YOUTH RECOMMENDATIONS TO INCREASE ENGAGEMENT IN DEMOCRACY

A Follow-up to the 2021 Summit for Democracy

FOREWORD

Youth engagement in public life is vital to building stable and resilient democracies and inclusive societies. Under the just-concluded Romanian Presidency (2019 to 2022) and with the beginning of the new Canadian (2022 to 2023) Presidency, the Community of Democracies can pride itself on its work to involve youth in shaping the future of democracy. For many years and through several initiatives, including the creation of the CoD YouthLeads, organizing the annual CoD Youth Forum, and engaging young people in CoD global events, the Permanent Secretariat of the Community of Democracies has translated Presidency vision into concrete, innovative, and workable recommendations to all stakeholders interested in learning best practices and ideas from the unbiased and enthusiastic voice of today's youth.

This report continues this tradition by following the path marked during the Summit of Democracies, organized in 2021 by the US Biden Administration. Crafted by the bright minds of the CoD YouthLeads and other youth leaders, it provides the reader with 20 policy recommendations to further bring young people front and center in public life.

As Secretary General, I suggest all stakeholders interested in bettering and innovating democracy invest the time to explore these ideas and make them theirs to bring the future closer.

Thomas E. Garrett

INTRODUCTION

On October 6th, 2022, the Permanent Secretariat of the Community of Democracies (PSCD) held an online roundtable with youth democracy leaders who contributed to the 2022 CoD Youth Forum. Meeting participants discussed commitments made by States invited to the 2021 Summit for Democracy, as well as progress made in this Year of Action, with a specific focus on youth engagement.

The following report, based on input from this dedicated roundtable meeting, is not exhaustive. The recommendations provided are built upon best practices youth representatives have experienced in their own countries and communities and aspirational policy targets.

This report aims to provide concrete policy recommendations to increase youth engagement and participation in democracies worldwide. The report will be presented to the CoD Governing Council Member States and disseminated as a tool to be considered in preparations for the Second Summit for Democracy, expected to be held in 2023.

For further information about this report and the content, please reach out to youth@community-democracies.org

1.   Equitable access to funding and financial institutions

One significant roadblock youth experience when trying to engage in political processes is the difficulties in funding political operations and overcoming bureaucratic hurdles to set up political organizations. This is often derived from the simple issue that young people have less of a network to fundraise from and limited credit history to prove to financial institutions that they are reliable parties in a contract. Similarly to policies aimed at supporting youth in starting a business, governments should envision schemes to help young people have access to funds to fuel political operations and special routes to open bank accounts.

2.   Simplified ways to create political parties and NGOs

Similarly to the previous point, young people that want to be actively engaged in the political and public life of countries regularly face high bureaucratic hurdles, even in mature democracies. These are often related to increased costs associated with founding organizations, extensive and complex documentation needed, and difficulties in accessing public servants who can guide them through the process. Simplified ways to conduct these operations should be envisioned for the youth.

3.   Gender alternate lists for elections

Gender alternate lists do help not only to ensure gender equality but also to increase youth participation. A common best practice in several democracies, gender alternate lists for elections not only have a very beneficial impact on female representation in politics but also help lower the age of candidates. In fact, by establishing rules that increase inclusion and having candidates from groups of people that are traditionally not well represented in politics, newcomers – who tend to be younger than the average politicians - tend to have a better chance to join lists and get elected.

4.   Transparency about the average age of political lists

Awareness and transparency about the average age of political candidates on electoral lists can increase youth engagement in two ways. First, it can drive political parties to select younger people as candidates to drive down the average age of the list. Second, it can attract young people to vote more as they will be able to identify candidates that can better represent their interests.

5.   **General inclusion of young voices in policies and laws**

Plenty of best practices exist to ensure that the perspectives of young people are included in policy-making and general legislative work. It is fundamental for governments worldwide to explore and include such mechanisms to increase youth participation in democracy. For example, the model of the Future Generations Commissioner of Wales has been widely praised. This role helps public bodies change their behaviors and focus on the current and future needs of the youth from a social, economic, environmental, and cultural standpoint.

6.   **Youth Citizens' Assemblies**

Youth Citizens' Assemblies can be an excellent tool to crowdsource the views and opinions of young people on divisive and fundamental topics of our times. Youth Citizens' Assemblies can be a counterpart of elected assemblies and parliaments and advise on all issues related to youth policies. It is also fundamental for such assemblies to have an enforcement mechanism to avoid their sidelining of youth.

