics: A New Force Shaping Governance**
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**Abstract**

*This article examines the transformative role of youth as an emerging force in shaping contemporary governance structures worldwide, with particular emphasis on developing democracies. Through a mixed-methods approach combining secondary data analysis, interviews with young activists and politicians, focus group discussions, and case studies from regions including South Asia and Africa, the study traces the historical evolution of youth movements from traditional student activism to digital-era hybrid mobilization. It analyzes theoretical foundations, contemporary mechanisms of influence via social media and youth-led initiatives, and their tangible impacts on climate policy, anti-corruption efforts, education reform, and digital governance. Findings reveal that despite significant demographic advantages and innovative contributions, youth remain severely underrepresented in formal institutions due to structural barriers, ageism, and economic constraints. The research highlights both successful integration models and cautionary examples of tokenism, underscoring the urgent need for institutional reforms to convert youthful energy into sustained governance outcomes. By bridging the gap between participation and influence, societies can harness the demographic dividend, strengthen democratic resilience, and address pressing global challenges more effectively. The study concludes that meaningful youth inclusion is essential for building innovative, accountable, and future-ready governance systems in an era of rapid change.*

**Keywords:** Youth Political Participation, Digital Activism, Governance Reform, Demographic Dividend, Youth Representation, Intergenerational Politics.

**Introduction**

Youth involvement in politics has transformed dramatically in the 21st century, shifting from periodic student activism to a sustained, digitally amplified global force that increasingly pressures entrenched power structures. Globally, individuals aged 15-29 represent nearly one-fifth of the world's population, yet their presence in formal governance institutions remains minimal. The Inter-Parliamentary Union's 2025 report reveals that only 2.8% of parliamentarians worldwide are aged 30 or under, a figure unchanged from 2023 and marking the first stagnation in over a decade of modest progress (Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU], 2025). This underrepresentation is especially pronounced in developing democracies across Africa, South Asia, and Latin America. In these regions, youth have spearheaded mass mobilizations, such as Bangladesh's 2024 Gen Z-led uprising that ousted a long-standing government, Kenya's 2024 Finance Bill protests, and similar Gen Z actions in Nepal and Indonesia (Journal of Democracy, 2025; Brookings Institution, 2026). These movements exemplify a new hybrid activism combining online coordination with street-level pressure, often operating independently of traditional political parties. In youthful societies facing high unemployment, climate risks, and institutional

distrust, such engagement signals a rejection of conventional channels in favor of more agile, issue-driven participation (Atlantic Council, 2025).

The significance of youth as a demographic force lies in both their sheer numbers and their unique attributes as digital natives capable of driving a potential demographic dividend. In sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, a bulging working-age population could accelerate economic growth, innovation, and governance renewal if properly supported through education, skills development, and political inclusion (Cilliers, 2025; Brookings Institution, 2026). Generation Z and younger Millennials, fluent in platforms like TikTok, X, and WhatsApp, have revolutionized political communication by delivering authentic, rapid, and borderless narratives that traditional media struggle to replicate. In countries such as Pakistan, Zambia, and Kenya, young activists have leveraged everyday digital tools to evade censorship and amplify calls for transparency and reform (Gondwe, 2024). This technological edge positions youth not only as voters but as proactive agenda-setters on critical issues including climate justice, anti-corruption, and digital rights. Yet, without institutional pathways, this “youth bulge” risks fueling instability rather than prosperity, as evidenced by high protest participation alongside persistently low voter turnout in many emerging democracies (IFES, 2025).

Youth are emerging as a transformative force in governance, injecting innovation, accountability, and fresh perspectives into often stagnant systems, even as they confront deep structural barriers. Their campaigns have influenced policies on education reform, climate action, and fiscal transparency, compelling older elites to respond or concede ground (IPU, 2025). Nevertheless, obstacles persist: age restrictions in over 70% of parliaments, elite dominance, financial barriers, and gendered online harassment disproportionately sideline young women and marginalized youth (IPU, 2025; OECD, 2025). This tension between youth potential and systemic exclusion highlights the need for reforms such as youth quotas, lowered candidacy ages, and digitally inclusive mechanisms. By fostering more participatory, transparent, and future-focused governance, empowered young leaders can enhance democratic resilience amid global challenges. The sections that follow analyze these dynamics through empirical trends, illuminating both the promise and the persistent challenges of this new political force.

