

WALKING THE WALK

PRIORITIZING YOUTH POLITICAL AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN RENEWING DEMOCRACY

Recommendations to Prioritize Youth Political Engagement Global Alliance for Youth Political Action

The *Global Alliance for Youth Political Action* is a growing network of organizations throughout the world focused on supporting and promoting youth civic and political engagement. The Alliance currently comprises [Accountability Lab](#), [Community of Democracies](#), [Democracy Moves](#), the [International Foundation for Electoral Systems](#), the [International Republican Institute](#), the [National Democratic Institute](#), [People Powered](#), and [Restless Development](#). Our primary goals are to coordinate our collective efforts to advocate for increased resources and support to young people leading political change efforts around the world.

The *Alliance* recently released a report, endorsed by the majority of its member organizations, [“Walking the Walk”](#), which uses survey-research and interview findings to push back against the false narratives of youth apathy and democratic disaffection. The reality is more nuanced. Although young people distrust formal political institutions and have doubts about democracy’s ability to deliver, the report reveals high levels of political activism and young people’s intense desire to influence positive change through new modes of organizing. The challenge is bridging the divide between young people and formal democratic decision-making processes.

In the spirit of this report’s findings and the recently held Summit for Democracy, the *Global Alliance for Youth Political Action* strongly encourages the United States government to adopt a robust focus on youth civic and political engagement around the world as the “Year of Action” begins. While the recent Summit for Democracy did elevate young people in panel discussions, there is an opportunity, and need, to ensure that the commitments and actions that follow more directly support youth-led efforts to revitalize democracy, rights, and governance.

While the “Walking the Walk” paper provided general recommendations to governments throughout the world, international funders, political parties, and a diverse array of actors, this document is geared specifically towards the United States government. We provide the following recommendations as examples of specific ways and mechanisms that the United States government can prioritize youth political engagement in a moment of deep democratic decay.

1. Elevate the Importance of Youth in the Summit for Democracy Year of Action

Globally, young people are often generalized as apathetic and seen as increasingly turning away from democracy. To that end, too often, young people are not explicitly mentioned as key actors in the movement for democracy, or are regarded as one of a host of marginalized groups. Democratic renewal efforts often include young people as an ancillary constituency rather than a core focus.

WALKING THE WALK

PRIORITIZING YOUTH POLITICAL AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN RENEWING DEMOCRACY

We believe, contrary to this dominant narrative, that our youngest generations can be—and in many places are already—the primary drivers of democratic renewal. In 2020, young activists maintained protests for years in Hong Kong despite crackdowns from the Chinese government. Young people in Sudan and Myanmar are pushing back against the military-led coups to restore democratic government. Likewise, the youngest generations continue the push for democracy throughout the Middle East. Young people of diverse identities and backgrounds are demanding democracy

As the Year of Action for Democracy kicks off around the world, we urge the United States government to create a meaningful mechanism to ensure that young people are front and center in the campaign. Recognizing the upsurge in youth activism around the world, young people need to be elevated as a key pillar of democratic renewal efforts and recognized for their current efforts to advance democracy. While youth as a status is transient, the ramifications of not acting now will have widespread, long-term implications for democracy.

The US government should explicitly and frequently recognize the challenges that young people face, especially in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and look for creative and authentic ways to engage them in the Year of Action. This can include high-level governmental officials explicitly focusing on young people's ongoing leadership and action in discussions on democracy (as Secretary Blinken did [here for example](#)); explicitly consulting them and including them in the nation-wide commitments to democracy that emerged from the Summit for Democracy; ensuring young people have leadership roles in youth-supporting initiatives, organizations and networks; and ensuring that departments like the Department of State and USAID are adequately staffed to work with young people on issues of democracy.

Young people should not solely be included as advisors or decision-makers to youth programming, but rather, part of broader democracy initiatives. One of the critical components to successfully elevating youth is ensuring real intergenerational collaboration is successfully occurring. One potential way to accomplish this intergenerational work would be to ensure that young people are fully integrated into all future Summit for Democracy events, commitments, and programming. For example, rather than having separate panels on young people, we hope that all panels and any steering committees that emerge from the summit include young people.

- 2. Recognize That "Youth" is Not a Monolith (Restless Development).** "Youth" as a group is not monolithic, despite how some policies, funding strategies and programs may describe the stage of life. Young people exist in their own social and political contexts which include unequal distribution of power, resources, access and decision-making often mediated by gender, sexuality, class, ability, language, and race. The US government should ensure that its efforts focused on youth engagement recognize the complexity of "youth" as a term.

WALKING THE WALK

PRIORITIZING YOUTH POLITICAL AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN RENEWING DEMOCRACY

The flattening of the youth sector, when not disaggregated or treated through a deliberate equity lens, may exacerbate institutional bias and result in reinforcing the power of certain groups, especially elites, to widen gaps in democratic participation. We recommend that the US government make a real investment into understanding and addressing equity within the youth sector, from inception, research and funding allocation (for example including gender frameworks in all program designs, donors establishing minimum standards for inclusion in their calls, requiring disaggregated data collection and analysis etc.).

- 3. Invest Significantly in Youth Political Engagement (IRI):** Often, democratic renewal efforts are focused on political parties and institutional reform, while youth development efforts focus on issues like education, health, and climate justice. These are all critical investment areas, but youth civic and political engagement is rarely prioritized for significant investment. The US government should invest robustly, urgently, and specifically in global youth political and civic engagement efforts.

