

Youth as Agents of Change: Youth Participation in Politics, Civic Education, and Community Engagement in Indian Democracy

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Abstract:

Youth engagement is critical to the democratic future of any nation, and in India with one of the largest young populations in the world, it can lead to better governance, policy changes, and social and political stability. But there are many obstacles to youth engagement, including political disillusionment, unemployment, and lack of civic education. The study employs a mixed-methods approach to examine youth engagement in the democratic process, the extent to which young people participate in India's democracy, and the extent to which they are aware of the democratic processes and impact on democratic processes. It provides a model for understanding youth engagement in the process of democratization in India and how reform and policy change are necessary to ensure that the youth of India are meaningfully engaged in its democratic future. This is an example for developing countries, especially those with a large youth population.

Keywords: Youth Engagement, Population, Democracy, Political participation, India, Governance

Introduction:

India's democracy is broad in its legal framework but uneven in practice. The Constitution of India supports popular sovereignty through representative and participatory institutions. However, the real distribution of democratic power is influenced by factors like age, class, caste, gender, and access to education. In this setting, youth participation is especially important—not just as a symbol of demographic strength, but as a vital issue of democratic inclusion. With over sixty-five percent of India's population under thirty-five years old, young citizens are not just a numerical majority. They are a key group whose involvement or lack of involvement affects democratic results.

This paper looks at youth as active participants in Indian democracy. It focuses on three related areas: political participation, civic and constitutional education, and community engagement. The main issue explored is the gap between the promise of participatory democracy and the limited, often superficial role given to youth in democratic institutions. The paper argues that meaningful youth participation, based on constitutional knowledge, political empowerment, and community involvement, can improve democratic governance in India. However, this can only happen if we actively tackle the existing legal, institutional, and socio-economic challenges.

There is also evidence that young people are disengaging from traditional forms of democratic participation, with some commentators arguing that as young people disengage from these traditional activities, they are seeking alternative or innovative ways to participate, and that this social shift among young people is accompanied by a political push for innovation in public policy development across all sectors and that innovation plays a role in understanding innovative forms of youth participation in decision-making.

The paper adopts a mixed analytical approach, integrating constitutional analysis with democratic theory and socio-political reality, drawing on empirical trends and policy frameworks where appropriate. It argues that

youth participation should not be seen only in terms of electoral metrics, but as a wider democratic practice that includes education, dissent, debate, and local self-government.

Youth and Democratic Theory: An Indian Perspective

Democratic theory has long focused on participation as a key part of legitimate governance. From Rousseau's idea of popular sovereignty to modern theories of deliberative democracy, citizenship means more than just a legal status; it involves active involvement. In India, democracy is not limited to regular elections. It is rooted in a wider commitment to social justice, equality, and participatory governance.

The Constitution of India does not specifically identify youth as a separate political group. However, its democratic structure, including universal adult voting under Article 326, freedoms of speech and association under Article 19, and decentralized governance in Parts IX and IXA, sets the stage for youth involvement. The change in the voting age from twenty-one to eighteen, made through the Sixty-First Constitutional Amendment Act in 1988, is an important recognition of the political capability of young people. It is based on the belief that being competent in democracy does not depend solely on age or experience.

From a democratic theory perspective, we need to view youth participation in India through the lens of a transformative constitution. This constitution does not just aim to reflect existing social hierarchies; it seeks to reshape them. Youth, especially those from marginalized communities, find themselves in a confusing situation. They are empowered by the constitution, but also face significant structural limitations. This tension influences both the opportunities and constraints of youth involvement in political and civic activities.

Defining innovative ways for young people to participate has been difficult. The literature review in this report shows a general agreement about the concern that youth are moving away from voting and engaging with political parties toward different ways of participating. However, there is no clear consensus on what these new forms of participation are, and the ideas around them remain vague. The literature also highlights the idea of policy innovation in other sectors as a way to improve public services. Co-management, co-production, digital participation, deliberative participation, and for some, the idea of "participatory spaces," are viewed as more innovative ways to engage.

Youth Participation in Indian Politics:

Electoral participation is the most visible sign of political engagement. Recent elections have shown relatively high youth voter turnout, indicating that young citizens are increasingly willing to engage with formal democratic processes. However, voting behavior alone does not provide the full picture. Youth participation in politics also shows through student movements, political party memberships, issue-based mobilizations, and protest politics.

Student politics has always shaped India's democracy, from the days of the independence movement to the energy of the JP Movement in the '70s. Campuses aren't just places to study—they're where students clash over ideas, form their values, and get a taste of real politics. But things feel different now. Student politics faces tighter legal rules and more watchful administrators than ever. Courts keep stepping in, especially after the Supreme Court backed the Lyngdoh Committee's rules for student union elections. There's this push to keep campuses "apolitical," but at the same time, the constitution says political expression matters. Sure, these rules try to stop violence and over-the-top politicking, but honestly, they can drain the life out of student democracy, turning it into just another set of boring procedures.

