



Youth Engagement and the Future of Democracy in India

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Abstract

Youth engagement is essential for shaping the democratic future of any nation. In India, with its vast and diverse young population, active involvement in democratic processes can foster progressive governance, drive policy reforms, and promote socio-political stability. However, various challenges, such as political disillusionment, unemployment, and insufficient civic education, impede full youth engagement. Using the mixed-methods approach to analyse the youth engagement within the democratic process, this research examines the youth's role in India's democracy. It also analyses survey data to evaluate their participation, awareness, and influence in democratic processes. This research offers a conceptual framework for understanding youth engagement in the democratisation of India. The findings underscore the necessity for institutional reforms and policy initiatives to ensure meaningful youth involvement in India's democratic landscape. It is also a showcase for developing countries, especially for those democratic countries which has more young population to utilise their potential effectively.

Keywords: Youth engagement, Democracy, Political participation, India, Governance

Introduction

India, the world's largest democracy, boasts a youthful population, with nearly 65% of its citizens under the age of 35 (Census of India, 2011). For the nation's political, economic, and social advancement, it is vital to have active youth participation in democratic processes. Democracy thrives when individuals take part in both

electoral and non-electoral activities, influence policy decisions, and hold their leaders accountable. However, youth engagement in India is inconsistent, differing across urban and rural regions, socio-economic classes, and educational levels (Verma, 2019). While urban, educated youth tend to exhibit higher political awareness and engage in digital activism, their rural

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counterparts often encounter obstacles such as limited awareness, political disillusionment, and socio-economic challenges. To boost youth participation in democracy, it is important to strengthen civic education, improve access to political platforms, and tackle socio-economic inequalities. Promoting youth engagement is crucial for cultivating an informed and active citizenry that contributes to a more representative and accountable governance system.

Research Methodology

The research methodology outlined in this article utilises a mixed-methods approach to evaluate how young people engage with democratic processes in India. It integrates both qualitative and quantitative methods, which include a thorough review of existing literature, policy analysis, and the collection of empirical data. The study focuses on youth participation by conducting surveys that assess voting behaviour, political awareness, and activism. Furthermore, it analyses case studies of youth movements and their digital engagement to capture current trends. The research also considers structural factors such as education, socio-economic status, and the influence of digital media. This comprehensive strategy provides a detailed understanding of youth political engagement and offers practical insights for improving democratic participation in India.

Conceptual Framework

The study employs a conceptual framework that divides youth engagement in democratic processes into three key dimensions: electoral participation, non-electoral engagement, and institutional and structural influences. Electoral participation encompasses traditional political activities such as voting, campaigning, and running for office. This aspect emphasises how young individuals play a role in formal political processes, potentially affecting election results and policy development. Non-electoral engagement includes actions outside the formal electoral framework, like activism, protests, online advocacy, civic volunteering, and community service. These activities demonstrate how youth contribute to social change and engage in political discussions, often through informal means and grassroots initiatives. The third dimension, institutional and structural influences, looks at the wider contextual elements that shape youth participation, such as the impact of education, digital media, government policies, and socio-economic factors. These elements influence the opportunities and motivations for young people to engage in democratic processes, affecting their awareness and involvement.

By examining these three dimensions, the study offers a thorough understanding of the diverse ways youth engage in democratic life in India. This framework facilitates an exploration of the complex nature of youth involvement, showcasing both traditional and innovative forms of participation and the structural factors that influence young people's political actions. Overall, it provides a detailed approach to assessing the depth and character of youth participation, offering valuable insights into the democratic development in India.

Youth Electoral Participation

Youth electoral participation is shaped by a variety of factors, such as digital exposure and socio-economic status. Young people in urban areas often interact with political content via social media, news platforms, and academic discussions, which helps to enhance their political awareness (Boulianne, 2015). Nevertheless, despite this increased exposure, voter turnout among the youth remains unpredictable. Socio-economic inequalities play a significant role in participation, as those from lower-income backgrounds may encounter obstacles like limited transportation options or strict voter registration laws (Rosenstone & Hansen, 2003). Furthermore, regional variations influence engagement levels, with urban regions typically showing higher participation rates due to better access to political resources and community involvement initiatives (Mason, 2020).

Disengagement from Voting: Many young individuals opt not to vote due to a mix of political dissatisfaction and practical challenges. A key factor is their disillusionment with political candidates and the overall governance. Numerous young people view politicians as disconnected from their everyday lives, which leads to a significant lack of trust in the political system (Boulianne, 2015). This scepticism is especially pronounced among youth who feel that traditional political parties overlook critical issues like climate change, social justice, and unemployment (Mason, 2020). For instance, during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, a considerable number of young voters voiced their frustration with both major-party candidates, resulting in a notable drop in voter turnout within this age group (CIRCLE, 2017).

