

Policy Brief 1:

No vote, but at least a voice? Opportunities and barriers for young people's civic participation



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SUMMARY

This policy brief explores the opportunities and obstacles related to young people's civic participation. Drawing from research on young people's involvement in public debates about climate change, the brief highlights how children and youth can either wield or be denied rhetorical and political power in matters that significantly impact them.

The policy brief recommends addressing the prevailing and enduring discourses that marginalise young voices in democratic discussions to foster a more inclusive and democratic society. This objective can be achieved through a concerted effort involving research, education, and critical reflection among key stakeholders, including educators, researchers, policymakers, and the media.

THE ISSUE

Climate change, with its profound and long-lasting impacts, particularly affects the young. But, due to their lack of voting rights, children and youth are excluded from influencing this issue through the ballot.

Despite the high visibility of young climate activists like Greta Thunberg and the Fridays for Future movement, their voices often go unheard in the climate debate. Authorities, educators, and the media increasingly emphasise the importance of youth civic participation. Yet, the response to youth climate activism often undermines their democratic involvement.

In political debates, the young are frequently dismissed as inexperienced, irresponsible, and ill-informed instead of being recognised as competent speakers with valid and valuable views. Increasingly, young climate activists are also demonised and portrayed as a threat to democracy in public discourse in many European countries.



Young climate protester, London 2019, Photo: Matt Harrop, licenced for reuse under cc-by-sa/2.0 Photo: Matt Harrop

Their civic participation does not threaten democracy, but their exclusion from democratic debates might. It might erode their trust in the potential for meaningful political discussions on pressing matters and diminish their faith in policymakers' willingness to prioritise their lives and the planet they will inherit, a sentiment echoed in the growing dissatisfaction among young people with how political leaders address climate-related issues.

KEY FINDINGS

- Andersen (2023a) shows that while it has long been widely accepted that children and youth should have limited political influence, there is a growing movement advocating for increased political empowerment of young people. In several countries, debates are underway about lowering the voting age, and some European nations already grant 16-year-olds the right to vote. However, simply extending voting rights does not guarantee enhanced political representation and power for youth. Practical barriers, including the underrepresentation of young people among elected officials, can hinder them from having a voice in the political system, even if they have the right to vote.
- Andersen (2023b) argues that acquiring political rights such as freedom of speech and the right to vote holds little value if not followed by the development of rhetorical citizenship. Rhetorical citizenship involves the ability to effectively articulate one's opinions and be recognised as a speaker with valid and valuable views.
- Andersen (2023a) finds that a significant barrier to youth civic participation is the widespread discourses surrounding their roles in democracy. The view of children and youth as apolitical beings and immature citizens-in-the-making who are meant to play and learn rather than participate in the political sphere obstructs them from speaking and being heard. Their marginalisation is evident in how young people are far less frequently given a platform in the media, and when they do, they are often met with hateful comments or dismissed as immature, ill-informed, and irresponsible participants who are out of place in public debates.
- Andersen (2023a; b) argues that efforts are needed in media and public discourse to recognise the valuable contributions of young voices and ensure that they are not dismissed or met with hateful rhetoric. This responsibility extends to researchers, policymakers, and media actors, prompting us to reflect on the assumptions about children and citizenship that underpin our actions.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS

- Give 16-year-olds the right to vote and ensure representation of young people among elected officials.
- Providing young people with training in rhetorical skills is crucial to empower them to assert their voices because, without the ability to express and argue for their views, their voices will remain unheard.
- More research is needed to understand how young people participate in democracy and perceive their opportunities to do so. Existing research has largely focused on youth activists and those who manage to have their voices heard in the public sphere. However, it is equally important to investigate what prevents others from participating and making their voices heard. Such research should also address the prevailing discourses that marginalise young people in democratic debates.

REFERENCES

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