



YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE DIGITAL ERA: TRENDS, DRIVERS, AND DEMOCRATIC IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract: The study explores the evolving patterns of political participation among youth in the digital era, focusing on how technological advancements have redefined the ways in which young people engage with democratic processes. As digital platforms become increasingly integrated into daily life, they offer new spaces for civic expression, communication, and activism, particularly among the younger generation. This research aims to examine the current trends in youth political participation, identify key factors that drive such engagement, and assess the implications for democratic development. The study is grounded in a qualitative research methodology, employing document analysis and descriptive interpretation to explore youth behaviors, motivations, and challenges related to political participation. It highlights the importance of digital literacy, civic education, and critical thinking as foundational components in fostering informed and responsible participation. Findings reveal that while traditional forms of political engagement such as voting remain essential, there is a noticeable shift toward digital forms of participation, including online advocacy, social media activism, and participation in virtual forums and campaigns. The flexibility and immediacy of digital tools allow youth to express opinions, build networks, and organize movements more effectively than ever before. However, the study also notes that while digital engagement offers new opportunities, it also presents challenges such as misinformation, digital divides, and the potential for superficial involvement. To enhance meaningful youth political participation, it is crucial to implement strategies that combine digital empowerment with education that promotes ethical responsibility, critical inquiry, and community engagement. This study underscores the potential of youth as key actors in shaping political futures and emphasizes the need to support their active involvement through inclusive, informed, and digitally adaptive frameworks.

Keywords: Youth, Political Participation, Digital Era, Civic Engagement, Education



1. Introduction

In recent years, the dynamics of political participation among youth have undergone a profound transformation, largely influenced by the rise of digital technologies. This evolution not only facilitates the dissemination of information but also empowers young individuals to engage with political discourse in unprecedented ways. The proliferation of mobile devices has created a Wireless World, enabling millions to access real-time information and participate in discussions that shape democratic processes (Firestone C et al., 2007). Concurrently, the manifestation of global risks, such as climate change and social inequality, calls for active engagement from a generation increasingly aware of their societal responsibilities. These trends indicate that today's youth are not merely passive consumers of information; they are pivotal actors in the democratic landscape, leveraging technology to advocate for change and influence policy decisions. Understanding these shifts is essential for understanding the trajectory of political engagement in the digital era.

Understanding the definition of youth political participation is crucial for grasping its significance in contemporary democratic discourse. Youth political participation encompasses the engagement of individuals aged between approximately 15 and 24 in various political activities, including voting, advocacy, and activism. This engagement is often motivated by a desire to influence political decisions and assert their interests within society. The digital era has transformed these forms of participation, enabling young individuals to leverage social media platforms as tools for political expression and community mobilization. For instance, social media has been pivotal in shaping youth electoral engagement as evidenced during the 2019 General Elections in Nigeria, where it facilitated a narrative space that empowered youth voices and impacted political agendas (Obisesan et al., 2022). Moreover, organizations and researchers have noted that digital technologies foster new forms of activism, thereby redefining traditional understandings of civic engagement among young people (de Ridder et al., 2017).

As the digital era matures, its impact on political engagement and dynamics becomes increasingly pronounced, particularly among youth populations. Digital platforms have revolutionized political communication, enabling unprecedented levels of interaction between politicians and constituents. This transformation is evidenced by emerging community media practices that foster greater citizen participation in governance, highlighting how digital tools shift traditional power structures and enhance democratic involvement (Johnson F et al., 2007). Meanwhile, social media has emerged as a powerful vehicle for political discourse, changing campaign strategies and influencing the relationship between the electorate and political leaders. However, the true extent of digital medias influence remains contested, as it simultaneously revitalizes campaign techniques while posing



challenges to democratic processes (Asante et al., 2020). Understanding these nuances is critical, as the digital landscape not only reshapes political engagement but also holds profound implications for the future of democracy, particularly regarding youth participation.