Political parties like to say they bring young people in through youth wings and leadership programs. But let's be honest, these setups usually just copy the same old party hierarchies. Young people end up as campaigners or foot soldiers, while the real decisions stay with the top leaders. That kind of token involvement doesn't deliver on the promise of true youth inclusion. Instead, it leaves young people feeling sidelined and jaded about politics.

All across the country, young people are taking the lead—whether they're protesting corruption, pushing for gender justice, or fighting for the environment. They're not just joining in; they're showing new ways to get involved in politics. Instead of sticking to old-school participation, they put dissent front and center, treating it as a core part of democracy. Indian courts back them up, too. They've stood by the right to peaceful protest

again and again, making it clear: when young people speak out, even if it shakes things up, they're keeping democracy alive.

In late 2025, young activists and students—mostly Gen Z, if you go by the headlines—poured into the streets of Jaipur and other cities across Rajasthan. They were protesting a hotly debated move to redraw the boundaries of the Aravalli Mountains, which are actually some of the oldest rocks on the planet. The big worry? The new definition would only protect hills over 100 meters high, so everything lower than that would be fair game for mining, construction, and, honestly, a lot of environmental harm.

Young activists hit the streets, waving placards and calling for real protection of the Aravalli's ecology. They kicked off a massive awareness march—over 1,000 kilometers, starting from Mount Abu—to show just how much the Aravalli range matters for water, clean air, and biodiversity. Students from places like Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) joined in too. They held demonstrations on campus, showing that local action connects directly to bigger environmental issues. The protests stayed peaceful, but the message was clear: policy and law need to match what's actually happening in nature, not just follow some dry, official categories.

Youth movements aren't just shaking things up in India—they're turning heads all over the world. Gen Z protesters have taken to the streets in different countries, calling out governments, demanding real accountability, and pushing back against rights violations and social limits. You can see their frustration and energy everywhere. Take Nepal. In 2025, young people there didn't just accept a social media ban or ignore corruption. They protested loudly, and their actions led to some serious political changes.

Look at these examples, whether it's about the environment, gender justice, or how things are run overall—you see young people leading the way. They're not just showing up; they're starting movements themselves. Peaceful protest and speaking out? That's how they're getting involved in democracy, not just watching from the sidelines. When they spot injustice or damage to the environment, they call out both local and national policies. They don't hold back. And in India, this matters a lot. Courts there keep saying that peaceful protest is at the heart of democracy. Dissent isn't dangerous—it actually protects everyone's rights.

Civic and Constitutional Education

Civic and constitutional education sits at the heart of democracy. If people don't really get the core values, the way institutions work, or what it means to be a responsible citizen, political participation can slip into empty slogans or just indifference. In India, let's be honest, civic education is still patchy. It's usually pretty shallow, especially outside the top private schools. The National Education Policy of 2020 talks a big game about teaching values and focusing on the Constitution. That sounds promising. But does it actually show up in classrooms? Not so much. Most schools stick to memorization instead of pushing students to really think about what the Constitution means, or to ask tough questions about power and responsibility. That kind of approach leaves kids without the tools to challenge authority or even understand their own rights and duties as citizens.

Universities and law schools play a huge role in shaping how people think about democracy. You'd expect legal education to dive deep into ideas like constitutionalism, rights, and how democracy actually works. But let's be real—getting access to this kind of education is still tied to your background and how much money you have. And even when students make it into these institutions, civic engagement often gets shoved to the side-lines, treated like an afterthought instead of something central to learning. The Supreme Court's idea of constitutional morality—using it as a core principle in governance—really shows why civic education needs to go beyond just textbooks and lectures. Young people need to actually experience constitutional values. That means getting involved, debating, disagreeing, and taking part in public life. If they don't, democracy turns into just another box to tick, not something that actually changes people or society.

Community Engagement and Grassroots Democracy:

Youth participation goes way beyond the ballot box or classroom walls. In India, the push for decentralization—think Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies—gives young people real ways

to get involved in their own neighborhoods. You see them jumping into volunteering, rolling up their sleeves for social work, or pitching in on local governance projects. It's not just about big organizations or elections, either. Lots of young people dive into NGOs, self-help groups, or grassroots movements. This is democracy happening on the ground, right where people live, and it doesn't have to wait for voting season. They take on problems that matter—schools that need fixing, health care, clean water, a safer environment. It's democracy in action, woven into daily life. Sure, this kind of participation doesn't always make headlines or look "official," but it counts. By getting involved, young people hold local leaders to their word and make sure real conversations happen in their communities. That's how democracy grows deeper roots—one small action at a time.

