

# Youth Civic Innovation and the Renewal of Democratic Participation

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## Abstract

Democratic participation among younger citizens is undergoing a structural transformation rather than a straightforward decline. Conventional indicators such as voting, political-party membership, and attendance at formal political meetings capture only part of contemporary youth engagement. Young people increasingly participate through digital advocacy, civic technology, community problem-solving, participatory budgeting, issue-based networks, social innovation projects, and locally organized public initiatives. This study examines the proposition that youth civic innovation can renew democratic participation when participation opportunities combine meaningful influence, political efficacy, institutional responsiveness, digital accessibility, and peer-based civic networks.

The article integrates contemporary scholarship on youth political engagement, democratic innovation, civic technology, political efficacy, and digital participation with a reproducible simulation-based analytical model. A synthetic dataset comprising 480 cases was generated for methodological demonstration. Democratic participation was modeled against five explanatory dimensions: civic innovation exposure, political efficacy, institutional responsiveness, digital inclusion, and peer civic networks. The simulated regression model explained 49.8% of variation in the participation measure. Civic innovation produced the largest estimated coefficient, followed by political efficacy and perceived institutional responsiveness.

The pattern indicates that participatory mechanisms are most promising when young citizens can see a credible relationship between expressing preferences, collective deliberation, institutional action, and visible feedback. Digital tools alone are therefore insufficient. Democratic renewal depends on institutional designs that convert youth voice into consequential participation while ensuring inclusion, transparency, civic learning, and accountability. The study offers a framework for municipalities, educational institutions, civil-society organizations, and public agencies seeking to develop durable youth-centered democratic infrastructures. Because the analytical dataset is synthetic, the statistical findings should be interpreted as theoretically informed simulation evidence requiring subsequent validation with field data.

**Keywords:** youth civic innovation; democratic participation; political efficacy; civic technology; participatory governance; institutional responsiveness; youth engagement



## 1. Introduction

Democratic systems depend not only on elections but also on continuing relationships between citizens and public institutions. Within this relationship, younger citizens occupy a particularly important position because political habits, civic identities, expectations of institutions, and perceptions of personal political capacity are often consolidated during adolescence and early adulthood. Yet public discussion frequently interprets declining membership in political parties, irregular electoral turnout, or low confidence in institutions as evidence that younger generations are politically apathetic. Such a conclusion is increasingly difficult to sustain. Contemporary research instead indicates that young people often remain committed to democratic ideals while questioning established modes of participation and searching for forms of action that appear more immediate, collaborative, expressive, and connected to issues affecting everyday life.

Cross-European evidence, for example, indicates that the youngest adults are not necessarily less supportive of liberal democracy than older groups, suggesting that dissatisfaction with existing institutions should not automatically be equated with rejection of democracy itself. The institutional dimension of this problem is substantial. Younger populations remain underrepresented in many formal decision-making institutions even where they constitute a large proportion of the voting-age population. OECD reporting for 2024 showed that people aged 20–39 represented approximately 34% of the voting-age population across OECD countries, whereas only about 22% of members of parliament were aged 40 or younger.

Representation gaps of this kind can affect how younger citizens perceive political responsiveness and whether participation appears capable of producing meaningful consequences. The broader democratic challenge is therefore not simply how to persuade youth to enter existing institutions, but how political institutions can develop credible channels through which youth knowledge, priorities, creativity, and community experience influence collective decisions.

Digitalization has further transformed this relationship. Social media, civic-technology platforms, mobile applications, digital consultations, online petitions, collaborative mapping, participatory budgeting systems, and community data platforms have lowered some traditional barriers to participation. Meta-analytic evidence nevertheless shows that the democratic implications of digital media depend heavily on how technologies are used.

Political information seeking, discussion, expression, and networked mobilization tend to demonstrate stronger associations with civic participation than passive or entertainment-oriented digital activity. Boulianne and Theocharis synthesized 106 survey-based studies and found that directly political forms of digital-media use were particularly relevant to youth engagement, while Skoric and colleagues similarly identified positive relationships between several forms of social-media use and citizen engagement. Digital access consequently expands the opportunity structure for participation, but it does not automatically produce political agency.

