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Can youth participation become a blueprint for wider and deepened democratic innovation at the EU level?

Democracy Retreat Highlights

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November 2025



Funded by
the European Union

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To cite: Chabane, S. and Staelens, J. (2025), "Can youth participation become a blueprint for wider and deepened democratic innovation at the EU level?", Democracy Retreat Highlights, Trans-European Policy Studies Association and the Egmont Institute.

The authors would like to thank Jean-Louis de Brouwer, Director of the European Affairs Programme at the Egmont Institute, for his valuable feedback on the paper.

Editing and formatting: Baptiste Roman (TEPSA).

Cover picture:
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Youth participation is increasingly viewed as a potential catalyst for democratic renewal in the European Union (EU), including through the upcoming EU's [Intergenerational Fairness Strategy](#). The issue has gained urgency as democracies worldwide face sustained pressures and the legitimacy of democratic institutions is increasingly questioned, including by younger generations.[1] At this critical juncture, following the first sessions of the [Citizens' Panel on Intergenerational Fairness](#) on 12-14 September 2025, key discussions explored whether youth participation could act as a blueprint for renewing and deepening democratic practices at the EU level.[2]

Youth participation in context

Youth participation cannot be reduced to formal political engagement alone. While electoral participation remains a crucial element of democratic inclusion, **non-formal forms of engagement**, such as social movements, digital activism, and grassroots mobilisation, **have become central** to how young people make their voices heard.[3] These diverse forms of civic engagement have **already reshaped policy agendas at**

the European level, notably in areas such as climate action, with the role of Fridays For Future's mobilisation in 2019, which led to the consolidation of today's European Green Deal [4] Yet they often take place outside institutional frameworks, which remain reluctant to fully acknowledge or integrate them.[5]

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At the same time, the democratic environment is increasingly difficult for younger generations. They **face structural barriers to participation** ranging from increasing socio-economic precarity and exclusion to the lack of meaningful consultation in policy-making and the scarcity of resources dedicated to youth engagement.[6] Funding for youth organisations and participatory structures has, in many cases, been reduced or is at risk of being further

dismantled, due to the merging of funding streams and the lack of fixed youth-specific targets in the current proposal for the EU's budget.[7]

To address these challenges, the EU has taken steps through a general strategy and targeted initiatives,[8] such as the [EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027](#)), which includes the establishment of the [EU Youth Dialogue](#) within its framework and where activities happen in 18-month work cycles, with each cycle focusing on a different theme decided by the Council of Youth Ministers,[9] and more recently, with the launch of the [Youth Policy Dialogues](#) to amplify youth voices across all Commission portfolios and embed them more systematically into institutional decision-making processes.

Following global initiatives such as the United Nations Pact for the Future, the **EU Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness**, designed this year and said to be published in the Spring of 2026, intends to **also address youth and future generations**, by ensuring "that decisions taken today do no harm to future generations and that there is increased solidarity and engagement between people of different ages." [10] Designing such a strategy implies an extensive consultation process where all generations, including young people, can shape its scope and outcome. Ongoing [European Citizens' Panels on the topic](#) are, for instance, voluntarily prioritising the representation of **a third of young people** (aged 16 to 29) within the panel assembly of 150 randomly selected citizens from all 27 Member States.

Respectively, these frameworks aim to promote more inclusive and equitable

participation of young people in shaping public policy. Ensuring the effectiveness of these initiatives will require sustained political will, dedicated funding and a genuine commitment to embedding youth perspectives.[11]

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From tokenisation to empowerment

Youth participation is often subject to tokenisation: young people are frequently invited into political processes, but their contributions are rarely translated into influence or shared responsibility.[12] This has created frustration and disillusionment, variable between EU Member States, which are compounded by broader societal trends of mistrust and repression, including the policing of protests and dismissiveness of contentious politics.[13] In reference to citizen participation, tokenism corresponds to situations where "people are indeed heard, but they still lack the power to ensure that their views are subsequently followed up." [14] Such tokenism is usually materialising through three modes: placation, consultation and information, which can respectively decrease levels of meaningfulness, as people perceive that they are only participating 'for show or image'. [15]

Addressing tokenism requires structural change, including the **systematic integration of a “Youth test”**[16] across all levels of EU governance to assess the impact of policies on younger generations, encouraging Member States to **lower the voting age to 16**,[17] and considering **youth quotas** [18] as a way to redress age imbalances in representative bodies. More generally, **intergenerational perspectives** appear **essential to ongoing budgetary negotiations of the EU’s long-term budget**, with calls for ringfenced funding to support youth initiatives and ensure continuity.