In addition to political dissatisfaction, practical barriers also play a role in preventing young people from participating in elections. Many young individuals frequently relocate for education or job opportunities, making it challenging to maintain consistent voter registration (Rosenstone & Hansen, 2003). Voting regulations that mandate individuals to cast their votes

in their registered locations can pose significant hurdles, particularly for college students who may live in a different state or city than their official residence. For example, in the United States, stringent voter ID laws in certain states disproportionately impact young voters who might not have in-state identification (Niemi & Hanmer, 2010).

Moreover, limited access to polling places in rural regions can deter participation. Long travel distances and a lack of public transportation options further complicate the voting process for young individuals, making in-person voting less practical (Hill, 2016). In the 2020 U.S. election, measures like mail-in ballots and early voting helped mitigate some of these challenges, but there are still ongoing issues in ensuring that young people have accessible voting options (Kiesa et al., 2020).

Urban and Rural Differences in Political Engagement: The differences in electoral participation between urban and rural youth are largely shaped by their geographical locations. Generally, urban youth show higher levels of political engagement, thanks to better access to information and resources that promote participation. Urban areas offer extensive exposure to political discussions through mass media, digital platforms, and educational institutions. These environments provide young people with numerous opportunities to interact with political content, enhancing their understanding of civic duties (Tenn, 2015). Moreover, urban settings have superior infrastructure for political involvement, including reliable public transportation, civic organisations, and local political events, making it easier and more convenient for them to participate in elections.

In contrast, rural youth often encounter obstacles that hinder their electoral participation. Political engagement in rural regions is frequently influenced by traditional voting patterns shaped by family and community leaders. Such influences can limit young people's ability to make independent voting choices, as political affiliations are often passed down rather than developed on their own. This situation may lead to lower levels of critical political thinking and engagement among rural youth, who might feel pressured to align with family or community expectations instead of assessing candidates and policies independently (Jenkins, 2013).

Additionally, rural youth may have restricted access to political information and fewer chances for direct civic involvement. Unlike their urban peers, they might not regularly encounter political debates, campaign events, or organisations that promote active participation. The lack of these resources can result in lower political efficacy and a reduced sense of political influence,

which may discourage rural youth from taking part in the electoral process.

Geographical differences play a crucial role in shaping youth electoral participation. In urban areas, there tends to be a higher level of political awareness and engagement, whereas rural regions often uphold traditional voting habits, which can restrict independent decision-making and political involvement.

Non-Electoral Political Activities

A significant number of young people participate in non-electoral political activities, such as activism, protests, social media advocacy, and community service. These avenues allow youth to shape political conversations and tackle social issues beyond the conventional act of voting (Dalton, 2008). Social media platforms serve as venues for young individuals to voice their opinions, rally support, and push for change (Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014). Moreover, community service and grassroots activism empower young people to engage in policy discussions and drive change at both local and national levels (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). This type of participation underscores the changing landscape of political engagement among younger generations.

Activism and Protests: One of the most prominent ways young people engage in politics outside of voting is through activism, especially via protests. Movements led by youth that tackle issues like climate change, economic inequality, gender equality, and government corruption have gained international attention. A prime example is Fridays for Future, a global climate initiative started by Swedish activist Greta Thunberg. This movement has motivated millions of young individuals around the world to call for stronger environmental policies and urgent action against climate change (Tufekci, 2017). Likewise, protests focused on systemic racism, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, have seen a significant involvement from young people who are determined to confront discriminatory policies and practices (Tufekci, 2017).

However, despite the excitement surrounding protests, some young people have concerns about their safety and effectiveness. In certain areas, government reactions to protests can be severe, leading to risks of violence, arrests, or intimidation. For example, during pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, young activists encountered harsh crackdowns, including mass arrests and legal consequences, which discouraged wider participation (Meyer, 2007). Additionally, some youth wonder if protests lead to real political change or if they simply act as symbolic gestures of dissent. While large demonstrations can increase awareness and put pressure on policymakers, the conversion of protest demands into

actual legislative changes remains uncertain. The Arab Spring protests, for instance, resulted in political changes in some nations but also led to prolonged instability in others, which has fueled scepticism about their long-term effects (Meyer, 2007).

Youth activism through protests continues to be a significant way for individuals to engage in politics. Nonetheless, worries about safety and the impact of these demonstrations reveal the intricacies of this method. While certain movements manage to influence policy, others struggle to maintain their energy and create enduring change.

Social Media Advocacy: Social media has become a vital instrument for political advocacy and mobilising youth. Platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp allow young individuals to express their views, organise movements, and share information quickly (Kohut, 2017). Digital activism, especially through hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, has shown how social media can shape public conversations and impact political decisions. For instance, the #BlackLivesMatter movement began as a hashtag and grew into a worldwide call for racial justice and police reform (Cohen, 2020). Likewise, the #MeToo campaign has highlighted issues of sexual harassment and assault, empowering survivors to share their stories and urging institutions to implement changes (Gill & Orgad, 2018).