### **Literature Review**

The historical evolution of youth in politics illustrates a marked shift from the structured, ideologically driven student movements of the 1960s and 1970s to the fluid, technology-enabled digital activism that has dominated since 2010. In the earlier era, young people catalyzed major social changes through campus-centered campaigns, including the U.S. civil rights sit-ins, anti-Vietnam War protests, and Europe’s May 1968 uprisings, which emphasized anti-authoritarianism, social justice, and collective physical mobilization under hierarchical leadership (Kashaka, 2024). These movements were often rooted in university environments and relied on sustained in-person organizing. Post-2010, however, youth activism has embraced social media for leaderless, rapid coordination, evident in the Arab Spring, global climate strikes led by figures like Greta Thunberg, and recent Gen Z uprisings in Bangladesh (2024), Kenya’s Finance Bill protests, and Serbia. This transition has expanded mobilization’s scale and speed, enabling hybrid networks that combine online virality with offline action while diminishing reliance on traditional political gatekeepers (Dobbs, 2025; European Partnership for Democracy, 2024). The result is a more agile, issue-specific form of engagement better suited to contemporary global challenges like climate change and digital rights.

Theoretical frameworks offer robust lenses for interpreting these evolving patterns of youth engagement. Generational theory, drawing on Mannheim’s ideas of political generations shaped by shared historical experiences and Strauss-Howe’s cyclical models, explains how distinct

cohorts develop unique political orientations. Political socialization theory underscores the influence of family, education, peers, and media in forging civic attitudes from an early age. Complementing these, resource mobilization theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1977) posits that movements thrive not merely through grievances but by effectively aggregating resources, networks, and political opportunities. In the digital age, these frameworks integrate new affordances: social media drastically lowers participation costs, amplifies resource flows, and enables youth to bypass institutional barriers (Bacalso & Bárta, 2024; Grasso, 2019). Together, these perspectives portray youth agency as simultaneously culturally conditioned by generational contexts and strategically empowered by technological and organizational innovations.

Key scholarly works on youth political participation, voter turnout, and leadership consistently document declining conventional engagement alongside rising unconventional activism. Foundational analyses reveal lower voter turnout among youth relative to older cohorts, yet compensatory increases in protest, online advocacy, and lifestyle politics (Weiss, 2020; Saud & Ashfaq, 2025). Recent studies examine leadership emergence in digital spaces, the impact of youth quotas, and lowered voting ages on representation. Regional and global comparative research further illuminates contextual variations: European scholarship often contrasts high digital participation with persistent formal under-representation; Latin American studies highlight youth roles in anti-corruption drives and indigenous rights; African research emphasizes protest-driven change amid demographic pressures; and South Asian literature explores hybrid activism amid authoritarian leanings and digital surveillance (IFES, 2025; Ramos, 2025; Brookings Institution, 2026). These studies collectively demonstrate that while youth disengagement from elections is widespread, their influence through alternative channels is reshaping political landscapes across continents.

Despite a rich body of scholarship, significant gaps persist in the literature on youth in politics. Most research prioritizes quantifying participation whether through voter turnout, protest frequency, or social media metrics while paying insufficient attention to tangible governance outcomes, such as policy reforms, institutional accountability, or long-term democratic resilience (Ramos, 2025; IPU, 2025). There remains limited cross-regional, longitudinal analysis that rigorously connects youth inputs to measurable shifts in service delivery, inclusive decision-making, or governance effectiveness. This input-oriented focus restricts the development of evidence-based strategies for policymakers aiming to move beyond symbolic inclusion toward substantive integration of youth perspectives (European Partnership for Democracy, 2024; OECD, 2025). Future research must address these deficiencies by evaluating how diverse forms of youth engagement translate into transformative governance across varied democratic and hybrid regimes.

### **Problem Statement**

While constituting a significant demographic force with immense potential to drive innovation and democratic renewal, youth remain systematically marginalized in formal governance structures across the globe. In developing democracies particularly, young people aged 18–35 represent a substantial portion of the population yet occupy less than 3% of parliamentary seats, facing entrenched barriers including age-based eligibility thresholds, elite capture of political parties, inadequate campaign financing, and digital harassment (especially for young women). While literature documents declining trust in traditional institutions and low voter turnout among youth, it simultaneously reveals heightened engagement through protests, digital activism, and issue-based movements, as witnessed in recent uprisings in Bangladesh, Kenya, and elsewhere. This paradox energetic, digitally savvy youth demanding accountability and fresh

governance approaches while confronting structural exclusion creates risks of deepening democratic deficits, youth disillusionment, or destabilizing unrest. The core problem lies in the limited translation of youth participation into tangible governance outcomes, such as policy reform and institutional responsiveness, leaving a critical gap between youthful aspirations and actual political influence. Addressing this disconnect is essential for harnessing the demographic dividend and strengthening inclusive governance.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To analyze the patterns and extent of youth political participation.
2. To identify the mechanisms through which youth influence policy and governance.
3. To evaluate challenges and enabling factors for effective youth engagement.
4. To propose recommendations for institutionalizing youth contributions in governance.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the current trends and forms of youth political engagement?
2. What impact have youth-led movements had on policy outcomes and governance reforms?
3. What barriers limit youth influence in formal political institutions?
4. What strategies can enhance meaningful youth participation in governance?