Casting a ballot is considered one of the most tangible ways of increasing the sense of belonging to the democratic system. However, participation cannot be limited to the electoral cycle. Providing opportunities for deliberation and consultation, through **electronic voting or citizens’ assemblies**, is equally important to empower younger generations and enhance the legitimacy of democratic decision-making. The tension between short-term electoral incentives and the need for long-term policy planning, particularly on issues such as climate change and intergenerational justice, is a key element to be addressed. In this context, **embracing a diversity of participatory practices beyond traditional voting is a way to balance immediate political pressures with the foresight required to address complex, long-term societal challenges**. [19]

Trust, communication, and representation

The broader relationship between citizens and institutions must also be

considered when examining the stakes of youth participation in democratic processes. The erosion of trust is mutual: while institutions often lament citizens’ disengagement, they themselves are reluctant to trust citizens with genuine responsibility. This requires **greater openness**, both in the spaces where decisions are taken and in the channels through which institutions engage with society. Such a “bridge” can be established and led by young citizens themselves, as long as a space is held for them to be genuinely listened to.[20]

“Embracing a diversity of participatory practices beyond traditional voting is a way to balance immediate political pressures with the foresight required to address complex, long-term societal challenges.”

Communication can be highlighted as a persistent weakness. European institutions are often targeted as scapegoats by national politics, while their own efforts to communicate remain limited in reach and effectiveness. To resonate with younger generations, institutions must adopt new approaches, not only by advertising achievements but also by **making clear the consequences of inaction and imagining new futures**. In addition, such engagement should take place in environments where young people already are, such as sports arenas, cultural spaces, or digital platforms, and in a language that connects to their lived realities.

Another concern for legitimacy is electoral representation and ensuring

that the interests of a diverse youth are safeguarded. For instance, the European Parliament, besides having a limited socio-economic diversity, **remains demographically unbalanced**, with younger age groups underrepresented compared to their share of the population.[21]

Towards a new democratic model

The **current model of democracy is insufficiently participatory** and needs to evolve. Some argue that gradual reform is preferable to rupture, but the scale of change required remains significant. **Co-management models** (such as those of the Council of Europe, in place for 20 years) feature examples of how responsibility can be genuinely shared between institutions and citizens.[22]

Education is considered a cornerstone of future engagement, with calls for citizenship education from an early age to embed democratic practices as part of everyday life. Equally, institutions should be encouraged to **explore new governance models**, including **permanent deliberative mechanisms** and **new ways of measuring progress** beyond the mainstream economic measure of 'Gross domestic product' to reflect intergenerational fairness and well-being.[23]

Concerns are raised about the broader orientation of European policy-making, which currently prioritises security and defence. Such concerns highlight the need for a renewed focus on well-being and social justice as essential components of the democratic contract between institutions and citizens. The creation of **new**

institutional structures dedicated to youth engagement (such as the European Commission's [new 'Youth Outreach Unit'](#)) and the mainstreaming of youth perspectives at the highest political levels are essential steps to ensure that younger generations are not only consulted but taken seriously in shaping the future of Europe.

Conclusion

Youth participation holds significant potential to act as a catalyst for democratic renewal. Young people in Europe and beyond are already experimenting with **new forms of engagement that challenge traditional boundaries** and highlight the need for institutions to adapt. Rather than perceiving these practices as disruptive, institutions should embrace them as an opportunity to reinvent democracy in ways that are more inclusive, participatory, and future-oriented. If embedded structurally into policy-making, **youth participation and intergenerational fairness could provide the blueprint for a more resilient democratic model**, one that not only restores trust between citizens and institutions but also ensures that today's decisions safeguard the interests of tomorrow.

Nets4Dem is a Horizon Europe project coordinated by Democracy Reporting International that endeavours to reshape the landscape of democracy initiatives. Nets4Dem brings together more than 200 cities, over 50 think tanks and universities, and dozens of democracy-focused non-governmental organisations, covering 38 European countries. Nets4Dem aims to enhance and transform the current landscape of democracy initiatives by creating a unique European network. This network is designed to facilitate high degrees of connectedness among policy-makers, practitioners, and researchers, by providing improved access to cross-cutting work on democratic innovations. It further aims to weave networks spanning various sectors, geographies and levels of governance, thereby redistributing power and resources to those who stand to gain the most from initiatives to engage citizens in civic renewal.

Stay in touch

Check out Nets4Dem on TEPSA [here](#).

Check out the Nets4Dem website [here](#).

