

Revised version

26 May 2021

Conference Report

Stepping up youth participation in politics and parliaments: From words to action

The demographic dividend of youth

Young people under the age of 30 make up around half of the world population.¹ Around a quarter of the world population is between the ages of 15 and 30.²

Decision-making must be responsive, inclusive and representative. This democratic process requires strong participation of all people, especially youth. This is not only true because they account for a high proportion of the world population, but also because how they relate to politics largely determines the health of our democracies today and in the future. Excluding young people in their formative years can lead to their disillusionment and lack of trust in our institutions, which weakens those institutions' legitimacy.

The second category of young people, aged 15 to 30, is made up of 1.8 billion individuals. This group is as diverse as the world they live in. These young people have shared needs, such as accessible quality education to prepare for the jobs of tomorrow; availability of decent work; equality among boys and girls and men and women; and a planet that is healthy, clean and sustainable. With the bulk of their lives ahead of them, young men and women have the highest stake in today's actions – or inactions – and have a right to be included in decision-making on these and all other issues that affect them. As IPU young MPs have often repeated, **“No decisions about us, without us!”**.

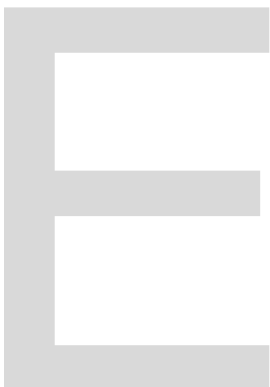
At a time when the global community is trying to tackle unprecedented challenges caused by COVID-19, the political participation of youth is not only a right that must be fulfilled, but it is also the smartest investment that can be made to an inclusive, effective and sustainable collective response. Harnessing the perspectives, new ideas and energy of young people is indispensable in the broader efforts to address key issues which affect people of all ages, such as the pandemic, achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), peace and security, the right to education, to health and to social protection, gender equality, equal socio-economic and political opportunities, and fighting climate change.

Youth are an innovative force that have much to contribute to these collective efforts. Ensuring full engagement of young men and women in the democratic process at all levels, and starting such engagement as early as possible through democracy education, are priority objectives that should be high on the political agenda.

Parliaments must exchange good practices and successful experiences in political, democratic and parliamentary education programmes that increase the interest of youth in the political process in general and in parliamentary work in particular, as well as their involvement and their training in good practices.

¹ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects 2019: Highlights* (ST/ESA/SER.A/423, New York, 2019):
https://population.un.org/wpp/Publications/Files/WPP2019_Highlights.pdf.

² *ibid.*



The political empowerment of young people brings new perspectives to politics and how it is done. Political institutions must be agile to respond to a fast-changing world facing new challenges and threats to humankind. They must constantly change and adapt with the times so that they reflect the societies that nourish them. As “natives” of the modern era and in the vanguard of new approaches and technologies, youth are best placed to drive the renewal of political institutions, including parliaments, so that they are more representative, responsive and effective, no matter the environment. Efforts should be made to foster an effective and meaningful youth contribution to all stages of the policy- and law-making cycle: from design to implementation and evaluation. Young people make a direct contribution whose impact on decision-making within their own communities is significant. Consequently, they can effectively engage in political decision-making processes at the national, regional and international levels.

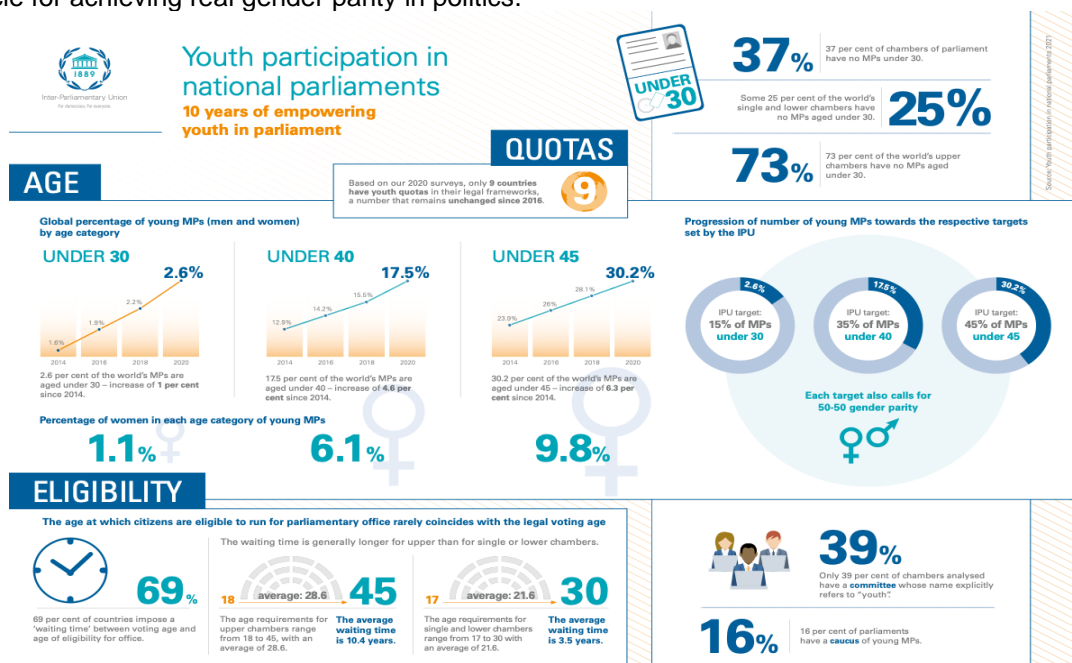
Young people will be more affected by decisions taken on longer-term issues like climate change, environmental sustainability and political instability. Without youth’s active participation, the laws and policies passed by parliament and government may be detrimental to their interests, both today and in the future.³ As such, enhancing youth participation can contribute to, and is needed for, better policymaking.

