

Youthquake in Global Politics: Are Young Voters Reshaping the World?

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Source: Upthrust²

Introduction

The 21st century has ushered in profound transformations in both global and domestic politics. At the forefront of these changes stands the younger generation—bold, impassioned, and increasingly unwilling to tolerate injustice and inequality, regardless of the source. The fiery spirit of youth, however, is often dismissed by the so-called elites who occupy positions of power and steer political agendas to serve their own interests. In societies plagued by deep-rooted corruption and systemic failures, it is often the youth who ignite the spark of resistance, leading movements that challenge and eventually dismantle oppressive structures. In recent years, a surge in youth-led activism across the globe has brought renewed attention to a once-

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² Community Desk, "From Apathy to Activism: Charting the Bangladeshi Youth's Political Awakening through the Student Protests." UpThrust, July 29, 2024. <https://upthrust.co/2024/07/bangladesh-youth-politics-apathy-activism-student-protests>.

forgotten term—"Youthquake." Originally coined in the 1960s, this word has resurfaced to describe the seismic impact of young people rising up to demand change, disrupt the status quo, and reshape the future.

The Rise of Youth Political Participation

Contrary to the long-standing narrative of youth apathy, recent years have witnessed a significant uptick in political engagement among young people³. In the United States, for instance, the 2020 presidential election saw a remarkable 11-point increase in youth voter turnout compared to 2016, with 50% of individuals aged 18-29 casting their ballots⁴. This surge reflects a broader global trend where young voters are increasingly influencing electoral outcomes and policy directions.

Similarly, the 2017 UK general election was characterized by a notable "youthquake," where increased youth turnout significantly impacted the political landscape. Research indicates that this shift was driven by a growing alignment of young voters with progressive values and a desire for systemic change.

This increased participation is not confined to Western democracies. In Romania, for instance, young voters have become a significant force, utilizing platforms like TikTok to engage with political content and mobilize support⁵. These examples underscore a global trend: young people are not only more engaged but are also leveraging new tools and platforms to make their voices heard.

Motivations Driving Youth Political Engagement

The motivations behind this youth-driven political engagement are multifaceted. Economic concerns, particularly around housing affordability, job security, and student debt, are

³ Marzęcki, Radosław. "Was It a 'Youthquake'? The Increase in Electoral and Political Participation of Polish Youth during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Elections in Times of a Pandemic – Dilemmas and Challenges*, February 20, 2024, 369–92. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004690622_025.

⁴ "Half of Youth Voted in 2020, an 11-Point Increase from 2016." Circle at Tufts, April 29, 2021. <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/half-youth-voted-2020-11-point-increase-2016>

⁵ Romanian voters again turn to TikTok for guidance in rerun of annulled election | Reuters. Accessed May 6, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/romanian-voters-again-turn-tiktok-guidance-rerun-annulled-election-2025-05-01/>

paramount. In Australia, for example, young voters expressed significant concern over the cost of living and housing affordability, influencing their electoral choices.⁶



Source: The Guardian⁷

Climate change is another critical issue galvanizing young voters. In the United States, former Washington Governor Jay Inslee emphasized that addressing climate change is essential for engaging young voters, noting that a lack of action could lead to disillusionment and decreased support for traditional parties⁸.

Moreover, social justice issues, including racial equality, gender rights, and indigenous reconciliation, resonate deeply with younger demographics. These concerns often transcend traditional party lines, leading young voters to support candidates and parties that prioritize these issues, regardless of their political affiliation.

⁶ "Labor Must Heed the Warnings Wrapped up in Its Election Win. Young Voters Are Crying out for Action | Intifarah Chowdhury." The Guardian, May 5, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/05/labor-warning-young-voters-want-action-australian-federal-election>.

⁷ "'youthquake' Named 2017 Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries." The Guardian, December 15, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/dec/15/youthquake-named-2017-word-of-the-year-by-oxford-dictionaries>.