The significance of studying youth engagement in the political sphere cannot be overstated, especially in the context of the digital era. As young individuals increasingly turn to digital platforms for information and discourse, understanding their motivations and behaviors becomes essential for fostering active participation in democracy. The rise of political polarization, disinformation, and disenchantment with traditional democratic processes, underscores the urgency for policymakers to create inclusive environments that resonate with younger populations. Furthermore, fostering youth engagement is vital for reinforcing democratic governance, which, as highlighted, is essential for protecting individual rights and promoting sustainable societal gains. By examining the dynamics of youth participation, researchers and stakeholders can identify effective strategies to empower this demographic, ensuring that their voices contribute meaningfully to the democratic process and combatting the challenges that threaten democracy today.

The role of digital media in shaping youth political participation is not only significant but also complex, revealing a myriad of trends and implications for democratic engagement. As young people increasingly turn to online platforms for information and activism, the dynamics of political communication evolve, necessitating a reassessment of traditional stakeholder strategies in political discourse. A critical examination of recent scholarship indicates that digital communication technologies contribute to revitalized campaign techniques, yet their actual impact on political processes remains contested. This ambiguity is particularly pronounced within specific contexts, such as in Ghana, where social media has transformed electoral politics and engagement methods among youth populations. The implications of this digital shift extend beyond mere connectivity; they reconfigure relationships between political leaders and constituents, influencing campaign strategies and participation levels (Olorunfemi et al., 2022)(Asante et al., 2020). Understanding these developments is vital for fostering democratic engagement and ensuring that youth voices are meaningfully integrated into political conversations.

2. Trends in Youth Political Participation

In recent years, the landscape of youth political participation has transformed significantly, largely influenced by digital communications used for civic engagement. The advent of smartphones has revolutionized how young people interact with political content, suggesting that these devices serve as fundamental tools rather than mere gadgets; they enable communication and information-sharing



that foster political activism and awareness (Soukup et al., 2015). This shift is critical, as research indicates that although many young Americans are reasonably informed and actively engaged – evident in the 45% voter turnout rate in the 2012 election – they still face considerable barriers, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds (N/A, 2013). These dynamics reveal that while digital platforms can enhance political engagement, systemic issues in civic education and misinformation persist, underscoring the need for collaborative efforts among various societal institutions to ensure young people are equipped to participate in the democratic process effectively.

Year	Age Group	Voter Turnout	Voter Registration	Primary Source
2020	18-29	69%	Not specified	Harvard Youth Poll 2024
2022	18-29	23%	Not specified	Harvard Youth Poll 2024
2024	18-29	66%	75%	Harvard Youth Poll 2024
2024	18-34	56% extremely likely to vote	Not specified	Common Cause 2024
2024	18-27	Not specified	40 million eligible voters	Common Cause 2024
2024	18-29	Not specified	Not specified	Harvard Youth Poll 2024

Table 01: Trends in Youth Political Participation (2020-2024)

Increase in online activism and social movements

The rise of online activism has transformed the landscape of social movements, particularly among youth, who leverage digital platforms to mobilize and advocate for change. This paradigm shift has become increasingly prominent as younger generations use social media to amplify their voices and connect with broader audiences, transcending traditional barriers to participation. Youth-driven campaigns, such as those advocating for climate action or racial justice, have harnessed online tools to not only raise awareness but also initiate collective action on a global scale. Critically, the narratives surrounding these movements highlight the historical significance of youth in societal change, as evidenced by their pivotal roles in past liberation struggles. In Africa, for instance, youth-led social movements are reshaping political discourse and challenging established governance systems, underscoring their demand for recognition and agency in transformative processes

(de Ridder et al., 2017). This dynamism reinforces the notion that online activism is a crucial driver of democratic engagement.