Youth-responsive policymaking is also required in key areas affected by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, such as education, health and employment. Their inclusion in decisions is critical as the world endeavours to emerge from the pandemic and embark on a recovery process that can build back better in a more inclusive, fair, resilient and sustainable way.

Current state of youth participation in parliament and politics

Despite the world having more young people today than ever before, youth are severely underrepresented in politics and parliaments. According to IPU data, only 2.6 per cent of parliamentarians are under 30.⁴ Disproportionate underrepresentation continues even when looking at percentages of parliamentarians under 40 and 45 years of age (see figure below). IPU research has also revealed that 37 per cent of the world’s single and lower chambers of parliament – and almost three-quarters of upper chambers – have no MPs aged under 30. Sixty-nine per cent of parliaments also impose a “waiting period” between when young people can vote and when they can be eligible for office.

Young women are doubly disadvantaged. In all age ranges, men continue to outnumber women in parliaments. However, one encouraging sign is that the proportion of men and women MPs is more balanced the younger the age cohort. This suggests that increased youth participation may be a vehicle for achieving real gender parity in politics.



³ IPU, *Youth participation in national parliaments: 10 years of empowering youth in parliament* (2021).

⁴ *ibid.*

In the five years since the IPU began collecting data on youth participation in parliaments, global trends have been inching in positive directions. In 2021, the percentage of young MPs under 30 years of age grew to 2.6 per cent from 1.6 per cent in 2014. The proportion of young MPs under 40 years of age grew to 17.5 per cent from 12.9 per cent. Yet, despite incremental progress, the world is nowhere near an equitable level of youth participation.

Barriers facing youth

There are many barriers impeding young men and women from running for political office or being politically active. Although these may vary from country to country, a number of common challenges can be highlighted:

- Young people face legal barriers in many countries, with 69 per cent of countries having a minimum age to hold office that is higher than the voting age. Globally, young people must wait on average 3.5 years after they are eligible to vote before they can take office in lower chambers. In upper chambers, this waiting period is even longer, at 10.4 years.
- In many contexts there are also financial impediments for young people to run for office. Nominations to parties and election campaigns can be expensive. Young prospective candidates often do not have the financial means either to qualify for elections or to competitively run against better resourced candidates.
- Negative norms that portray formal politics as being for senior individuals are a persistent obstacle. Around the world, there is often a mentality that young people are “not yet ready” for the responsibility of holding office. Politics is also typically regarded as a space for politically experienced persons. As a result, young people are systematically marginalized because of their age, limited opportunities and perceived lack of experience. There is a perception that youth are inexperienced in politics, suggesting that they should wait for their turn to run for political office. This stems from the belief that a certain level of knowledge, experience and maturity is required to successfully meet the many demands placed upon parliamentarians. This can cause resentment among young people and discourage their interest in political engagement.
- Many young people face life-cycle challenges to running for office as they pursue higher education, undergo training or begin a career, and may be unable to take the risks associated with running for a post that is far from guaranteed. Other young people may be starting families and caring for young children, which can be difficult to juggle with standing for office.
- There is also the perception that young politicians lack the name recognition and the access to crucial networks that are needed to gain attention, be nominated by political parties and become viable candidates.
- Disengagement with formal politics leads many young people to feel that “formal” politics is simply beyond them. Some do not know where to start or do not wish to join a party or a political institution (parliament) that they feel disillusioned with.
- Young women aspirants to political office face additional barriers manifested in gender and age bias and gender-based discrimination and violence.⁵

IPU action

Responding to this situation, in 2010 the IPU adopted the resolution *Youth participation in the democratic process* at the 122nd IPU Assembly in Thailand.⁶ It called on parliaments, governments and political parties to take comprehensive legal and policy action to enhance youth participation in politics.

