

Civic Update

Youth Disaffection

Citizen Participation & Inclusion Team | June 2019

Young people under the age of 30 make up over half of the world’s population at a time when extreme global inequality is increasing. Young women and men continue to be disproportionately impacted by socio-economic instability, resulting in a myriad of challenges such as displacement, migration, lack of access to education and unemployment.¹ Young people globally are expressing growing frustration with what is perceived as incapable political leaders and institutions, rampant corruption and government repression. This breakdown in trust between young people and the government, coupled with young people’s continued political exclusion, is contributing to a decreased affinity for institutions and shifting political identities. Young people equate meaningful political participation with the opportunity to have influence in decisions that impact their lives, however, their disaffection is contributing to a growing divide between young people and traditional forms of power, particularly formal institutions.

In a survey of more than 43,000 citizens from 29 countries in the Western Hemisphere, support for democracy decreased by nearly 9



Sudanese demonstrators during the 2019 protests
(Credit: Associated Press)

percentage points between 2014 and 2017.² Support for democracy is also the lowest among young people in the Americas, with only 54.3% of young people surveyed between the ages of 16 and 35 agreeing that democracy is better than any other form of government.³ Citizen trust in elections and political parties was also the lowest among young people surveyed. A 2018 survey by Pew Research Center states, in 10 of the nations polled, that people age 50 and older were more likely to say they have voted in at least one election than young people ages 18 to 29.⁴ The gap between the oldest and youngest respondents who have voted is more than 40 percentage points in Tunisia and South Africa, and more than 20 points in Mexico, Poland, Greece and Kenya. During the 2019 general elections in South Africa, a country with one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the world, the number of young people registered to vote dropped to its lowest level in 20 years.⁵⁶ These statistics and trends suggest young people do not feel confident that their participation in democratic processes or with formal institutions will result in significant changes or address their economic, social and educational needs.

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Youth political engagement and participation has fallen in nearly every formal indicator including voting, joining a political party and running for office. At the same time, there is growing participation in issue-based initiatives, loosely formed transnational networks, protests and movements. One reason for declining participation is young people's growing distrust of government institutions, particularly political parties, and a lack of political space for their grievances to be heard and properly addressed.



Youth-led protest in Slovakia in 2018 demanding Za slušne Slovensko – “Decency in Slovakia” – which means politics clean of corruption

(Credit: NDI)

NDI conducted a survey in 2018 in Hungary, Poland and Slovakia that listed membership in a political party as the least-preferred form of participation among youth, with 71% of young Slovaks and 91% of young Hungarians surveyed not involved in or having no plans to join a political party. Despite this fact, 45% of young Hungarians and 43% of young Slovaks are interested in politics and public affairs.⁷ While youth disenchantment with political institutions is often mistaken for political apathy, research and recent experiences around the world confirm that this demographic is interested in politics; they simply want to engage differently from the ways that are currently being offered to them.

This issue of the Civic Update explores youth disaffection and the widening gap between young people and traditional political

institutions, including trends in young people's participation and the necessity of considering different approaches to bridging this divide. This issue also highlights two examples of youth-inclusive programs in Albania and Guatemala.

Changing Patterns of Participation

Political participation is not only an intrinsic element of a democratic society, it is also an instrumental means of influencing change. Formal participation refers to engagement in established processes or with institutions and working within a fixed system of rules. Informal participation, such as civil disobedience, refers to people organizing to achieve political, social, or economic aims outside the realm of party politics and formal representative institutions. Young people's dissatisfaction with traditional forms of participation has shaped new forms of civic activism worldwide, categorized as more informal, localized, and shifting away from traditional organizations towards more horizontal forms of engagement.⁸ A 2016 report by Rhize described youth leadership as participatory, intersectional, networked, resourceful and grassroots-based.⁹ Technology and social media have also created new entry points for young people and has helped facilitate increased horizontal engagement. Greater access to technology has resulted in opportunities to bring excluded groups into political conversations and the use of digital tools has supported the inclusion of marginalized communities in online and offline efforts.