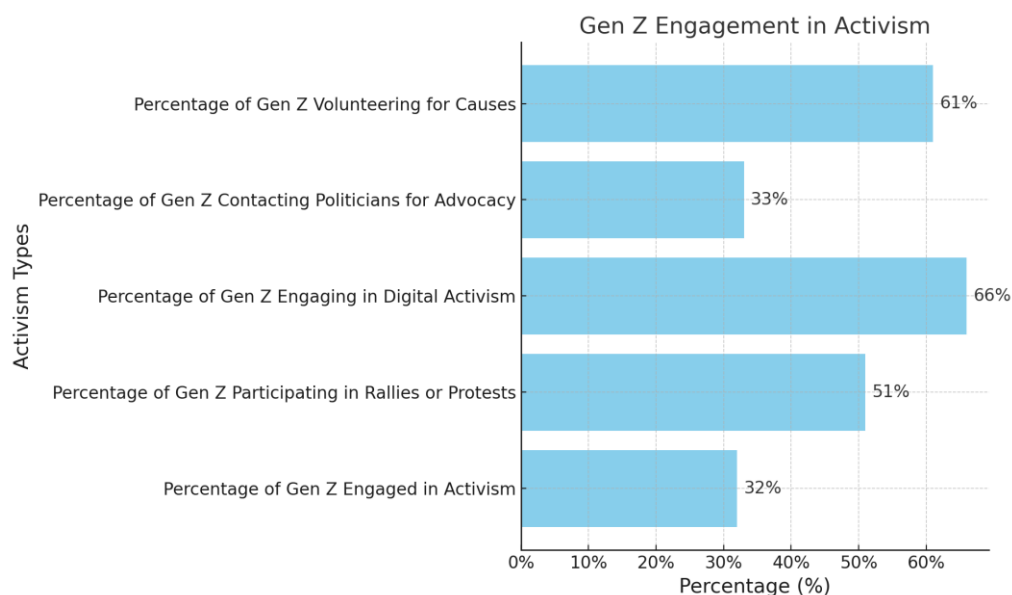


Fig.01: This bar chart presents the engagement of Gen Z in various forms of activism, displaying the percentages of youth involvement in activities such as digital activism, participating in rallies or protests, contacting politicians for advocacy, volunteering for causes, and general engagement in activism. The data indicates a notable preference for digital activism among Gen Z.

Rise of youth-led political organizations

The rise of youth-led political organizations marks a pivotal shift in contemporary democracy, driven largely by the integration of digital technologies into political mobilization. These organizations, often fueled by a sense of urgency regarding social issues such as climate change, racial justice, and economic inequality, leverage platforms like social media to disseminate information and galvanize supporters. As observed in various studies, the lack of trust in traditional electoral processes often results in voter apathy, particularly among younger demographics; thus, these youth-led initiatives seek to counteract this trend by fostering civic engagement and participation (Adamu et al., 2025). Moreover, the innovative nature of these organizations allows them to adapt quickly and effectively respond to community needs, reshaping political dialogues and priorities in a way that resonates with younger generations (de Ridder et al., 2017). Ultimately, this resurgence of youth activism not only enhances democratic participation but also underscores the critical role that young citizens play in advocating for systemic change.