In 2020, the IPU celebrated the tenth anniversary of its resolution on youth in the democratic process.

The resolution went beyond calling for increased youth consultation in political processes by also calling for increased direct youth representation in decision-making.

⁵ For more on this topic see: IPU, *Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe* (2018).

⁶ IPU resolution, *Youth participation in the democratic process* (122nd IPU Assembly, 2010).

It proposed concrete measures, such as the introduction of youth quotas, alignment of the minimum age of eligibility for parliament with the voting age, enhancement of youth in political parties and political education to stimulate active citizenship. The resolution also laid the foundations for the establishment of the IPU Forum of Young Parliamentarians, which was subsequently created in 2013 and serves as a statutory body of the IPU committed to youth empowerment.

The IPU took further action in 2016, when it held a general debate entitled *Rejuvenating democracy, giving voice to youth* at the 134th IPU Assembly in Zambia. IPU Member Parliaments highlighted the indispensable role of young people as key agents to re-energize parliaments and political institutions so that they adapt to the modern world.⁷ In addition to echoing proposed measures to enhance participation of youth in parliaments, Member Parliaments also underlined the role of youth in upgrading the functioning of parliaments through new technologies.

Member Parliaments also called for change within the IPU's functioning itself so that young MPs were better represented in country delegations and took on more senior roles within the Organization's political structures. In 2018, the IPU adopted changes to its Statutes to enhance the number and role of young MPs at IPU Assemblies. To attain a target of having young MPs make up a minimum of 25 per cent of parliamentary delegates at Assemblies, a set of incentives were instituted to encourage greater inclusion of young men and women MPs. The President of the Forum of Young Parliamentarians now holds an *ex officio* seat on the IPU Executive Committee as well as all the Standing Committees' Bureaux.

Addressing the particular situation of young women, in partnership with the United Nations Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, in 2021 the IPU launched a [Call to Action](#) on women's political participation and leadership. The Call to Action identified three priorities for increasing young women's political participation: nurturing political aspirations; supporting young women candidates; and empowering young women in office and investing in their leadership.

The IPU has also acted to identify youth needs and solutions to ensure a youth-responsive recovery to the COVID-19 pandemic. At its 2021 Global Conference of Young Parliamentarians, the IPU brought together hundreds of young MPs to coordinate actions on protecting and fulfilling fundamental youth rights and stepping up youth empowerment across recovery efforts, including with political participation, education, health and the economy.

The IPU has engaged in many other initiatives to empower youth, including research on youth participation in parliaments, facilitating participation of young MPs at international events and organizing capacity-building trainings.

The IPU in action	
✓ Creation of the Forum of Young Parliamentarians	✓ Participation of young MPs at international events
✓ Global and regional conferences of young parliamentarians	✓ Youth enhancements to the IPU Statutes
✓ Research and data collection on youth participation in parliaments	✓ Technical assistance and capacity building

Stepping it up: Launching the next chapter to empower youth

The Declaration adopted by the IPU's Fourth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament in 2015 stated that: "Participation in political life and public decision-making is an entitlement and is crucial to development. When people are left voiceless or excluded, their well-being is undermined, and democracy is left wanting." The Speakers of parliament pledged to do their "utmost to make politics genuinely open to young people and to facilitate their election to parliament in greater numbers".

⁷ IPU outcome document of the General Debate, *Rejuvenating democracy, giving voice to youth* (2016).

Six years later, young men and women continue to be left behind in political life and public decision-making.

It has now been just over ten years since the IPU adopted its resolution *Youth participation in the democratic process*. The year 2021 marks an occasion to celebrate the progress made since 2010, but also to trigger a new decade of action for renewed political will and commitment to fully implement the resolution. This is all the more important in this time of pandemic in order to prevent backsliding on the youth agenda.

To step up to the challenge, in 2021 the IPU launched a new campaign called “I SAY YES to youth participation in parliament!” The campaign is an exciting step to translate words to action. It calls on MPs of all ages – and **with a special focus on Speakers of parliament** – to “SAY YES” and become changemakers in parliament by taking at least one of the following six pledges for youth participation.



Speakers of parliament can pledge their support on <https://www.ipu.org/i-say-yes>

The Fifth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament and the “I SAY YES” campaign are opportunities to walk the talk and take bold steps to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on youth, and contribute to a youth-responsive, effective and sustainable recovery which goes hand in hand with the efforts for greater youth participation in institutions of political representation, particularly parliament.

The Conference will provide a platform for parliamentary leaders, both collectively and individually, to affirm their commitment to empower youth and to consolidate support for action.