The concept of civic innovation provides a useful way of moving beyond a narrow technology-centered interpretation. In the present study, youth civic innovation refers to institutional, social, and technological arrangements through which young people identify public problems, formulate proposals, deliberate with others, contribute knowledge, allocate resources, develop civic solutions, and interact directly with organizations capable of acting on those contributions. Examples include youth councils



with meaningful authority, youth participatory budgeting, community innovation laboratories, student-led public-policy initiatives, civic hackathons connected to government implementation, digital consultation platforms, and youth-led neighborhood projects. UNDP's contemporary work on civic technology emphasizes that sustainable participation depends upon an institutional cycle linking listening, action, and reporting back; participation can become merely performative when citizen voice is collected without an observable institutional response.

Against this background, the present article investigates how civic innovation could contribute to the renewal of democratic participation among young citizens. Rather than claiming the existence of field observations that were not collected, the study adopts a simulation-based methodological design. A theoretically specified synthetic dataset is used to examine relationships among civic innovation, political efficacy, institutional responsiveness, digital inclusion, peer civic networks, and democratic participation. The purpose is not to substitute simulated evidence for real-world research. Instead, the simulation tests whether a theoretically coherent model produces interpretable relationships that can later be evaluated through surveys, longitudinal studies, participatory-action research, field experiments, or comparative municipal datasets.

## 2. Objectives of the Study

### 2.1 Examining Civic Innovation as a Democratic Participation Mechanism

The principal objective is to examine whether youth civic innovation can be conceptualized as a mechanism for strengthening democratic participation rather than merely as an extracurricular or consultative activity. The study focuses on participation arrangements that permit young citizens to influence public problems, priorities, projects, resource allocation, or policy discussions.

### 2.2 Identifying the Mechanisms Connecting Innovation and Participation

A second objective is to investigate the theoretical roles of political efficacy, institutional responsiveness, digital inclusion, and peer civic networks. The study proposes that civic innovation is unlikely to sustain participation when young people cannot access participatory channels, do not believe that they possess the capacity to contribute, or repeatedly encounter institutions that solicit views without responding meaningfully.

### 2.3 Developing an Empirically Testable Framework

The final objective is to construct a reproducible simulation model that can be converted into a future empirical research instrument. The resulting framework is intended to support questionnaire design, comparative municipal research, experimental civic-education interventions, youth participatory-budgeting evaluations, and longitudinal studies of democratic engagement.

## 3. Review of Literature

### 3.1 From Conventional Political Participation to Networked Youth Citizenship

Earlier approaches to political participation frequently emphasized electoral behavior, political-party membership, campaign activity, contacting officials, and institutional political organizations. These remain fundamental democratic practices, but the repertoire available to young citizens has broadened



significantly. Contemporary participation can include community volunteering, consumer activism, digital expression, protest participation, issue advocacy, mutual-aid networks, social entrepreneurship, environmental campaigns, online consultation, and collaborative public problem-solving.

Keating and Melis examined social media and youth political engagement and argued that digital environments had created additional possibilities for political expression, although online opportunities do not necessarily mobilize previously disengaged individuals into every form of conventional participation. Their findings caution against interpreting online activity as an automatic substitute for institutional engagement.

Boulianne and Theocharis subsequently provided broader evidence through a meta-analysis of youth, digital media, and engagement. Across 106 survey-based studies, their synthesis found little support for the claim that digital media are uniformly damaging youth civic life. Instead, relationships were generally more favorable when digital practices were explicitly political, including accessing political information, discussing public issues, and participating in political expression.

These findings support a distinction between digital availability and civic activation. A young citizen may have extensive access to communication technology without gaining opportunities to influence public decisions. Conversely, politically oriented digital networks can reduce information costs, strengthen connections among participants, expose individuals to civic opportunities, and support collective mobilization.

The changing civic repertoire is particularly visible on newer social-media platforms. Moffett and Rice examined Americans aged 18–25 and found that politically oriented TikTok expression was associated with higher offline civic engagement. Their work highlights how informal, culturally familiar, and creative forms of expression can connect young citizens to wider political networks.

### **3.2 Political Efficacy, Civic Learning, and the Experience of Influence**

Political efficacy refers broadly to citizens' belief that they understand political processes, possess the capacity to participate, and can potentially influence political outcomes. It is especially relevant to youth because unfamiliarity with political procedures, limited representation, unequal resources, and previous experiences of being disregarded can weaken expectations that engagement is worthwhile.