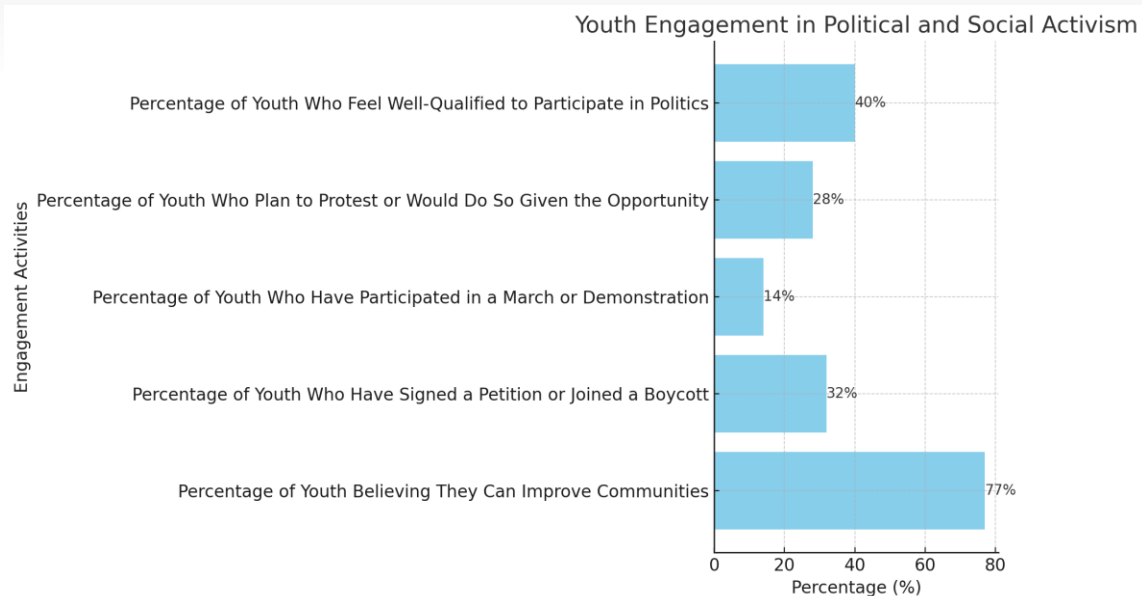


Fig.02: The chart illustrates the various percentages of youth engagement in political and social activism. It highlights that a significant majority of young people believe they can improve their communities (77%). However, there are notable decreases in participation for other activities, such as signing petitions or boycotting (32%), participating in marches (14%), and feeling qualified to participate in politics (40%). This data reflects both the potential enthusiasm and the challenges facing youth in political involvement.

Engagement through social media platforms

Engagement through social media platforms has transformed the landscape of youth political participation, amplifying their voices and fostering a sense of community among young voters. These platforms serve as dynamic arenas for dialogue, where information about political events and issues is rapidly disseminated, enabling real-time engagement and mobilization. The inherent connectivity of social media allows for diverse perspectives to be shared, often inspiring grassroots movements and campaigns that challenge traditional political narratives. However, this increased engagement also presents risks, as the prevalence of disinformation can undermine informed decision-making and distort democratic processes. With approximately 56.8% of the global population active on social media, electoral management bodies and other stakeholders must develop strategies to address the challenges posed by misinformation while leveraging these platforms to enhance civic engagement and electoral integrity (de Ridder et al., 2017) (Achler et al., 2022). Ultimately, fostering positive engagement through social media is crucial for sustaining democracy in an increasingly digital era.

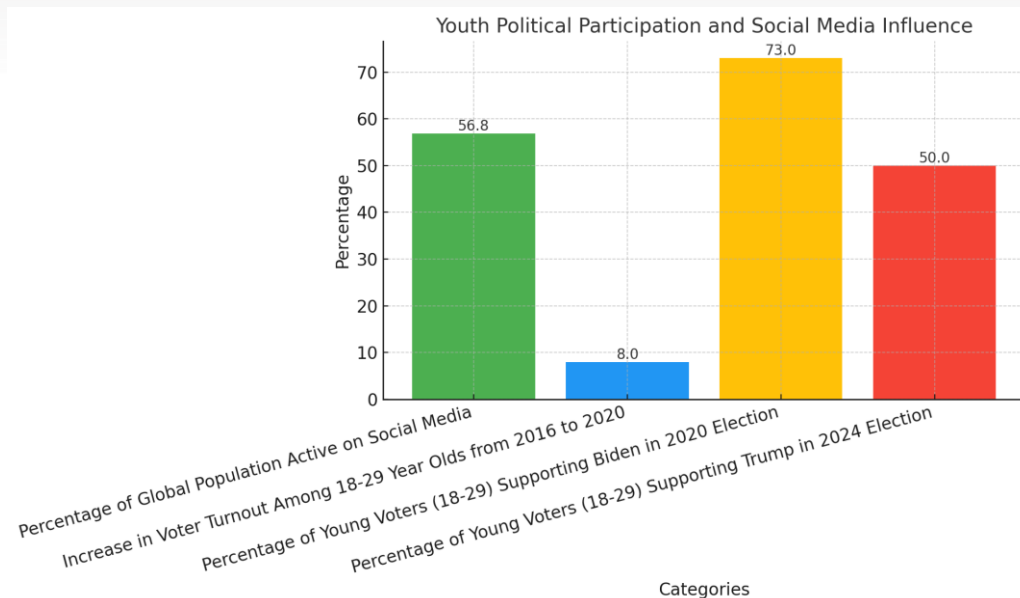


Fig.03: This bar chart illustrates the impact of social media on youth political participation. It highlights the percentage of the global population active on social media, the increase in voter turnout among 18–29-year-olds from 2016 to 2020, and the support for Biden and Trump among young voters in the 2020 and 2024 elections, respectively. The data emphasizes both the positive influence of social media on political engagement and the ongoing challenges faced by young voters.