In order to bridge the traditional development space with civic and political engagement, there is the possibility of funding youth-led accountability initiatives focused on issues like health, gender, livelihoods and climate. Such programs have the opportunity to simultaneously achieve improvements in specific development areas, while young people gain formal access to governmental authorities, and a subsequent desire to engage politically, including running for office.

US government actors like USAID and the Department of State should work to advance young people's role in revitalizing democracy, rights and governance to address worrying signs of disengagement and polarization. For example, the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI), the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) and the Young Leaders of the Americas Initiative (YLIA) should be scaled up and should include additional training around political and civic engagement. Other initiatives that merit additional support include the [European Democracy Youth Network](#) (EDYN), the [Democracy Moves](#) network, the International Republican Institute's [Generation Democracy network](#), and USAID's [Global LEAD initiative](#) and the [Open Government Partnership's Youth Collective](#) to ensure young people have access to resources and a support network to be positive forces for democratic resiliency around the world.

The US government can specifically lead by investing in youth civic education efforts abroad, which can help to establish a new generation of young democratic leaders. This civic education should not be solely focused on how the government works, or, as sometimes occurs in more oppressive countries, geared towards allegiance to the government. Instead, evidence demonstrates that experiential civics learning, in which young people learn civics

WALKING THE WALK

PRIORITIZING YOUTH POLITICAL AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN RENEWING DEMOCRACY

by engaging in the political process itself, is an effective way of developing efficacious, motivated young citizens. The US government can provide capacity building support and funding to local partners engaging in this type of experiential civic learning,

The US government should also substantially increase funding efforts that are less restrictive and designed in consultation with young people, including investing in opportunities for young people to share and learn from each other. The US should specifically consider supporting locally-led youth political engagement and democracy efforts and movements. The recent Powered By The People RFI from USAID is a useful step in the right direction in this regard and in the full call for proposals, should consider how to engage young people with diverse identities and backgrounds.

Additionally, there is the opportunity to work collaboratively with like-minded funders throughout the world, including international actors, and large institutional foundations focused on democratic renewal. The US government can also use its influence and leadership with domestic institutional funders, and other international actors, to fund youth political engagement efforts.

- 4. Meet Young People Where They Are (IFES):** The US government should meet young people where they are, recognizing their diversity and encouraging creative, often nontraditional engagement in the political process. The best way to do this is to engage young people as authentic partners in developing outreach efforts. The US government can support this approach by working to authentically understand how young people view democracy and the solutions they have by supporting youth-led research and analysis.

Grounded in information about the unique needs of young people, the US government and partner governments should elevate ways that youth, particularly young people with diverse identities, are expressing their political viewpoints, especially in the digital space. Investing in youth engagement and leadership online is especially important as a concrete mechanism to counter increasing efforts to close civic spaces. Reforms should also be adopted to ensure that digital spaces are safe spaces, where young people do not receive harassment or threats. The US government should significantly invest in digital citizenship and literacy through existing and new initiatives, and counter increasing amounts of disinformation, including through promoting the intentional regulation of social media companies that are at risk of spreading harmful propaganda to young people and creating safety guidelines in particular for minors engaging online.

The US government should also invest in tools and knowledge-building programs specifically for elected officials to understand how to engage with young people. Many elected officials assert that they would like to work and understand youth issues, but do not know how to reach youth actors. Specific training programs, developed with and delivered by young

WALKING THE WALK

PRIORITIZING YOUTH POLITICAL AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN RENEWING DEMOCRACY

people, on ways to seek feedback from young constituents and intergenerational exchange initiatives would better break the aforementioned vicious cycle, and ensure that elected officials are adequately and authentically paying attention to youth issues.

In addition to training, there should be investments in programs that ensure accountability and follow-up with elected officials so that continuous engagement can occur. The OGP Youth Collective has recently developed a handbook on youth engagement for government Points of Contact, for example, with a variety of ideas, approaches, tools and templates for this kind of work.

- 5. Ensure Young People Have Real Decision-Making Power (NDI):** Too often young people are tokenized in formal political engagement efforts or siloed into isolated engagements with other young people, rather than in substantive decision-making. While there may be a perception that it is uncomfortable or impractical to invite young people to the decision-making table, it is necessary: they have real lived experience and innovative ideas that are vital towards making better policy, and are an increasingly large part of the global population, especially in countries in the Global South. Consultations with young people have shown that if participation is not linked to decision-making, they are likely to avoid it.

Specific ways to help ensure that young people have influence can include fostering more inclusive, participatory spaces through deliberative processes, such as participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies, that enable young people to shape budgets and policies; introducing young people to collective action strategies and opportunities to organize in order to build power; actively involving young people in the design of USG-funded programs and initiatives, through consultative processes and advisory boards; designing asset-based programs starting with young people's strengths and interests, such as their familiarity with technology or passion about a socio-economic issue; supporting meaningful intergenerational collaboration and investing in efforts that rely on intergenerational relationships; and investing resources in political training programs for young people to run for and obtain political office as [NDI has done in the past](#), for example. Further investment is also needed in capacity strengthening for non-youth staff, officials and other stakeholders in meaningful and mutually beneficial intergenerational partnership.