Civic education can improve knowledge, but information alone may not be sufficient. Research increasingly distinguishes knowing how democratic systems operate from believing that personal and collective action can matter. Kahne, Crow, and Lee showed that different civic-learning opportunities can influence different dimensions of youth political engagement, illustrating the importance of experiential rather than exclusively informational civic education.

More recent experimental work provides particularly strong evidence for the efficacy mechanism. McClendon, Sperber, and Kaaba conducted a community-collaborative experiment involving 775 urban young adults in Zambia. Participants received civic education through WhatsApp, while one treatment incorporated messages intended to strengthen efficacy. The efficacy-focused intervention produced stronger improvements in young women's political participation than information alone and contributed to narrowing gender differences in engagement.

The significance of this evidence extends beyond the specific intervention. Participation itself can become a form of civic education when young people practice deliberation, negotiate competing

priorities, communicate with public officials, evaluate evidence, formulate proposals, or participate in collective resource allocation. Civic innovation can therefore create a reinforcing sequence:

participation opportunity → practical civic experience → increased efficacy → further participation.

However, this sequence can also operate negatively.

If participation repeatedly produces no response, participants may conclude that public consultation is symbolic. This creates a reverse sequence:

participation opportunity → institutional silence → reduced efficacy → withdrawal.

Youth-centered democratic innovation should therefore be evaluated not merely by how many young citizens submit ideas but also by whether those ideas receive transparent consideration and whether participants receive explanations of eventual decisions.

### 3.3 Participatory Institutions, Responsiveness, and Democratic Renewal

Youth councils, participatory budgeting, deliberative forums, civic-technology platforms, and co-design processes are increasingly used to expand youth participation. Their democratic value depends on the depth of participation provided.

Participatory budgeting is particularly relevant because it connects citizen preferences to tangible public resources. Youth participatory-budgeting programs can enable young people to identify community problems, formulate projects, deliberate over priorities, and vote on resource allocation. Recent research into youth participatory budgeting emphasizes a central distinction between genuine empowerment and simple involvement: institutional design determines whether participation redistributes meaningful influence or merely invites young people into predetermined processes.

Youth councils can similarly function as sites of democratic learning when members encounter practical governance and experience recognition as political actors. Emerging research describes some youth councils as environments in which citizenship is practiced through deliberation and public involvement rather than learned only through formal instruction.

Institutional responsiveness is therefore central to the present framework. Young citizens need evidence that institutions listen, explain decisions, implement feasible proposals, and communicate why other proposals cannot be adopted. UNDP's civic-technology framework similarly emphasizes that durable participation requires a closed feedback loop connecting listening, institutional action, and subsequent reporting to participants.

## 4. Research Methodology

### 4.1 Research Design and Simulation Logic

The study employs a quantitative simulation-based research design. No field survey, experiment, or administrative dataset is presented as having been collected. Instead, synthetic observations were generated to test the internal behavior of a theoretically specified model.

A reproducible random seed of 20260812 was used to create 480 synthetic cases. Five standardized explanatory constructs were simulated with moderate positive correlations representing theoretically plausible relationships among civic resources and participation environments.

The outcome variable, Democratic Participation, represents a composite theoretical construct encompassing behaviors such as civic deliberation, community advocacy, public consultation

participation, volunteering, institutional contact, participatory decision-making, and intention to participate in democratic processes.

**Table 1: Operational Structure of the Simulation Model**

| Construct                    | Conceptual Meaning                                                | Illustrative Indicators for Future Empirical Validation                                              | Expected Direction |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Civic Innovation             | Exposure to meaningful youth-centered participatory opportunities | youth councils, participatory budgeting, civic labs, policy co-design, community innovation projects | Positive           |
| Political Efficacy           | Perceived capacity to understand and influence public affairs     | confidence in expressing views, perceived personal influence, civic problem-solving confidence       | Positive           |
| Institutional Responsiveness | Perception that authorities listen and respond                    | feedback from officials, proposal follow-up, transparent explanations, implementation visibility     | Positive           |
| Digital Inclusion            | Effective ability to access digital civic opportunities           | affordable connectivity, device access, digital literacy, accessible civic platforms                 | Positive           |
| Peer Civic Networks          | Social connections encouraging civic involvement                  | civic discussions, volunteering networks, youth associations, peer mobilization                      | Positive           |
| Democratic Participation     | Breadth and intensity of democratic engagement                    | consultation, voting intention, advocacy, volunteering, institutional contact, deliberation          | Outcome            |

## 4.2 Model Specification

The simulated outcome was generated as a weighted combination of the five predictors plus random disturbance. Multiple ordinary least squares regression was subsequently applied to estimate the relationship between the predictors and democratic participation.