Participation in digital voting initiatives

Amidst the evolving landscape of democracy, participation in digital voting initiatives represents a significant shift in how young people engage in the electoral process. These initiatives not only streamline the voting experience but also foster a greater sense of ownership among youth, aligning with the broader trends of increased digital engagement in political discourse. By facilitating access to information and promoting digital literacy, efforts such as those outlined in (Hobbs R, 2010) play a crucial role in empowering young voters. However, the reliance on digital platforms also raises questions about the integrity of the voting process, as highlighted in (Baboš et al., 2020). Acknowledging the potential risks associated with digital voting, it is essential to ensure that these initiatives uphold the principles of free and fair elections, thus preserving the democratic ideals that underpin societal governance. As such, the intersection of technology and political participation remains a vital area of exploration for future democratic engagement.

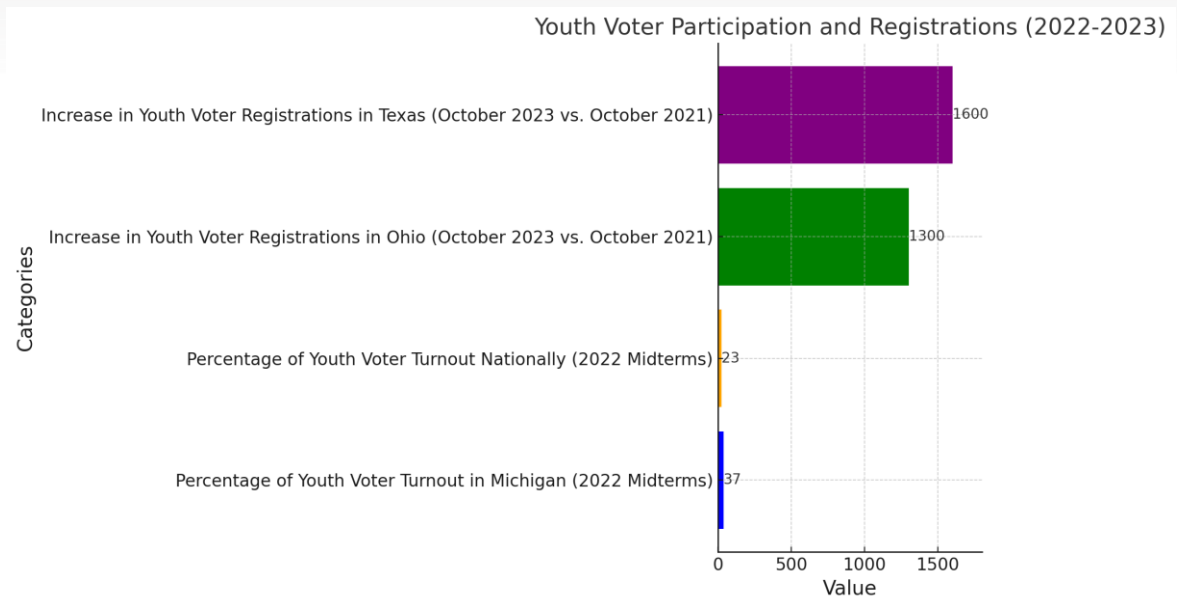


Fig.04: This bar chart illustrates the youth voter participation and registration data, specifically highlighting the percentage of youth voter turnout in Michigan and nationally during the 2022 midterms, as well as increases in youth voter registrations in Ohio and Texas from October 2021 to October 2023. The chart effectively communicates the significant impact these factors have had on youth political engagement.

