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CEPPS

Strengthening
Democracy
through Partnership



Raising Their
Voices: How
effective are
pro-youth laws
and policies?

Source: NDI



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International Foundation
for Electoral Systems



Source: IFES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

National governments, international donors, and domestic youth stakeholders are increasingly advocating for, and adopting, pro-youth legal and political participatory mechanisms, ostensibly to encourage youth civic and political engagement and respond to a sense of political marginalization among key demographic groups. Advocates of these measures expect that increased youth engagement will result in better policy outcomes across a range of issues that affect young people. To date, however, there has been relatively little empirical research on whether and how these mechanisms actually improve the quality or quantity of youth engagement. Moreover, youth are possibly gravitating to other forms of political participation, for example using social media and other online platforms to engage in decision-making processes.

This report begins to fill that gap by analyzing the effect on youth engagement of four specific pro-youth legal and political mechanisms: national youth policy strategies, reducing minimum ages for voting and candidacy, youth quotas, and political party youth wings. Our research on these participatory mechanisms suggests mixed results for substantive youth engagement.

CORE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Despite constituting a large portion of electorates around the world, on average, youth participate in political and civic life at lower rates than older age cohorts. Pro-youth legal instruments (e.g. lowering age restrictions to vote), intra-party policies (e.g. party youth wings), and other public measures (e.g. adoption of national youth policies) are tactics increasingly employed by governments, political parties, and other electoral stakeholders to encourage youth engagement. However, as these actors, including international funders, evaluate their investment in these approaches, they lack empirical evidence on the efficacy of legal instruments, intra-party policies, and public measures in promoting youth engagement.

SUMMARY FINDINGS OF RESEARCH

- There was no evidence from any of the cases reviewed that national youth policy strategies improved long-term youth civic and political engagement beyond an initial cooperative development process.
- On the other hand, the available evidence suggests that lowering the minimum age of candidacy results in more youth holding office, and lowering the minimum age of voting tends to increase youth voter turnout, even beyond youth voters' first elections.
- Youth quotas can increase the quantity of youth in elected bodies but must be accompanied by a holistic strategy to support meaningful youth engagement within those institutions.
- Finally, youth political party wings can increase the quantity of youth members of political parties, but the quality of that participation depends on local context, including the underlying nature of the political system. Youth wings can either provide a constructive formative political experience, or can mobilize youth for violence or patronage, depending on the goals of political elites.

National Youth Policy Strategies

Ideally, national youth policy strategies facilitate youth political and civic engagement by prioritizing youth issues across state agencies and policy sectors; by helping state officials and agencies coordinate policies and programs across sectors; by encouraging state agencies to allocate financial, human, and material resources to youth policy programs; by kick-starting youth engagement through an initial policy development process; and by helping governments signal commitment to the values and interests of youth and youth advocates.

Often, however, implementation failures impede these functions. In all the cases we analyzed, including Colombia, Georgia, Kenya, Mongolia, and Morocco, the development of a national youth policy strategy suffered from similar implementation challenges. Common issues surrounding implementation included a failure to allocate resources, redundancy of state agencies, a lack of accountability, limited technical capacity, and a lack of political incentives for implementation.

KEY RECOMMENDATION

The incentives for governments to develop national youth policy strategies may not necessarily encourage implementation of that strategy. Donors, implementers, and local partners should encourage accountability by pushing for action plans and for monitoring and evaluation benchmarks, and strengthen inter-agency coordination with relevant ministries for more effective commitment of budget resources prior to the adoption of the strategy. Sustained engagement from development through implementation can help ensure a national youth policy strategy performs its key functions and fulfills its objectives.

Minimum Ages for Voting and Candidacy

Efforts to lower minimum eligibility ages for voting and running for office fall primarily into two lines of argumentation. First, rights-based arguments contend that formal political participation through voting or holding office are fundamental human rights that should not be unreasonably denied to younger citizens. Utility-based arguments, on the other hand, contend that enfranchising and empowering younger citizens provides observable benefits to youth and to society as a whole. Our research suggests that lowering these minimum eligibility ages can indeed increase youth voter turnout and representation, but that there is insufficient evidence to conclude that this increased representation improves policy outcomes.

KEY RECOMMENDATION

In countries where there is local initiative to lower voting ages below 18, comparative examples should be used to inform legal framework reform efforts, including the option of lowering the voting age for only subnational elections. Efforts to lower minimum voting and candidate ages should be accompanied by civic education programs that build political literacy and should be designed to reduce discrepancies in participation rates among youth from marginalized groups. For national and subnational elected positions, candidate eligibility ages should align more closely with the age of voter enfranchisement.

Youth Quotas

Elected bodies and political parties around the world have adopted youth quotas to achieve several distinct goals: to appeal to young voters, to mitigate political violence, or to increase substantive youth engagement in decision-making. If well-designed, youth quotas can increase the number of youth elected to office, but quotas alone do not guarantee substantive representation of youth. Youth quotas must be accompanied by holistic strategies to empower young office holders to participate meaningfully once elected.

KEY RECOMMENDATION

Youth quotas have the potential to result in a greater number of youth elected when they are numerically significant and enforceable. Proponents of youth quotas should address acknowledged barriers to youth participation that prevent youth candidates from different backgrounds from competing for office and ensure that quotas recognize youth as a cross-cutting identity. Adoption of youth quotas in representative bodies should account for formal and informal barriers to meaningful youth participation within those institutions, including technical expertise, political financing, and existing networks of influence.

Political Party Youth Wings

Political party wings, under different circumstances, can emphasize substantive, constructive youth engagement in the political process, or act as a vehicle for the mobilization of political patronage or violence. Within democratic systems with relatively programmatic political parties, party wings can facilitate the recruitment of young leaders, provide technical training and experience, and help parties appeal to youth through substantive policy contributions to the policy platform. However, where political systems are characterized by political patronage or violence, political elites can dole out positions in party youth wings in exchange for political support, while denying substantive youth contributions to the party. Youth party wings may also allow the immediate mobilization of youth for violent demonstrations or attacks on opponents in political systems that encourage violence between competing groups.

The research identified a number of specific, and often interrelated, challenges facing youth wings in transitioning democracies. Some of these challenges, however, are also found in established democracies where parties can become set in their ways and find it difficult to change, particularly when the overall political incentives support the status quo.

KEY RECOMMENDATION

Political party youth wings are most likely to facilitate constructive youth engagement in parties that reproduce democratic, programmatic politics. Donors, implementers, and partners supporting the development of youth wings should ensure that elements of internal party democracy within the parent party, including clear organizational guidelines and financing, democratic leadership selection, technical capacity development, and clear guidelines for recruitment and promotion, are preconditions for the development of youth wings.

Areas of Priority Research

These findings are based on a limited number of cases from various regions. Further research is needed on key issues such as:

- a) New forms of political participation and mobilization by youth especially linked to social media, technology, and advocacy;
- b) Distinctions in policies and effective implementation in fragile versus stable environments;
- c) The role of civic education to engagement models in strengthening both participation and the enabling environment; and
- d) The link between volunteer and national service program models and greater political engagement by youth.