7.   **Inclusion of Civics education in the school curriculum**

The possibility for young people to receive a comprehensive Civics education and learn about the role of government, separation of powers, legislation, inclusive participation, fundamental rights of citizens, and media literacy is seldom left to the educational system. As such, the youth are often left to receive partial or unclear information from family members or peers, leading to distorted views of the functioning of a healthy democracy. It is fundamental to ensure that the school curriculum includes Civics, presented from a neutral, democratic institutional standpoint.

8.   **Elimination of deposit to participate in elections**

An efficient barrier that young people face in some countries when deciding whether or not to stand for elections is the high sum requested by administrations to file one's candidacy. Such barriers disproportionately discriminate against young candidates less likely to have the liquidity to cover such expenses. Special dispensations or schemes to facilitate the youth to stand for elections should be explored.

9.   **Access to media coverage for youth**

A shared experience of young political candidates across the globe is the difficulty of accessing traditional/legacy media, which provides credibility and exposure to political candidates. As part of media and electoral regulations, media should be encouraged/asked to provide a space for younger candidates to compete on a level playing field with experienced and established candidates.

10. Protection from sexual harassment and violence

Young people that engage actively in political and civic life may face many levels of harassment and violence. While this is a cross-cutting issue that interest all age groups, young people are often less equipped to deal with such behaviors when they first get involved in politics and civil society. It is fundamental that regulators acknowledge this situation and provide special protections for young people in this field.

11. Independence of youth institutions

Whenever existing, youth institutions tend to be a spin-off or simply dependent on all-age institutions. This happens within administrations – where youth advisors, youth parliaments, etc. – are often created temporarily to complement other bodies. For youth institutions to gain standing and influence, they should be autonomous from other institutions and have their processes, such as meritocratic, independent, and leadership selection.

12. Public spending on youth beyond just education

In many countries, public investments in youth are often a synonym for education budgets. However, for youth to thrive, more than just education is needed – investments in infrastructure, sports facilities, community spaces, and much more is required. Public spending must look beyond education when seeking to improve the lives of young people in a country or community.

13. Elimination of barriers to participating in elections

While this report covered several measures to ensure young people can more easily stand for elections, it's also fundamental to ensure that voting barriers are removed. A best practice in this sense is to provide automatic voter enrollment for everyone when reaching voting age, without the need for further bureaucratic steps.

14. Development of caucuses of young parliamentarians and young leaders of civil society

Within power structures, young people can support each other to increase their influence and voice. Based on models of interest groups, such as the cross-party Problem Solvers Caucus in the United States Congress, young people in parliaments, as well as in other arenas such as civil society, should merge in youth democracy caucuses to support each other.

15. Voting not bound to residence

Young people are highly mobile. They move to study, to work, to have new experiences. However, this often impairs their ability to vote, as in many countries, people are requested to vote in a specific location where they might be registered as residents. Such restrictions should be lifted to increase young people's turnout in elections.

16. Exploration of voting systems that do not favor incumbents

Specific voting systems support established parties and candidates, as voting for a new alternative, unlikely to make significant gains in their first elections, can be seen as a wasted vote. While proportional systems are better than first-past-the-post systems in this regard, other best practices exist to diminish the power of the incumbents, such as preferential voting systems (see London Council elections as an example).

17. Easy and confidential voting systems

Ballots and ballot boxes can be intimidating. Simplified ballots that are intuitive and easy to fill and ensure private and secure locations to cast votes can positively influence young people in their decision to participate in electoral processes.

18. Countering misinformation

Young people tend to receive their news through digital means and social media. While the debate about misinformation is lengthy and complex, measures such as labeling official information (as done by Twitter for official accounts) can go a long way to avoid spreading fake news that diminishes young people's trust in democracy.

19. Digital, remote voting

Seldomly used, digital remote voting can be beneficial in involving young people in public life. Such voting procedures have been widely tested across the planet, for example, in the 2022 French parliamentary elections.

20. Increasing the budget of public schools of public-school budgets

As a last catch-all recommendation, increasing public schools' budget to ensure they are provided quality education is a vital measure to improve young people's engagement in public life progressively by providing them with the tools needed to embark on the complex but rewarding path of public engagement.