⁸ Opinion | how Democrats can win over Young Trump voters - The Washington Post. Accessed May 6, 2025. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2025/05/01/democrats-youth-climate-jay-inslee/>.

Digital Activism and Global Movements

The digital age has revolutionized the way young people engage with politics. Social media platforms have become powerful tools for organizing, mobilizing, and amplifying youth-led movements. The #FridaysForFuture campaign, initiated by Greta Thunberg, exemplifies how digital activism can galvanize global action on pressing issues like climate change. Thunberg's school strikes inspired millions of young people worldwide to demand environmental accountability from their governments⁹.

In Nigeria, the #EndSARS movement, driven predominantly by young activists, utilized online platforms to protest against police brutality and systemic injustice. These digital campaigns not only raise awareness but also exert pressure on policymakers to address the concerns of the younger generation¹⁰.

Gender Dynamics in Youth Political Engagement

Gender plays a significant role in shaping political preferences among young voters. Recent analyses indicate a growing political divide between young men and women, with young women tending to support progressive policies and candidates, while young men show a propensity towards conservative ideologies¹¹.

⁹ Tait, Amelia. "Greta Thunberg: How One Teenager Became the Voice of the Planet." *Wired*, June 6, 2019. <https://www.wired.com/story/greta-thunberg-climate-crisis/>

¹⁰ Christ, Kiernan. "#endsars: An Evaluation of Successes and Failures One Year Later." *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, December 13, 2021. <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2021/12/13/endsars-a-evaluation-of-successes-and-failures-one-year-later/>.

¹¹ Mindel, Maia. "Why Are Men so Much More Right-Wing than Women Now?" *Vox*, May 6, 2025. <https://www.vox.com/politics/410419/political-divide-men-women-economics-policy>.



Source: Vox¹²

This divergence is influenced by various factors, including economic opportunities, educational attainment, and cultural narratives. For instance, the decline of traditionally male-dominated industries and the rise of service-oriented sectors have impacted young men's economic prospects, potentially influencing their political leanings.

Understanding these gender dynamics is crucial for political parties and policymakers aiming to engage effectively with the youth electorate. Tailored strategies that address the distinct concerns and aspirations of young men and women are essential for fostering inclusive political participation.

The Rise of Non-Traditional Political Actors

Young voters are increasingly supporting non-traditional political actors who challenge the status quo. In France, Jordan Bardella, a 28-year-old politician, has emerged as a prominent figure in the far-right National Rally party, appealing to young voters disillusioned with traditional parties¹³.

¹² <https://platform.vox.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2025/02/gettyimages-2163668723.jpg?quality=90&strip=all&crop=0.004549590536854%2C0%2C99.990900818926%2C100&w=1080>

¹³ Walt/Paris, Vivienne. "Jordan Bardella Is the New Face of Europe's Far Right." Time, May 15, 2024. <https://time.com/6977921/jordan-bardella-interview-france-europe/>

This trend reflects a broader global pattern where young voters are drawn to candidates who offer alternative visions and address issues that resonate with their experiences. The appeal of such figures underscores the importance of authenticity, relatability, and responsiveness in political leadership.

However, the rise of non-traditional actors also raises concerns about the potential for populism and the erosion of democratic norms. It highlights the need for established parties to adapt and reconnect with younger constituents by addressing their concerns and involving them in the political process.

Youth in Formal Political Structures

Beyond activism, young people are increasingly seeking representation within formal political institutions. In Germany, the establishment of the Klimaliste party by youth climate activists underscores this trend. Dissatisfied with the environmental policies of existing parties, these young leaders formed their own political entity to advocate for more aggressive climate action¹⁴.