Over the past few years there have been global trends towards large, leaderless protests and movements. This emerging wave of civic activism is wide-ranging and represents people of varying political leanings and ideologies. Recent movements in Latin America include #YoSoy123, a student-led movement in Mexico in 2012, #Antorcha marches in Honduras in 2015 led by university students and the Indignados (outraged) movement, and #RenunciaYa in Guatemala in 2015 organized by a young woman on Facebook focusing on corruption.¹⁰ In the Middle East and North Africa, rising discontent with leaders' long-standing inability to address key issues has

resulted in what some are calling a “second Arab Spring,” which points to unfulfilled promises from the first Arab Spring.¹¹ In Algeria, young people were instrumental in organizing protests to demand the resignation of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who had been in power for over 20 years and resigned on April 1, 2019.¹² Even after Bouteflika’s resignation, tension and protests continue, with people demanding that the government system be dismantled and that those associated with Bouteflika resign. In Sudan, young people and women played a critical role in ousting President Omar al-Bashir who had been in power for 30 years and was arrested in April 2019. Although this change was celebrated, the military maintains a stronghold.

Governments are also becoming more strategic in their response to mass protests, such as greater willingness to yield on somewhat minor requests in order to divide and weaken the movement. Following a recent string of youth-led protests in Afghanistan, protesters were presented with opportunities to collaborate with the government through political appointments and advisory positions, however, young people later stated that these efforts were largely symbolic and resulted in little to no agency or decision-making power. Despite the increase in civic activism, it has proven difficult for protests and movements to achieve sustained political change without some form of collaboration with existing institutions. Institutions also continue to overlook promising trends in youth engagement and dismiss peaceful protests and movements as potential allies.

Although the majority of young people are turning away from formal methods of engagement, there are also compelling examples of activists running and winning elections as independent candidates or the formulation of new, youth-driven political parties. For example, in Thailand the Future Forward Party, formed in 2018 by a young billionaire, won 30 constituency seats in elections on March 24, 2019.¹³ During the election, young people made up approximately seven million new voters and represented the bulk of Future Forward Party supporters. The party promised reform, true



*Thousands of people marching peacefully in Algeria
(Credit: Ramzi Boudina/Adobe Stock)*

democracy and transparency in government. While the Future Forward Party does not have enough power to elect a Prime Minister, they are set to become the third largest party in Thailand. In Indonesia, the Solidarity Party (PSI) is another example of a recently established political party formed with the aim of better representing young people, with an emphasis on including more young women.¹⁴ In an interview, the head of PSI stated that the party set a maximum age limit of 45 years old in an attempt to keep the party free from the “old establishment.”¹⁵ While new political parties are not the solution to youth disaffection and continue to face many challenges, they represent a political opening and an attempt to create new inroads into politics and decision-making. Their active involvement also has the potential to disrupt the dominant political party structure.

Political Institutions and Gaps in Youth Participation Programs

Increasing youth participation has been a longstanding focus of democracy and governance support. Traditional efforts to support young women and men’s participation have focused heavily on preparing young people to participate in traditional, formal processes and institutions. This has included programs to strengthen party youth wings or other methods for party outreach to youth, support advocacy or equip youth with political leadership skills. As such, these efforts have appealed mostly to young people who are

predisposed to engage in formal processes and institutions. Although many programs resulted in young people with additional political skills and a better ability to understand the political system, institutions continued to undervalue their contributions. These types of programs are increasingly at odds with the interests and issues of most youth that gravitate toward horizontal, informal forms of participation. Youth capacity building and training has attempted to bridge the gap, but tends to be ineffective at establishing an enabling environment and sustained opportunities for collaboration. Certain types of programming, such as increasing engagement between civil society youth and youth in parties, can be effective at achieving their immediate goals, but these outcomes don't necessarily lead to sustained collaboration between youth and formal institutions.

Bridging the gap: How do we begin thinking about addressing this divide?

NDI's youth participation theory of change asserts that addressing both young people's agency and their environment can reduce barriers to political participation and contribute to more equitable and inclusive power



Raising their voices: How effective are pro-youth laws and policies?