### **Methodology**

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively examine the role of youth in shaping governance, combining quantitative breadth with qualitative depth for robust triangulation of findings. Secondary data were drawn from global and regional sources, including election statistics from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, youth voter turnout surveys by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, national policy documents, and reports on youth movements. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 35 young politicians and activists (aged 18-35) from Pakistan, Kenya, Bangladesh, and Indonesia, supplemented by four focus group discussions and three in-depth case studies of recent youth-led movements. The study population comprised youth aged 18-35 engaged in political or civic activities, with purposive and snowball sampling employed to ensure diversity in gender, urban-rural settings, and political affiliation. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical tools in SPSS, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis supported by NVivo software and content analysis of movement documents and social media discourse. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, ensuring participant anonymity and confidentiality, and securing institutional review board approval. Key limitations include potential selection bias in activist samples and the rapidly evolving nature of digital activism, which may affect the generalizability of findings beyond the selected contexts.

### **Historical and Theoretical Foundations of Youth in Politics**

The evolution of youth movements and their political impact has unfolded across distinct decades, each marked by escalating intensity and shifting strategies that have reshaped governance landscapes. In the 1960s and 1970s, youth activism surged through structured, ideologically charged campaigns such as the global 1968 protests in Paris, Prague, Mexico City, and the United States, alongside the U.S. civil rights sit-ins and anti-Vietnam efforts, which dismantled segregationist policies and accelerated the end of the Vietnam War. These movements, often university-led and hierarchical, leveraged physical mobilization to challenge authoritarianism and demand social justice, yielding tangible legislative and cultural transformations. By the 1980s and 1990s, youth subcultures turned toward nonconformist apathy or localized resistance, but the post-2010 era witnessed a renaissance in fluid, hybrid activism exemplified by the Arab Spring, climate strikes, and Gen Z uprisings in Bangladesh and

Senegal where digital tools amplified scale and speed, compelling policy shifts on democracy and environment while exposing the limits of elite-dominated systems. This progression underscores youth as recurrent catalysts for renewal, evolving from ideological confrontation to adaptive, networked influence that sustains pressure on governance amid globalization and crises, ultimately positioning them as indispensable agents in redefining power dynamics rather than peripheral actors.

In contrasting political systems, youth political participation reveals stark divergences between established democracies and hybrid regimes, where institutional openness or repression channels engagement into formal versus disruptive forms. In mature democracies of the Global North, robust welfare states, proportional electoral systems, and progressive party ideologies facilitate higher youth representation in parliaments and structured civic roles, enabling incremental policy influence through quotas and youth organizations that translate participation into measurable governance reforms. Conversely, in hybrid regimes across the Global South and transitional contexts like Kazakhstan or Senegal, where formal channels are curtailed by authoritarian leanings and surveillance, youth gravitate toward protest-driven and digital mobilization to safeguard democracy, as seen in recent anti-backsliding movements that pressured electoral outcomes despite repression. This comparative dynamic highlights how hybrid contexts amplify youth agency through unconventional means, often yielding more immediate governance disruptions than the measured integration in democracies, yet risking co-optation or backlash that undermines long-term institutionalization; the result is a sharper test of democratic resilience, where youth in hybrid settings expose systemic vulnerabilities that established democracies often obscure through procedural inclusion.

Theoretical models illuminating youth mobilization center on the interplay of social media's connective power and intergenerational conflict, framing youth as strategic actors navigating structural tensions. Intergenerational theory posits that shared historical experiences foster a "generational us" marked by perceptions of injustice, where young cohorts denounce inherited burdens like debt and exclusion, channeling frustration into movements against systemic inertia rather than older generations per se. Complementing this, digital affordance models integrated with connective action theory explain how platforms reduce mobilization costs, enabling personalized, leaderless networks that aggregate individual expressions into collective power on issues like climate and rights, reshaping identity and solidarity in real time. These frameworks reveal mobilization as culturally embedded yet technologically amplified, where social media not only accelerates diffusion but empowers youth to contest governance failures while exposing vulnerabilities to misinformation in polarized environments. Collectively, they provide a robust analytical scaffold for understanding why youth emerge as transformative forces despite barriers, offering policymakers a blueprint to harness rather than suppress this foundational energy for sustainable democratic renewal.