The purpose of estimating the model after simulation was to assess whether the theoretically constructed relationships remained visible under stochastic variation rather than to estimate population parameters for any real country or community.

### 4.3 Reproducibility, Ethics, and Methodological Boundaries

Because the dataset contains no human participants, personal information, interviews, identifiable digital traces, or administrative records, the simulation itself does not constitute human-subject data collection. Ethical principles remain relevant, however, because synthetic findings can be misleading if presented as real evidence.

Accordingly, three boundaries are maintained throughout this manuscript. First, all numerical findings are labeled as simulated. Second, no country, institution, university, or youth population is claimed to have produced these results. Third, causal claims are avoided because the simulation establishes model behavior rather than real-world treatment effects.

Future empirical validation should employ transparent informed-consent procedures, privacy protection, equitable participant recruitment, accessible participation mechanisms, appropriate institutional ethical review where required, and safeguards for young participants, particularly where minors are included.

## 5. Analysis

### 5.1 Overall Model Performance

The simulated regression produced an  $R^2$  of 0.498 and an adjusted  $R^2$  of 0.492. Within the synthetic analytical environment, the five predictors jointly accounted for approximately 49.8% of variation in democratic participation.

This value should not be interpreted as an estimate of democratic participation in an actual population. Its significance lies in demonstrating that the theoretical model produces a coherent multivariate structure in which civic innovation remains influential even after political efficacy, institutional responsiveness, digital inclusion, and peer networks are considered simultaneously.

### 5.2 Relative Contribution of the Participation Mechanisms

**Table 2: Simulated Multiple Regression Results Predicting Democratic Participation**

| Predictor                    | Coefficient (B) | Standard Error | t-value | Significance |
|------------------------------|-----------------|----------------|---------|--------------|
| Civic Innovation             | 0.289           | 0.039          | 7.326   | $p < 0.001$  |
| Political Efficacy           | 0.258           | 0.040          | 6.537   | $p < 0.001$  |
| Institutional Responsiveness | 0.204           | 0.040          | 5.079   | $p < 0.001$  |
| Digital                      | 0.164           | 0.036          | 4.595   | $p < 0.001$  |

| Predictor           | Coefficient (B) | Standard Error | t-value | Significance |
|---------------------|-----------------|----------------|---------|--------------|
| Inclusion           |                 |                |         |              |
| Peer Civic Networks | 0.163           | 0.037          | 4.395   | $p < 0.001$  |

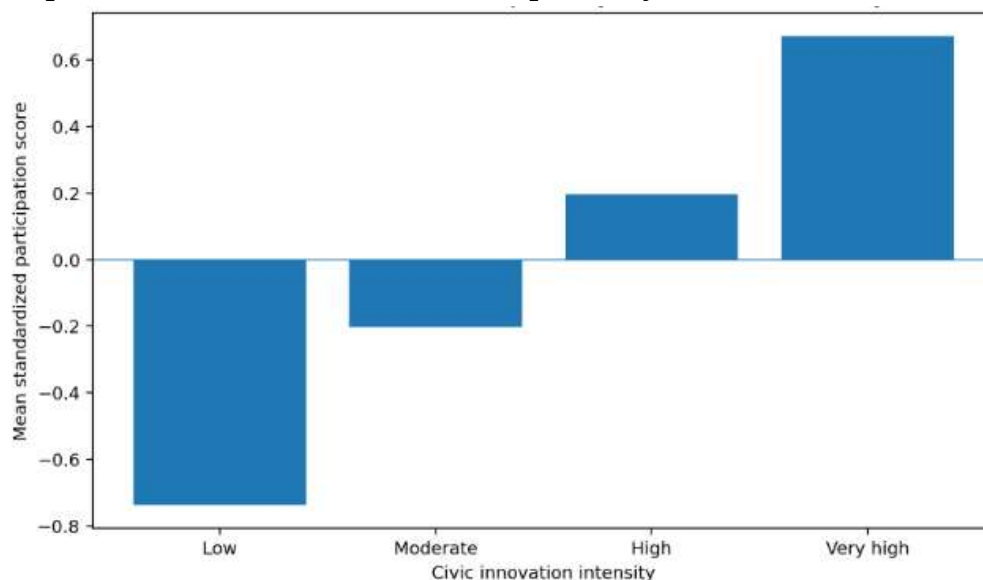
The pattern is conceptually important. It indicates that participation opportunities alone are not sufficient, but neither can individual motivation alone explain engagement. Democratic participation emerges from interaction between opportunity and agency. Young citizens must encounter accessible mechanisms through which action is possible, possess confidence in their ability to use those mechanisms, and experience institutional environments in which participation appears consequential.