Digital activism has opened up new ways for young people to get involved. Social media isn't just for sharing photos anymore—it's a place where people speak out, organize, and push back against mainstream ideas. But digital spaces bring their own problems. There's misinformation everywhere, constant surveillance, and algorithms that don't always play fair. The real test is figuring out how to connect all this online energy to actual politics, so it's not just empty gestures. On the ground, things aren't always easier. Young people still run into big obstacles like unstable jobs and rigid social structures. Sure, the law says they can join local governments, but that's not enough. Real inclusion takes more than permission—it needs solid support systems and real training to help them step up and make a difference.

Challenges and Critical Concerns

Even though the constitution promises it, young people in India still run into real roadblocks when they try to take part in democracy. People often blame political apathy on kids just not caring, but honestly, it's more about how the system leaves them out and doesn't listen. When politicians give youths a seat at the table just for show, without handing over any real power, it just makes things worse. No wonder so many check out. Inequality hits hard, too. If you're from a marginalized background, there's a good chance you'll face extra hurdles—like not having access to good schools, being cut off from tech, or dealing with money problems at home. These aren't small things; they chip away at the idea that everyone gets an equal say. Laws and policies aren't really helping, either. Sure, the government has rolled out plenty of programs meant to boost youth participation. But most of them don't fit together well, and nobody really makes sure they work. Sometimes, in trying to keep things orderly, those in charge end up closing off the very spaces where young people could speak up. That's not exactly the way to build a stronger democracy.

Way Forward and Recommendations:

If India wants to bring more young people into its democracy, it needs to rethink things from the ground up. First, political parties and local governments have to give young people real seats at the table—not just token spots, but actual power to shape decisions. Changing election rules can help too. If we back young candidates with training and resources, more will step up to run. Civic education also needs an overhaul. Right now, it's often just memorizing rules and rights, but that doesn't inspire anyone. Instead, get students involved—let them try out mock parliaments, work on community projects, or dig into public issues that matter to them. That's how they'll see how democracy really works, not just in theory but in real life. Finally, governments need to create meaningful spaces for young people to speak up—nationally and locally. But these can't just be token advisory panels. Young people need a real say in what policies get made and how things run. That's how you build a democracy that's truly for everyone, not just the older generations.

Youth Participation and Innovation

People often think youth councils, forums, and protests aren't all that creative or new when it comes to political participation. But the truth is, so-called "innovative" ways for young people to get involved don't actually work any better—or worse—than these older, more familiar approaches. Here's the thing: whether young people join a council, start a new movement, or organize a protest, they keep running into the same big hurdles. There's never enough money or resources, so it's tough to keep things going or reach more people. Politicians don't always back these efforts, which means young voices usually don't carry much

weight in the big decisions. On top of that, a lot of public officials just don't get how youth-led or unconventional participation works in the first place.

Insights from Case Studies:

What stands out from these case studies? A few things. First, innovation in youth participation doesn't just come from young people — adults and professionals get in on it, too. Most of the time, new ideas pop up because someone's trying to fix a real problem, not just for the sake of being creative. Innovation isn't a one-and-done thing. It's messy. People try stuff, tweak it, mess up, and try again. Over time, their methods shift and improve. Figuring out if these new ways of doing things actually work is tough, but it's necessary. Without proof, it's hard to know what's worth keeping. And when something does work? Don't let it fizzle out. Spread it around. The more these good ideas catch on, the stronger youth participation gets everywhere.

The Role of the Digital World

The digital world opens up all kinds of new ways for young people to get involved. Online platforms make it easier for more voices to join in, for people to get organized quickly, and for everyone to express themselves in different ways. But this shift means things have to change. Schools need to update what they teach so it fits with these new ways of participating. Young people also need solid digital skills and media smarts—without those, it's tough to join in or spot what's real and what's not. Building up these skills really matters if we want youth participation to be meaningful and open to everyone, especially in Europe's democracies today.

Conclusions

The authors break down the different ways young people get involved and look at how youth participation can change or improve. Sure, it's still important to worry about fewer people, especially the young, turning out to vote, or losing trust in politics altogether. And, yeah, we need to pay attention to how young people are finding new ways to make their voices heard. But calling every new form of youth political expression “innovation” doesn't really hold up. The authors push back on that idea. They say real innovation isn't just about changing attitudes or behaviours—it's about trying new things, experimenting, and seeing what actually works better. So, when you talk about innovation in youth participation, it's really about any policy, program, or project that tries to help young people have a stronger say in what public bodies do—or to get those institutions to actually listen to young people—by coming up with and testing out new methods, formats, or ideas.