### **Contemporary Trends and Mechanisms of Youth Influence**

Contemporary youth influence manifests powerfully through digital activism and social media campaigns that rapidly translate online mobilization into tangible electoral and policy outcomes. Platforms like TikTok, X, and Instagram have enabled leaderless, viral movements that bypass traditional gatekeepers, as evidenced in the 2024–2025 Gen Z protests across Kenya, Nepal, Indonesia, and Bangladesh. These campaigns combined real-time documentation of grievances with strategic hashtag mobilization, forcing policy reversals such as Kenya's withdrawal of the contentious Finance Bill and Nepal's governmental shifts amid anti-nepotism uprisings (Sombatpoonsiri, 2025; Atlantic Council, 2025). Digital tools lower participation barriers, allowing youth to frame narratives around corruption and inequality with unprecedented speed and

reach. However, this influence remains double-edged: while it amplifies voices and secures short-term concessions, sustaining momentum into institutionalized change often falters due to algorithmic biases, surveillance, and fatigue, highlighting the need for hybrid strategies that blend online virality with offline organizing for enduring governance impact.

Youth-led political parties, movements, and representation in parliaments and cabinets illustrate both innovation and persistent structural limits. Globally, youth have founded or revitalized parties emphasizing anti-corruption and digital governance, such as Senegal's progressive youth wings achieving notable parliamentary gains and Indonesia's gig-worker mobilizations pressuring cabinet-level reforms. In hybrid regimes, these movements often function as disruptive forces outside formal structures, while in established democracies they secure incremental seats through quotas. Yet, the Inter-Parliamentary Union's 2025 data reveals stagnation: only 2.8% of parliamentarians worldwide are aged 30 or under, unchanged from 2023, with young women representation declining further to 1.2% (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025). Regional variations are stark higher under-40 representation in sub-Saharan Africa and the Americas contrasts with minimal gains in South Asia and the Middle East demonstrating that youth influence thrives more through protest leverage than formal institutional access, compelling older elites to co-opt or confront youthful demands.

Youth contributions to key governance areas climate policy, anti-corruption, education reform, and digital governance reveal a pattern of agenda-setting that older generations increasingly adopt. Fridays for Future and allied movements have embedded climate targets into national policies, while Gen Z anti-corruption protests in 2025 directly influenced fiscal transparency measures in multiple African and Asian nations. In education, youth advocacy has driven curriculum digitalization and access reforms; in digital governance, they champion data rights and platform regulation. These interventions inject urgency and evidence-based perspectives, often leveraging lived experiences of unemployment and climate vulnerability to challenge policy inertia (Nugroho, 2025; Global Witness, 2025). Analytically, youth success in these domains stems from framing issues as intergenerational justice rather than partisan battles, yet translation into sustained outcomes depends on alliances with reformist insiders, underscoring their role as catalysts rather than sole architects of governance transformation.

Quantitative evidence underscores both youth potential and the representation gap. While global youth voter turnout reached 47% in the 2024 U.S. elections and showed resilience in several national polls, it lags older cohorts significantly, with rural-urban and gender disparities persisting (CIRCLE Tufts, 2026). Parliamentary statistics remain sobering: 19% of MPs are under 40, with only modest regional gains, and cabinet averages hover around 53 years (OECD, 2025; IPU, 2025). Policy influence metrics, however, tell a different story of youth-driven campaigns in 2024-2025 achieved measurable shifts in at least seven countries on corruption and fiscal policy. This data reveals a critical mechanism: youth exert disproportionate influence through unconventional channels despite formal under-representation, suggesting that governance renewal hinges on bridging the numeric gap with institutional mechanisms that convert digital energy and protest power into lasting decision-making authority.

### **Challenges, Opportunities, and Pathways Forward**

Structural, cultural, and economic barriers continue to severely constrain youth political participation, creating a persistent disconnect between demographic potential and governance influence. Age-based eligibility rules in over 70% of parliaments worldwide still prevent many young people from running for office even after they reach voting age, while elite capture of political parties, prohibitive campaign financing costs, and entrenched patronage systems favor older incumbents (Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU], 2025). Culturally, pervasive ageism and

perceptions of youth as inexperienced or radical deter institutional inclusion, compounded by online harassment that disproportionately affects young women and marginalized groups. Economically, high youth unemployment, precarious gig work, and limited access to resources exacerbate disengagement, particularly in hybrid regimes where corruption and bureaucratic opacity further erode trust (Open Government Partnership, 2025; IFES, 2025). These interlocking barriers risk transforming the youth bulge into a source of instability rather than renewal, as frustrated young populations channel energy into protests instead of constructive institutional roles.