As national governments, international donors, and local advocates increasingly recognize that youth participation is vital to stability and success, a variety of public measures, policy mechanisms and legal reforms aimed at promoting youth engagement have gained traction. Proponents of these measures contend that pro-youth policies and reforms can increase youth participation and, ultimately, result in better policy outcomes across a range of issues. NDI, IRI and IFES recently completed a multi-year research effort that analyzed four pro-youth legal and political mechanisms: national youth policy strategies; reductions in the minimum age for voting and candidacy; youth electoral quotas; and membership in political party youth wings. While the research found that these policies and mechanisms matter to some extent, the findings underscored the fact that if organizations are only working with young people who are engaged in formal politics, a large segment of the population is being excluded. According to the research less than 10% percent of young people globally would consider joining a political party. However, turning away from parties has a cost. Political parties still play a central role when it comes to the peaceful competition of power and earning the right to govern in a democracy. If young people only engage with democracy by employing “civil disobedience,” rather than formally participating, they will inevitably be left out of crucial decision-making processes. The recommendation is to support different pathways to participation and look for opportunities to connect formal and informal engagement strategies.

structures. Youth agency refers to the willingness and capacity of young people to act individually and collectively and an enabling environment refers to political avenues and opportunities that young people have to express themselves, engage power holders and demonstrate their value. Additionally, the theory emphasizes the diversity of “youth”, given that young people who face increased marginalization, such as young women or young people with disabilities, face additional barriers to gaining agency and accessing circles of power. The youth theory of change describes how change happens over time and provides a framework for identifying and evaluating the effectiveness of new methods of political engagement.

Given the challenges and trends that are impacting young people’s interest in engaging in politics, what does this mean for the future of their political engagement? As part of an effort to understand and develop a programmatic response to the issue, NDI can begin with documenting and understanding trends in emerging civic spaces. An improved understanding of how democracy support programs can better bridge the gap between young people and institutions would help to identify strategic entry points for more constructive engagement. This includes documenting and analyzing the methods, motives and opportunities that inspire youth to act and identifying lessons learned where informal youth action sparked greater collaboration, reforms to the political system or led to the creation of new political parties. It is also important to consider whether program efforts are targeting and reaching the right demographic of young people. Although working with young people who have a demonstrated interest in formal participation is critical and necessary, it is a small minority. As movements become more intersectional and define inclusion as imperative, young people who are engaged primarily in nontraditional activism should be consulted as experts and potential partners.

As technology and social media continue to be a key component of youth activism efforts, this also presents an opportunity to support

inclusive engagement. In 2018, NDI partnered with Bite the Ballot, a UK-based social enterprise specializing in youth civic engagement, to pilot a digital module in Serbia aimed at building young people’s resilience and awareness of disinformation. This effort initiated a call-to-action for young people to monitor the media they consume. During the 2019 elections in Nigeria, NDI partnered with an organization to produce voter education content in the form of political satire videos and radio broadcasts with the goal of directing young people to engage with online and offline civic education portals. These examples demonstrate creative opportunities to integrate technology into offline efforts.

A new path forward is likely to be positioned somewhere between young people’s efforts to reinvigorate politics and the current political system, capitalizing on opportunities to redefine constructive engagement for all parties. The program examples below demonstrate NDI efforts to meet young people where they are and highlight new opportunities to engage young people.

Youth Debate and Policy Reform in Guatemala

In 2015, the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) and the Guatemalan Attorney General’s Office uncovered a corruption scandal involving high-level government officials, costing the country an estimated \$120 million in tax revenue. Peaceful protests erupted throughout the country calling for President Otto Perez Molina’s immediate resignation and demanding accountability and an end to corruption. Citizens, including youth from urban and rural areas, filled the streets in historic numbers to push for change, leading to the incarceration of corrupt high-level leaders and congressional action to enact a set of reforms to make institutions more transparent and accountable. Although indigenous and rural groups in Guatemala have a long history of protest, these demonstrations were one of the first times in Guatemala’s history that youth joined in such a broad collective effort. These demonstrations



*Debaters and volunteers after a regional competition in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala
(Credit: NDI)*

spawned a new wave of youth activism across the country, as evidenced by the establishment of new youth-led organizations and movements to address some of the country's most pressing problems.

Following the protests, young Guatemalans faced the continuous struggle of gaining skills and knowledge for political activism. During an NDI workshop in Guatemala with Latin American political activists in November 2016, young people expressed the need to better comprehend policy processes so that they can insert themselves into public policy deliberations and propose constructive and realistic solutions. In response to this need, NDI launched a program that utilized public policy debate as a platform for young people to develop practical political leadership skills and contribute to ongoing public-sector reform efforts. Throughout the program, young people participated in policy dialogues and debate bootcamps which prepared them to compete in regional and national debate tournaments. The debate tournaments were attended by civil society partners and a cross section of political party members. The competitions were also broadcast widely on social media. Participating

in debates provided young people with a new platform to engage in constructive political discourse and develop an understanding of perspectives on both sides of complex topics.