### 5.3 Civic Innovation Intensity and Participation

For graphical interpretation, simulated civic-innovation values were divided into four equal groups ranging from low to very high exposure. Mean standardized democratic-participation scores increased progressively across these groups:

- Low civic innovation: **-0.738**
- Moderate civic innovation: **-0.203**
- High civic innovation: **0.196**
- Very high civic innovation: **0.671**

**Graph 1: Simulated Democratic Participation by Civic Innovation Intensity**



The graph demonstrates a monotonic relationship within the simulated data. Participants represented by the lowest civic-innovation quartile display the lowest average participation score, while the highest innovation group displays the strongest value.



The finding should be interpreted as a theoretically generated expectation. A future empirical study should investigate whether actual communities demonstrate this gradient and whether the relationship remains significant after controlling for socioeconomic status, educational attainment, gender, urban–rural location, political interest, trust, prior volunteering, family political socialization, and access to civic organizations.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1 Democratic Renewal Requires Consequential Participation

The central implication of the study is that democratic renewal should not be approached as a problem of persuading supposedly disengaged young people to participate in unchanged institutional arrangements. Contemporary evidence indicates that many young citizens continue to value democracy while expressing dissatisfaction with existing political institutions or shifting toward less conventional modes of engagement.

The simulation reinforces a theoretical explanation for this pattern. Civic innovation becomes most relevant when it provides an observable pathway from participation to public consequence. Asking young people for opinions without demonstrating how those opinions influence decisions can weaken rather than strengthen democratic commitment.

This distinction can be expressed as the difference between voice collection and shared democratic agency. Voice collection is institution-centered: authorities define an issue, request responses, aggregate them, and retain control over interpretation and follow-up. Shared agency is relational: participants help define problems, gain access to relevant information, formulate alternatives, deliberate over trade-offs, observe institutional decision-making, and receive feedback concerning outcomes.

Youth participatory budgeting illustrates the difference. When young people are permitted to deliberate over actual resources and successful proposals are implemented, the process can provide practical democratic experience. Where budget amounts are insignificant, rules are opaque, or authorities retain undisclosed veto power, the participatory label may conceal a largely symbolic process.

Similar principles apply to youth councils. Their educational value is greater where participants engage directly with policy development, municipal committees, budget priorities, public consultations, or community implementation. A purely ceremonial council can provide recognition without power and may unintentionally teach participants that political institutions value youth presence more than youth influence.

### 6.2 Political Efficacy and Responsiveness as Connecting Mechanisms

The second major contribution concerns political efficacy. The simulated model identifies political efficacy as one of the strongest mechanisms associated with participation. This is consistent with empirical evidence indicating that civic interventions become more effective when they address citizens' sense of capacity in addition to supplying information. The Zambian civic-education experiment reported by McClendon, Sperber, and Kaaba is especially relevant because strengthening efficacy



produced improvements in political participation among young women that information-only civic education did not achieve to the same extent.

Civic innovation can potentially develop efficacy because it turns abstract citizenship into practiced citizenship. Developing a proposal requires translating dissatisfaction into an actionable idea. Presenting it to decision makers develops communicative confidence. Deliberating with peers develops perspective-taking and negotiation. Receiving public feedback helps participants understand institutional constraints. Observing implementation demonstrates that collective action can generate tangible consequences.