Similarly, initiatives like the Global Citizen Festival have highlighted the pivotal role of Generation Z in addressing global challenges. With over 70% of its members belonging to Gen Z, the organization emphasizes the necessity of harnessing youth activism to combat issues like poverty and climate change.¹⁵

Case Study

Australia: Youth and the Cost-of-Living Crisis

In the 2025 federal election, young Australians influenced the outcome by prioritizing housing, climate change, and social justice. The shift toward Greens and independents signaled discontent with major parties.⁵

¹⁴ Unger-Verna, Marino. "In Germany, Youth Climate Activists Formed Their Own Political Party." Teen Vogue, April 20, 2021. <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/klimaliste-germany-youth-climate-activists>.

¹⁵ Gamboa, Glenn. "Global Citizen CEO Taps into Generation Z's Sense of Urgency." AP News, September 29, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/global-citizen-festival-hugh-evans-gen-z-52dde2b64502f9375b06f19c871aa726>.

Bangladesh: Youth-Led Protests and Democratic Aspirations

In Bangladesh, the youth have played a central role in recent anti-government movements, particularly in response to concerns over democratic backsliding, political repression, and economic mismanagement. Student groups and young activists have mobilized large-scale protests, demanding electoral reforms, freedom of expression, and accountability. The 2024-2025 wave of demonstrations highlighted the frustration among the youth regarding alleged irregularities in the national election and limitations on political opposition. Despite crackdowns, youth-led civil society groups continue to advocate for democratic change, showcasing the vibrancy and resilience of young political actors in South Asia.



Source: The Daily Star¹⁶

Challenges and Barriers

Despite the increased engagement, young voters face several challenges that hinder their full participation in the political process. Disillusionment with traditional political institutions, perceived lack of representation, and systemic barriers such as voter suppression and economic inequality can dampen enthusiasm and participation. A UN report highlights the threats young activists encounter, including online smear campaigns, arrests, and physical attacks. The report

¹⁶ Nowrojee, Binaifer. "A New Era of Youth-Driven Democratic Uprisings." The Daily Star, September 4, 2024. <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/news/new-era-youth-driven-democratic-uprisings-3694301>

emphasizes the need for policies that protect and empower youth activists, ensuring their voices are heard without fear of retribution¹⁷.

To address these challenges, it is imperative to implement policies and initiatives that foster youth engagement. This includes civic education programs, youth representation in political bodies, and platforms for meaningful participation in decision-making processes. Moreover, leveraging technology to facilitate engagement while ensuring digital security and combating misinformation is crucial.

Moreover, structural barriers such as age restrictions for candidacy and limited access to political networks hinder youth participation in formal politics. Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts to create inclusive political environments that value and integrate the perspectives of young people. The youthquake in global politics presents both challenges and opportunities. By recognizing and harnessing the potential of young voters, societies can foster more inclusive, responsive, and dynamic democratic systems.

The Future of Youth Engagement

The resurgence of the term "Youthquake" signifies more than just a momentary surge in youth activism; it represents a fundamental shift in the political landscape. As young people continue to mobilize, advocate, and lead, their impact on global politics becomes increasingly undeniable. To sustain this momentum, it is imperative to institutionalize youth participation, ensuring that their contributions are not only acknowledged but also integrated into the decision-making processes at all levels.

In conclusion, the active engagement of young voters and activists is reshaping the world, challenging traditional power structures, and paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable future. The "Youthquake" is not merely a tremor; it is a transformative force redefining the contours of global politics.

¹⁷ "Youth Activists Need Protection against Smear Campaigns and Arrests, Says UN Expert." The Guardian, March 11, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/mar/11/youth-children-activists-protection-smear-campaigns-arrests-un-report>.

Conclusion

The emergence of young voters as a formidable force in global politics signifies a transformative era in democratic participation. Their increased engagement, driven by pressing economic, environmental, and social concerns, is reshaping political landscapes worldwide. While challenges persist, the proactive involvement of youth offers a promising avenue for revitalizing democratic institutions and addressing contemporary issues with fresh perspectives. It is incumbent upon political leaders, institutions, and societies at large to embrace this youthquake, ensuring that the voices of young people are not only heard but also heeded in shaping the future.