Informed by the IPU’s research and deliberations, members of parliament are encouraged to initiate and support concrete measures to push youth participation to the next level, including to:

- Implement by 2035, the global targets for youth participation in national parliaments set by the IPU Forum of Young Parliamentarians based on youth proportions in the global population:
 - 15 per cent of young parliamentarians under 30
 - 35 per cent of young parliamentarians under 40
 - 45 per cent of young parliamentarians under 45

Acknowledging the specific challenges that young women face in entering politics and parliament, each target provides for gender parity of 50 per cent young women and 50 per cent young men.

A first step is to “SAY YES” to youth in parliament by pledging support to the [new IPU campaign](#) and taking transformative action for youth participation.

- Governments and parliaments should pursue institutional reforms to correct the democracy deficit of youth representation. Parliaments should also make it a priority to address the double discrimination young women suffer.
- Propose deliberate measures to reach the targets for youth participation in national parliaments, including by reforming constitutions and electoral laws to introduce youth quotas and removing legal barriers for young people to engage in politics by aligning the minimum age of eligibility for political office with the voting age.

- Support and promote the realization of the IPU young MPs' motto **"If you are old enough to vote, you are not too young to run"**, including by joining and supporting the #NotTooYoungToRun global campaign.
- Empower young parliamentarians already in office by providing them with training and mentorship programmes and positioning them to take up leadership roles in parliament.
- Establish parliamentary specialized bodies, such as youth committees or forums of young parliamentarians, to mainstream youth issues in parliament's work and provide youth perspectives to issues that affect them.
- Open up parliamentary processes to youth in society to ensure they contribute to parliamentary work throughout the policy- and law-making cycles: from design to monitoring and evaluation. At the same time, encourage parliaments and their members – younger or older – to reach out to youth in their spaces, for example, on social media, in schools, universities and public spaces. The practice of establishing constituency-level youth advisory councils for individual MPs is one way to strengthen this link.
- An increasing number of parliaments are creating "youth parliaments" composed of youth representatives who debate policy and legislation, question government members and take initiatives. The key aim of these parliaments is to give young people a chance to get a feel for the job of a member of parliament. Parliaments should ensure that continuous support and mentoring is provided to young people who participate in youth parliaments.
- Promote the use of modern technologies to more closely connect youth with parliamentary processes, including through innovations such as online petitions, virtual hearings and submissions, and online interactions and voting.
- Invest in modern technologies, particularly social media, to involve young people in politics. Unprecedented access to information and technologies is providing youth with new means to express their aspirations and concerns more freely and to connect with others to debate the problems that concern them.
- Invest in and implement democracy education programmes to educate children and young people and kindle their interest in the democratic process.
- Open up political parties to youth, including by creating and strengthening youth wings and giving young people leadership positions within decision-making structures in order to increase their reach to younger demographics.
- Invest in youth empowerment more broadly. This includes ensuring accessible, quality education for young men and women, including in the fields of STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), and supporting youth employment, vocational training, entrepreneurship and financial services, such as youth empowerment banks and micro-financing initiatives.
- Review progress made in implementing national strategies for the advancement of youth, and monitor the strategies' achievements and the obstacles encountered. Furthermore, parliamentarians are encouraged to learn from good practices in this regard, especially those related to preventing duplication or conflict of competences between various institutions concerned with youth issues. Lastly, they are encouraged to give more space to volunteer-based institutions that represent youth and reflect their interests.
- Underline the role of parliaments in increasing the funds allocated to youth programmes in the general budget, especially those related to enhancing youth participation in political life and their contribution to political decision-making, so that it becomes a budget responsive to the needs and aspirations of youth.

- Expand “political simulation” initiatives that train youth in political practice and promote the participation of indigenous actors by focusing media attention on such initiatives in order to emphasize their importance and encourage young people to engage in them, as well as provide more opportunities for policy actors to share their real-life experiences with youth participants.
- Develop measurable standards and indicators to monitor progress made in enhancing the active participation of youth in political life at all levels and in all areas, such as influencing the political agenda to be more responsive to the needs of youth, measuring the percentage of youth representation within organizational and leadership frameworks in different political institutions and, particularly, measuring the impact of young MPs on political decision-making. This can be done through monitoring the contributions of young MPs in parliamentary debates, and monitoring the effects of their proposals on final policy decisions, notably those that affect youth.
- Create an enabling environment for increasing young women’s representation in politics through nurturing young women’s political aspirations, supporting young women candidates for political office and empowering them, while investing in their leadership.
- Ensure a youth-responsive COVID-19-recovery by enhancing investment in accessible and resilient education systems, opportunities of decent employment and access to social security, and access to universal health coverage and dedicated youth health services.

“The time for talk is over. The time to act is now.”
*Outcome document, Fifth Global Conference of Young
Parliamentarians (Baku, 2018)*