3. Drivers of Youth Political Engagement

In the dynamic landscape of political engagement, youth participation is increasingly driven by factors that resonate with their lived experiences and digital literacy. The prevalence of social media platforms provides young individuals with unprecedented access to political discourse, allowing them to mobilize quickly around critical issues such as climate change and social justice. According to the findings presented in various studies, including the Global Risks Report, emerging global risks, particularly environmental crises and economic disparities, significantly shape youth activism and political consciousness. Moreover, as technology continues to evolve, youth are becoming more adept at using digital tools to advocate for change, thus fostering a sense of agency and participation in democratic processes (de Ridder et al., 2017). Consequently, understanding these drivers is crucial for enabling effective frameworks that enhance and sustain youth political engagement in an era marked by rapid digital transformation.

Value
Higher education levels are associated with increased political participation among youth.
Active engagement on social media platforms correlates with higher political involvement among young people.

Participation in community organizations and volunteer work enhances political engagement among youth.

Exposure to political discussions and activities within the family influences youth political participation.

Peers' political attitudes and behaviors significantly impact youth political engagement.

Table 02: Drivers of Youth Political Engagement

Influence of social media on political awareness

In the contemporary political landscape, social media has emerged as a pivotal tool for enhancing political awareness among youth. By providing platforms for interaction, expression, and information exchange, social media facilitates greater engagement in political discourse. Notably, this shift is characterized not merely by the accessibility of information but also by the profound ethical implications of online behavior. As outlined in (Aulia et al., 2024), the moral dimensions of participation necessitate that young individuals approach political engagement with integrity and respect, fostering a culture of constructive dialogue. Furthermore, the technical framework of smartphones accentuates this interaction, wherein users leverage them to access diverse communicative experiences, as highlighted in (Soukup et al., 2015). Together, these dynamics illustrate how social media shapes political awareness, compelling young people not only to consume information but to engage responsibly in the democratic process. Ultimately, this blend of connectivity and ethics underscores the critical role of social media in modern political participation.

Role of educational institutions in fostering engagement

Educational institutions play a pivotal role in fostering engagement among youth, particularly in the context of political participation in the digital era. By integrating civic education into their curricula, schools and universities can equip students with the knowledge and critical thinking skills necessary for informed participation in democratic processes. Studies indicate that inadequate civic education often correlates with voter apathy, which undermines electoral legitimacy and governance (Adamu et al., 2025). Furthermore, educational settings provide a unique platform for discussing contemporary political issues, promoting dialogue, and encouraging active citizenship. This dynamism is further amplified by leveraging digital tools that facilitate outreach and engagement, making it easier for young individuals to connect with political movements and initiatives. Consequently, educational institutions not only serve as foundational sites for learning but also as incubators for engaged and informed citizens who can actively contribute to their democracies.

Impact of global issues (e.g., climate change, inequality)

The impact of global issues, particularly climate change and inequality, has profound implications for youth political participation in the digital era. Young people increasingly recognize that these crises not only threaten their futures but also demand collective action through political engagement. As highlighted by the necessity of civic education, the effectiveness of youth participation hinges on an informed electorate, with many young individuals demonstrating awareness of political issues despite significant misinformation challenges. Furthermore, the historical interplay between state, market, and civil society underscores the need for a rebalancing of these forces to effectively address the pressing development challenges posed by climate change and socio-economic disparities (Leach et al., 2016). By leveraging digital platforms for activism and advocacy, youth today are not merely observers but crucial stakeholders in shaping discourse and driving initiatives that seek sustainable solutions, thereby enhancing democratic practices within their communities and beyond.

Accessibility of information and resources online

The rapid evolution of digital media has significantly enhanced the accessibility of information and resources, particularly for youth engaged in political discourse. This newfound access is pivotal in fostering informed citizenry, enabling young individuals to participate actively in political processes. As highlighted in extensive research, the Internet serves as a crucial platform for sharing knowledge and promoting freedom of expression, thus empowering users to advocate for their rights and engage in democratic practices (Scientific and Organization C et al.). However, the impact of this accessibility is multifaceted; while it revitalizes traditional campaigning strategies, it concurrently necessitates innovative approaches from political stakeholders to address the ensuing challenges in communication (Asante et al., 2020). Therefore, understanding the dynamics of online resources is essential not only for enhancing youth participation but also for ensuring that democratic values are upheld in an increasingly digital political landscape. This evolution underscores the critical intersection of technology and youth engagement in shaping democratic futures.