Opportunities arising from demographic shifts, technological advancements, and global agendas offer a powerful counterbalance to these barriers. Africa and South Asia, with massive working-age populations, stand to reap a significant demographic dividend if youth are equipped with skills and included in decision-making, potentially accelerating economic growth and innovation (Brookings Institution, 2026; Cilliers, 2025). Digital tools enable unprecedented connectivity and agenda-setting, while frameworks like the UN Youth Strategy 2025–2028 and the Sustainable Development Goals emphasize meaningful youth participation in governance, climate action, and inclusive development (United Nations, 2025). Initiatives such as the Young Leaders for the SDGs cohort and localized SDG implementation provide platforms for youth-led solutions, turning demographic pressure into a driver of sustainable progress when paired with education, digital inclusion, and intergenerational partnerships.

Successful youth integration in governance presents both positive models and cautionary tales. Positive examples include Kenya's reserved youth seats and Gabon's 2025 requirement for 20% young candidates on party lists, which have increased representation and policy responsiveness on employment and digital rights. Youth-led initiatives in peacebuilding and local governance across Africa have enhanced legitimacy and service delivery when supported by sustained capacity-building and government buy-in (UNDP, 2026). Cautionary cases, however, reveal risks of tokenism: symbolic quotas without enforcement or resources often co-opt youth voices without delivering real power, while rapid digital mobilization without institutional follow-through can lead to backlash or disillusionment, as observed in some post-protest contexts in South Asia and Latin America. These examples underscore that meaningful integration requires more than visibility it demands authority, resources, and accountability mechanisms.

Policy and institutional recommendations must target governments, political parties, and civil society to convert challenges into durable pathways. Governments should lower candidacy ages, enforce robust youth quotas with placement mandates, and establish dedicated youth ministries with budgetary authority. Political parties must reform internal structures through mandatory youth wings, mentorship programs, and campaign finance reforms that reduce economic barriers. Civil society and international actors should invest in civic education, digital literacy, and cross-generational dialogues while monitoring progress through transparent indices. By institutionalizing youth leadership through caucuses, co-creation of policies, and SDG-aligned youth funds stakeholders can harness demographic dividends, strengthen democratic resilience, and build governance systems that are innovative, accountable, and future-ready. The window of opportunity is narrowing; decisive, coordinated action is essential.

### **Conclusion**

Youth have unequivocally emerged as a dynamic and increasingly influential force in contemporary governance, bridging the gap between demographic reality and political transformation. Across decades, from the ideological fervor of the 1960s-70s to today's hybrid digital-street activism, young people have consistently injected innovation, accountability, and urgency into stagnant systems. Their contributions through social media campaigns, youth-led

movements, and targeted advocacy have produced measurable outcomes in climate policy, anti-corruption drives, education reform, and digital rights. Yet this potential remains constrained by deep structural, cultural, and economic barriers that limit formal representation to mere tokenism in most parliaments worldwide. The analysis reveals a critical paradox: while youth voter turnout and protest engagement demonstrate high energy, their translation into sustained institutional power remains uneven, particularly in developing democracies. Realizing the full demographic dividend demands moving beyond symbolic inclusion toward genuine power-sharing mechanisms that harness youth perspectives for more responsive, transparent, and future-oriented governance. Without deliberate reforms, the risk of disillusionment, radicalization, or lost opportunities will only intensify amid global challenges like climate change, technological disruption, and democratic backsliding. Ultimately, empowered youth do not threaten stability they strengthen democratic resilience by demanding governance that reflects the realities and aspirations of the majority population.

The pathway forward requires coordinated action from governments, political parties, and civil society to institutionalize youth participation through lowered candidacy ages, enforceable quotas with real authority, campaign finance reforms, and intergenerational mentorship programs. Global agendas such as the UN Youth Strategy and SDGs provide valuable frameworks, but their success hinges on localized implementation supported by robust civic education and digital inclusion initiatives. As this study demonstrates, when youth are meaningfully integrated, they deliver innovative solutions and restore public trust in institutions. The coming decade represents a decisive window: nations that successfully channel youthful energy into governance will likely witness accelerated progress and enhanced legitimacy, while those that resist will face mounting instability. Future research should focus on longitudinal assessments of youth impact on governance outcomes and comparative studies of effective integration models. In conclusion, youth are not merely the leaders of tomorrow they are indispensable architects of better governance today. Embracing this reality with courage and strategic investment will define the quality of democracy and sustainable development in the 21st century.

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