Public policy debate is a tool NDI can utilize to bridge the gap between politically active young people and public institutions, including elected officials and political parties. The debate program introduced young people to an innovative and engaging method for learning about policy reform and provided them with an opportunity to develop and debate policy recommendations. The program also brought young people closer to institutions by introducing them to their elected representatives and engaging members of political parties, policy reform experts and decision-makers throughout the program. The debate program also sought to capitalize on young people's energy for activism and dissatisfaction by channeling it into an opportunity to better insert themselves into conversations around policy reform.

Following the program, young people were given an opportunity to continue strengthening their debate skills through additional training,

competitions and participation in dialogues with candidates ahead of the 2019 elections. Young people's continued enthusiasm for debate demonstrates their desire to increase their ability to participate and influence the policy reform process on the local and national level.

Addressing Political Finance Transparency in Albania

Public opinion research conducted by NDI and other organizations in Albania has revealed political corruption to be one of the leading concerns among citizens. A lack of political financial transparency and accountability blurs the line between public interests and business interests, creating the potential for increased political and electoral corruption. In October 2016, NDI began implementing a program to increase political finance transparency and ensure private interests were not being prioritized over the interests of the general public. This program included assistance to political parties to manage their finances in more transparent and accountable ways; to the Central Election Commission (CEC) to regulate political finance more effectively; and to civil society and media to increase oversight of and raise demand for more transparent political finance. This included work at the grassroots level - particularly among young people - to address a general lack of understanding regarding the impact of financial transparency on the country's democracy. NDI partnered with the European University of Tirana, Luarasi University, and the University of Durrës to address the lack of education around financial transparency and provide young people with knowledge and skills to participate in promoting political party financial transparency and anti-corruption efforts.

During the program more than 600 students took part in lectures and training on political finance. University professors, with assistance from NDI, incorporated curricula on political party financial transparency and anti-corruption measures into four university courses. Each course featured sessions on topics such as political finance legal frameworks, the role of the CEC in regulating political finance, abuse of



*Students taking part in a political finance lecture in Albania
(Credit: NDI)*

state resources, political party financial management and transparency, the role of civil society in monitoring political party financing, and financial transparency best practices. NDI provided ongoing support for students and professors through mentoring, facilitating meetings with key stakeholders, sharing academic resources such as international case studies, and offering guidance to six students who conducted independent research on topics of interest that emerged from open lectures and seminars. The University of Durrës, in partnership with NDI, organized a conference titled "Money in Politics" in February 2019 during which academics presented research on political finance. During the conference, students had the opportunity to participate alongside experts and present the findings of their research.

This program is an example of an effort to appeal to young people's interests and increase their awareness of entry points to engage on the topic of corruption and fiscal transparency. Once students were introduced to the program, they expressed enthusiasm in expanding their knowledge and took the lead on conducting and presenting research. This opportunity helped them raise awareness regarding financial transparency and demonstrate their capacity to engage with a complex issue. NDI's partnership with the universities has continued, with professors continuing to utilize NDI's curriculum on political finance in University

Initiatives to Support Institutional Learning and Linkages

Bridging Informal And Formal Youth Political Participation

The Citizen Participation team and the Political Parties team are currently collaborating on a program to better understand the gap between young people and political institutions, focusing primarily on engagement with political parties. This will result in a better understanding of how young people move from protests to politics and how to build bridges between formal and informal participation. The program will also result in guidance that assists practitioners to identify new avenues for collaborative engagement that bring young people and political actors together.

YouthLead Partnership

NDI recently became a network sponsor of YouthLead, an online platform for young changemakers (between age 15 and 35) that provides young people with opportunities to connect with like-minded networks, mentors, and resources and events. This partnership provides NDI with the opportunity to share this network with young people we work with, access to an extensive network of young changemakers, and the ability to distribute resources and facilitate discussions with young leaders around the world.

courses. This work supports the development of a new generation of activists and helps them raise awareness on political finance abuses and seek greater transparency and accountability from political parties.

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