Institutional responsiveness completes this process. A young citizen may initially possess high motivation and political efficacy but become discouraged if every participatory interaction ends in institutional silence. Conversely, visible responses can reinforce participation even when a citizen's preferred proposal is not adopted. Responsiveness does not mean agreeing with every demand; it means demonstrating that participation enters a transparent decision process.

This explains why civic-technology platforms should incorporate visible proposal status, response deadlines, decision rationales, progress indicators, implementation reporting, and opportunities for continued dialogue. UNDP's emphasis on completing the listening–action–feedback cycle is highly consistent with this mechanism.

### **6.3 Digital Civic Innovation Must Remain Inclusive and Deliberative**

The simulated findings also position digital inclusion as a meaningful but not dominant predictor. This distinction matters because democratic innovation is sometimes reduced to the deployment of technological platforms. Yet creating an application does not create democracy.

Research on digital political engagement demonstrates that political uses of media are generally more strongly associated with participation than passive use. This means civic technologies should be evaluated in terms of what users are able to do through them rather than the sophistication of the technology itself.

An effective youth-oriented platform should enable users to understand public problems, communicate proposals, access evidence, deliberate respectfully, follow decision processes, collaborate with others, and observe outcomes. At the same time, digital-first designs can reproduce exclusion when participation depends on stable internet connectivity, expensive devices, high levels of literacy, dominant-language proficiency, or sophisticated digital skills.

A more inclusive model combines digital and offline participation. A municipal youth participatory process might use an online proposal platform while simultaneously offering school-based sessions, community kiosks, facilitated neighborhood meetings, accessible formats for young people with disabilities, and outreach to youth outside formal education.

Digital democratic environments also introduce concerns involving misinformation, algorithmic amplification, polarization, harassment, surveillance, unequal visibility, and privacy. Oden and Porter found that social-media participation could relate to civic engagement while also examining its relationship with affective polarization, illustrating why the democratic consequences of digital participation cannot be treated as uniformly positive.



The appropriate objective is therefore not maximum digital participation but high-quality democratic participation: informed, inclusive, pluralistic, consequential, safe, transparent, and connected to institutions capable of responding.

## 7. Conclusion

The renewal of democratic participation among youth requires a broader understanding of what political engagement has become. Younger citizens participate across interconnected electoral, community, digital, expressive, deliberative, and problem-solving arenas. Declining participation in particular conventional organizations should therefore not automatically be interpreted as an abandonment of democratic values.

This study proposes youth civic innovation as a framework connecting emerging participation practices with meaningful public decision-making. Its central argument is that innovation strengthens democracy when young people do more than express opinions. Democratic renewal is more likely where they can identify problems, develop proposals, deliberate, collaborate, influence decisions, observe institutional responses, and experience the consequences of collective action.

The simulation-based analysis provides methodological support for this conceptual model. Across 480 synthetic cases, civic innovation demonstrated the largest positive relationship with democratic participation, followed by political efficacy and institutional responsiveness. Digital inclusion and peer civic networks also contributed positively. The model accounted for 49.8% of simulated variation in democratic participation.

These findings are not empirical estimates of an existing youth population and should not be cited as survey evidence. Their contribution is to identify theoretically defensible relationships suitable for field validation.

For public institutions, the policy implication is clear: youth engagement strategies should move beyond one-time consultations, awareness campaigns, or symbolic representation. Municipalities and public agencies can strengthen youth councils by providing clearly defined authority and formal response mechanisms. Participatory budgeting can connect civic learning with tangible resource decisions. Educational institutions can integrate experiential civic projects with local governance rather than treating civic education as solely classroom-based knowledge. Civil-society organizations can develop peer networks connecting youth concerns to policy processes. Civic-technology initiatives can provide transparent feedback loops showing how participation moves from proposal to consideration, decision, implementation, and evaluation.

Future research should validate the model using longitudinal datasets, comparative city studies, randomized civic interventions, mixed-method research, and participatory-action designs. Special attention should be given to inequalities within youth populations because gender, income, education, disability, geography, digital access, migration background, and social exclusion can substantially affect participation opportunities.



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