4. Democratic Implications of Youth Participation

The rise of digital platforms has significantly transformed the landscape of youth political participation, yielding profound democratic implications. As evidenced by the findings of The MacArthur Research Network on Youth and Participatory Politics, young individuals increasingly engage in participatory politics through new media, which not only amplifies their voices but also enhances their influence within political spheres (Bowyer B et al., 2012). Furthermore, the



educational integration of digital media can foster civic engagement among youth, equipping them with essential skills for activism and community problem-solving (Levine P, 2008). This dual role of media and education demonstrates a crucial shift in democratic practices, encouraging a generation that is more politically informed and active. Consequently, the prevalence of digital participation not only reflects the evolving nature of democratic involvement but also highlights the necessity for institutions to adapt and support these emerging forms of civic engagement among youth.

Strengthening democratic values and practices

In the context of youth political participation, strengthening democratic values and practices is imperative to ensure a robust and sustainable democratic framework. Young voters today are increasingly influenced by digital platforms, necessitating a reevaluation of civic education and engagement strategies that resonate with their experiences and concerns. Empowering youth through technology can counter voter apathy, particularly in regions where trust in electoral processes is eroded, as highlighted by findings on Uganda's electoral challenges (Adamu et al., 2025). Moreover, as misinformation proliferates on social media, it is crucial for electoral bodies and civil society to foster media literacy among young citizens to enhance their ability to differentiate credible information from disinformation (Achler et al., 2022). By promoting transparency, accountability, and innovative outreach programs, stakeholders can cultivate an empowered youth electorate committed to democratic ideals, thereby enriching the political landscape and reinforcing the integrity of democratic governance.

Challenges posed by misinformation and digital divides

In the landscape of youth political participation, the challenges posed by misinformation and digital divides are particularly pronounced. Misinformation, especially rampant on social media, can distort political discourse, leading to misinformed civic engagement among young voters. As social media continues to influence political messaging, they provide unprecedented opportunities for sharing and discussing ideas; however, this also facilitates the rapid spread of false information, threatening democratic integrity and informed participation (Abozaid et al., 2024). Meanwhile, the digital divide exacerbates these issues, as not all youth have equal access to technology and reliable information. With an estimated 56.8% of the global population active on social media and a significant portion of those participating in electoral processes, the repercussions of misinformation undermine the foundation of democracy, raising questions about the reliability of youth engagement in a politically polarized environment (Achler et al., 2022). Addressing these challenges is essential for fostering informed political participation.

Potential for policy change driven by youth voices

In the contemporary digital landscape, youth voices are emerging as a potent catalyst for policy change, significantly reshaping governance and societal norms. The interconnectedness facilitated by social media platforms allows young individuals to mobilize around issues that resonate with their values and needs, amplifying their impact on political discourse. Community media practices, as highlighted in recent research, demonstrate how youth can effectively engage in media production and influence policy outcomes through collaborative efforts and grassroots movements (Johnson F et al., 2007). Moreover, initiatives that incorporate social documentaries serve as powerful tools to raise awareness about pressing social justice issues, further galvanizing youth advocacy (Aufderheide P, 2003). This convergence of digital engagement and creative expression not only empowers young people to voice their opinions but also compels policymakers to consider their perspectives, thereby facilitating a more inclusive democratic process. As such, the potential for transformative policy change driven by youth voices is immense, heralding a new era of civic engagement.

Long-term effects on political landscapes and voter demographics

The intersection of digital technology and youth political participation is reshaping the political environment and altering voter demographics in profound ways. As younger generations increasingly engage through online platforms, their modes of civic engagement are diverging from traditional electoral participation, often resulting in dissatisfaction with established political processes. This shift raises critical questions about the efficacy of conventional political systems and highlights the need for innovative approaches to mobilize and represent this demographic. By utilizing social media and other digital tools, activists foster communal ties and drive political discourse, leading to new forms of activism that emphasize collective action over mere voting. This evolving dynamic suggests that long-term implications for voter demographics may include a more diverse electorate, driven by issues of social justice and environmental sustainability, thus reshaping the political landscape as noted in contemporary analyses of political engagement and citizenship (N/A, 2022). As these trends develop, understanding their potential effects becomes increasingly necessary for future democratic practices (Singh et al., 2024).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the dynamics of youth political participation in the digital era underscore a profound shift in how younger generations engage with democratic processes. The role of social media cannot be overstated; it fosters agency and empowers youth to participate actively in political discourse, as evidenced by its