Endnotes

- [1] Deželan, Tomaž, '[Young people's participation in European democratic Processes: How to improve and facilitate youth involvement](#)', Directorate-General for Internal Policies, PE 745.820, March 2023.
- [2] This paper is inspired by the [Fourth Democracy Retreat](#) co-organised by TEPSA and the Egmont Institute on 16 September 2025 under the [Nets4Dem](#) initiative, with a focus on youth participation and its relations with democratic renewal in the EU. By connecting more than 200 cities, dozens of think tanks, universities and civil society organisations, Nets4Dem provides a unique platform to share practices, test participatory tools, and build capacity across different levels of governance which includes the establishment of the EU Youth Dialogue within its framework.
- [3] The [2024 Youth Eurobarometer](#) indicates that the second most popular form of participation among young people in the EU is creating or signing a petition (26% of respondents), followed by volunteering for a charity or campaign organisation (20%).
- [4] Euronews, '["We were hopeful": Climate activists reflect on EU climate action amid a green backlash](#)', 12 April 2024.
- [5] Vogiatzis, Nikos, '[The Past and Future of the Right to Petition the European Parliament](#)', Yearbook of European Law, Volume 40, 82-110, 15 November 2021.
- [6] In 2024, 24.1% of the young people aged 15-29 in the EU (17.3 million) were at risk of poverty or social exclusion ([Eurostat, June 2025](#)); European Trade Union Confederation, '[Young people and precarious work](#)', Briefing, nd.
- [7] European Youth Forum, '[EU budget: a rude awakening for youth](#)', EYF website, 22 July 2020.
- [8] The following list is far from being exhaustive, and further initiatives coordinated by the European Commission's Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (but not only) are found within the following document: European Commission, [Management Plan 2024](#), DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 24 January 2024, p. 4.
- [9] Currently, the current cycle (No 11) runs from January 2025 to the end of June 2026, and is linked to the Youth Goal #1 of the EUYS Strategy on "Connecting EU with youth."
- [10] Von der Leyen, Ursula, [Europe's Choice. Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2024-2029](#), 2024, p. 19.
- [11] The first Youth Policy Dialogue took place with Commissioner Glenn Micallef on 28 January 2025. See: https://youth.europa.eu/events/youth-policy-dialogue-commissioner-glenn-micallef_sr.
- [12] P.Bosnić, '[Tokenism in Youth Activism: Are Young Voices Really Being Heard? EDYN Features Members](#)', European Democracy Youth Network, 06 February 2025.

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- [13] T. Chevalier, '[Political trust, young people and institutions in Europe. A multilevel analysis](#)', International Journal of Social Welfare, Volume 28, Issue 4, Special Issue: Youth employment in Europe: Coordination as a crucial dimension, October 2019.
- [14] B., van Ek, (2022). [Beyond Tokenism: Interactive Governance Taking on a Meaningful Role](#). Master's Thesis, Erasmus University of Rotterdam, p. 14; see also the MHPSS Collaborative, "What is Tokenism? (According to the Youth Expert Advisors)", 05 August 2024.
- [15] S. R. Arstein (2019). [A ladder of citizen participation](#). Journal of the American planning association, 85(1), 24-34.
- [16] EU Youth Test: impact assessment tool which ensures that young people are considered when the EU is deciding on new policies and law. ([Definition of the European Youth Forum](#)).
- [17] Currently followed by a limited number of EU Member States (Belgium, Germany, Greece at 17 years old, as well as Malta and Austria) for voting during the European elections: Rafał Mańko, '[Voting Age for European elections](#)', European Parliament, PE 749.767, August 2023.
- [18] F. Bellato, B. Coraglia, C. Guerra, A. Semenzato, "[This time I've voted", but am I represented? Addressing the underrepresentation of young Europeans through the adoption of youth quotas](#)", Institut Jacques Delors, Student Policy Brief, November 2022.
- [19] Marco Improta and Elisabetta Mannoni, '[Government short-termism and the management of global challenges](#)', Political Studies Association, Volume 27 Issue 2, 18 September 2024.
- [20] Such approach can be found in the recent Brussels-based youth organisation, The Bridge: <https://thebridgeasbl.org/en/a-propos>
- [21] The youngest MEP is 23 years old, the oldest one is 76. The average age of MEPs is 50 years old, and most MEPs are between between 40 and 44 years old.
[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2024/762356/EPRS_ATA\(2024\)762356_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2024/762356/EPRS_ATA(2024)762356_EN.pdf).
- [22] Council of Europe, '[Co-management](#)', nd.
- [23] Zoe Institute, '[Mainstreaming wellbeing and sustainability in policymaking](#)', 28 March 2023.

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