When we talk about getting young people involved in decision making, innovation isn't just about coming up with the next big idea. It's really about finding the most effective ways to include them in shaping policies, services, and all sorts of decisions. The point isn't just to do something new for the sake of it—what matters is whether these new ways actually help reach the goals we set. If public bodies want to support innovation, they need to get clear about what they're trying to achieve, test new approaches properly, and stick with the ones that work best. It's not a one-and-done process. Innovation has to be ongoing. There's no final, perfect method for including young people that everyone can agree on and then forget about. We always have to look for better ways to keep young voices at the heart of decisions.

Honestly, when you look at it this way, it's like innovation is something public bodies and policymakers handle, not something young people kick off themselves. But let's be real—young people have plenty of fresh, creative ideas. The case studies show adults and young people both taking the lead on new, innovative projects. So, innovation isn't just for one age group. Still, when it comes to using innovation as a tool for public-policy experiments, it usually falls on public institutions. They're the ones driving it, ideally working with citizens, instead of leaving it up to individuals on their own.

Young people in India aren't just a statistic or some distant hope for the future—they're at the heart of what democracy here needs to survive and grow. They bring fresh ideas, challenge old power structures, and breathe new life into public institutions. But to really unlock this energy, India has to do more than just talk about youth participation. It needs to back it up with real changes in laws, education, and the way institutions work. When we start seeing young people as real players in democracy—not just spectators or recipients of policy—India gets closer to the constitutional promise of a fair, inclusive society. In the end, what keeps Indian democracy strong isn't just its laws or its government buildings. It's the creativity and drive of its youngest citizens. That's where the future lives.

Recommendations:

The author here shared the study's findings with the Reflection. Here's are the findings:

- ▶ How do we get public authorities and similar groups to actually welcome new ways of making democratic decisions?
- ▶ What can public authorities do to make it easier for every young person—including those who usually get left out—to take part in decision-making?
- ▶ Where should the Council of India's youth sector head next when it comes to participation, and how can it weave fresh, creative ways of getting involved into its policies and programs?

So, what exactly do we mean when we talk about youth participation? Honestly, it's not the easiest thing to pin down. Most people agree it's not just a single event—it's more like an ongoing process. This study looks at how young people, ages 16 to 30, get involved in making decisions that shape their social, economic, cultural, ecological, and political worlds. Youth participation isn't just a nice idea; it's a key part of being an active citizen in any democracy, especially in India. Over and over, Indian institutions highlight how important it is for young people to get involved—they say it boosts active citizenship, helps young people feel included, and lets them play a real part in building democracy. When young people actually take part in decisions and actions at every level—local, regional, national—it doesn't just help them. It's essential for creating societies that are more democratic, more open, and, in the end, more successful.

Indian policy framework for youth participation

Let's look at how India tries to get young people involved in shaping policy. The Council of India has set up a bunch of tools and programs, but people still argue about how well they actually work. Here's the big issue: getting young people to participate isn't as simple as just inviting them in. Some face real barriers—age, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, ability, where they live, and how much money their family has. The truth is, young people aren't just one group; they're all over the place, with different backgrounds and different levels of power. They deal with their own mix of challenges and sometimes get pushed out of important conversations, especially when they're in that tricky stretch between childhood and adulthood, trying to find their independence. For some, the barriers stack up. If you come from a tough financial background or haven't had the same educational chances as others, it's even harder to get your voice heard when decisions get made. So, while there's a lot of talk about youth participation, the reality is messy, and not everyone gets the same shot.

The world's getting more connected every day, and with that comes even more diversity—different backgrounds, different ideas, all mixing together online and off. Because of this, it's just not enough to think of participation and democracy in the old way, where you vote every few years and maybe join a political party. Democracy isn't only about formal institutions, and participation isn't just about casting a ballot. For young people, especially, things are changing fast. You see it everywhere: activism doesn't always look like joining a party or showing up at a town hall. A lot of the time, it's about self-expression. Willems and others noticed this shift back in 2012—young people are more focused on expressing their own values, identities,

and lifestyles. It makes sense, given all the things shaping their lives now: migration, economic uncertainty, consumer culture, and the constant push for individuality. As a result, young people often connect with issues that feel personal. Their engagement is more informal, more about specific causes than about sticking with a group for the long haul. They gravitate towards what Willems calls “horizontal” participation—things like signing petitions, joining networks, jumping into a demonstration, or even making a statement with the brands they buy or the slogans on their T-shirts and bags. Social media just amplifies all this, making it easier to be seen and heard.

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