significant impact during events like the 2019 General Elections in Nigeria (Obisesan et al., 2022). Moreover, the increasing ubiquity of mobile technology has transformed communication, enabling vast networks of connectivity that transcend traditional barriers. This interconnectedness equips youth with the tools to mobilize, share information, and advocate for change in ways that were previously unimaginable (Firestone C et al., 2007). As digital platforms continue to evolve, they will further shape the landscape of political engagement, posing both opportunities and challenges for democracy. Thus, fostering digital literacy and critical engagement among youth will be essential to harness the full potential of these emerging platforms.

The investigation into youth political participation in the digital era reveals several critical trends and dynamics impacting their engagement in democratic processes. A primary finding underscores the shift in communication strategies from traditional methods to digitally mediated platforms, where smartphones serve as significant conduits for political interaction. Youth utilize these devices not merely for information but as tools for engagement, thereby reshaping their communicative practices around political discourse (Soukup et al., 2015). Furthermore, despite the apparent integration of Web 2.0 tools into political campaigning, the depth of interactivity remains limited. Many political entities adopt superficial online strategies, indicating that while the Internet facilitates access, it does not inherently transform organizational communication practices (Koc-Michalska et al., 2012). This duality highlights a crucial dynamic: while digital platforms provide unmatched opportunities for youth involvement, the effectiveness and impact of these tools on actual political engagement warrant further examination.

As we look to the future of youth political participation, it becomes increasingly important to recognize the evolving landscape shaped by digital media and social movements. Young people today are not just passive consumers of information; they are active participants, leveraging platforms to advocate for social justice and engage in political discourse. Documentaries that address crucial issues of democracy have emerged as tools for both education and mobilization, effectively illustrating the power of narrative in fostering civic engagement and awareness (Aufderheide P, 2003). However, despite the potential for informed participation, challenges remain, notably in areas of misinformation and socio-economic disparities. Reports indicate that while a significant portion of young Americans are engaged, a considerable number remain uninformed or disengaged from the political process (N/A, 2013). Thus, ensuring that future generations are equipped with critical civic knowledge and effective channels for participation is essential for sustaining a vibrant democracy.

In the context of youth political participation, a compelling call to action for increased engagement is essential to harness the transformative power of digital



platforms. The pervasive nature of social media and online communication has created unprecedented opportunities for young individuals to express their political opinions and mobilize for change. However, this potential will not be realized without proactive measures to encourage participation. Initiatives that promote digital literacy and civic education can empower youth to navigate online political discourse effectively. Moreover, fostering inclusive online spaces allows diverse perspectives to be heard, significantly enriching democratic dialogue. Additionally, collaborative efforts among educational institutions, non-profits, and governmental agencies are vital to create robust frameworks that support young activists. As noted in the CEDAR networks findings, reinforcing these connections can yield substantial benefits for youth-oriented political movements and, by extension, strengthen democratic processes (de Ridder et al., 2017).

In reflecting on the intricate relationship between technology and democracy, it becomes evident that technology serves as both a catalyst and a challenge to youth political participation. The digital era has transformed how young individuals engage with political discourse, providing platforms for advocacy and facilitating broader access to information. However, as highlighted, the effectiveness of these digital tools relies heavily on comprehensive civic education and informed participation, which are not uniformly accessible. For instance, the research emphasizes that civic education must be a shared responsibility among various stakeholders to cultivate informed citizens. Furthermore, in contexts where voter apathy prevails due to distrust in electoral processes, technology can play a crucial role in enhancing civic engagement by promoting transparency and accountability (Adamu et al., 2025). Ultimately, leveraging technology in democracy necessitates ongoing efforts to empower young voters through education and more inclusive practices, ensuring their voices resonate in the political landscape.

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