However, social media also poses challenges for political engagement. A significant issue is the spread of misinformation, as false narratives can quickly circulate online, swaying public opinion and affecting election results. Research indicates that misinformation spreads more rapidly on social media than accurate news, leading to confusion and eroding trust in political institutions (Friggeri, 2014). Furthermore, social media algorithms can create echo chambers, where users mainly encounter content that reinforces their existing beliefs (Sunstein, 2017). This situation hampers critical thinking and increases political polarisation, making individuals less inclined to consider opposing perspectives.

Despite these challenges, social media remains a potent tool for youth involvement in political discussions. It offers an accessible and inclusive environment for young people to engage in activism, raise awareness about social issues, and challenge established power dynamics. When used wisely, digital platforms can boost political engagement and promote informed civic participation among the youth.

Community Service and Voluntary Work: Community service plays a vital role in non-electoral

political engagement for young people. Many youths actively engage in voluntary work, social initiatives, and local governance, making significant contributions through non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and grassroots movements. These activities empower young individuals to impact their communities and tackle urgent social issues like poverty, education, and healthcare (Putnam, 2000). For example, organisations such as Habitat for Humanity and Amnesty International provide platforms for young people to participate in humanitarian efforts, advocate for policy changes, and develop civic leadership. Through these initiatives, youth cultivate leadership skills and a sense of civic duty that can lead to formal political involvement later.

Nonetheless, economic challenges can hinder young people's ability to engage in community service. Financial instability and unemployment often compel individuals to prioritise paid work over volunteer opportunities (Furlong, 2013). For instance, low-income youth may find it difficult to dedicate time to unpaid service, especially if they must support themselves or their families. Despite these obstacles, many young people view community service as a valuable way to drive social change. Some programs even provide stipends, scholarships, or professional development opportunities to enhance accessibility.

While community service may not directly impact electoral politics, it promotes civic engagement and social responsibility. NGOs are essential in connecting youth with political participation by offering structured paths for activism and advocacy. By addressing societal challenges at the grassroots level, young individuals can effect real change outside the formal political arena, illustrating that civic engagement goes beyond just voting.

Institutional and Structural Influences on Youth Political Engagement

Factors related to institutions and structures play a significant role in shaping youth political engagement. Educational systems equip young individuals with the necessary knowledge and skills to participate in political discussions, while digital media acts as a platform for mobilising and sharing information about political issues (Boulianne, 2015). Additionally, socio-economic factors, including income inequality and access to resources, can either promote or restrict political participation (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). Collectively, these elements influence the political behaviours and attitudes of young people, affecting both the level and nature of their involvement in democratic activities.

Education and Political Awareness: Educational institutions are crucial in fostering political awareness among young individuals. Studies indicate that a higher level of education often correlates with greater political knowledge and engagement (Galston, 2001). By introducing students to a variety of viewpoints and encouraging critical thinking, schools can significantly influence political beliefs and participation. However, many students express dissatisfaction with the limited emphasis on civic education within school programs. In numerous countries, civic education is either minimal or completely lacking, leaving young people ill-prepared to grasp their political rights and the workings of government (Torney-Purta, 2002). Without a strong foundation in civic education, youth may find it challenging to engage meaningfully in the political arena. For instance, without understanding the importance of voting, many young individuals might neglect their civic responsibilities or fail to see how their participation in elections can make a difference. Furthermore, a lack of knowledge about political processes can impede their ability to advocate for policy changes or engage in social movements. Consequently, the absence of thorough civic education can lead to political apathy or disengagement among young people, which poses a significant challenge to the vitality of democratic societies. By ensuring that schools emphasise civic education, we can help bridge this gap and empower the next generation to contribute actively and knowledgeably to society.

Role of Digital Media: Digital media has greatly changed how young people engage in politics, giving them unique access to information and the chance to take part in online political conversations. The internet enables youth to keep up with current events, follow political figures, and join debates on social media, blogs, and forums. For instance, movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo gained significant traction through digital channels, rallying young individuals around issues of social justice and political activism (Tufekci, 2017). However, the swift spread of digital media also brings notable challenges, such as the rise of misinformation and fake news, which can skew political views. Research indicates that misinformation can harm democratic processes by undermining trust in political institutions and leaders (Lazer et al., 2018). Additionally, algorithms employed by social media platforms often favour sensational or divisive content, creating an atmosphere of online polarisation (Bakshy et al., 2015). This can reinforce pre-existing political beliefs, leading to ideological echo chambers where youth are only exposed to information that matches their views, making them less receptive to differing opinions. Despite these hurdles, digital media continues to be a vital tool for political engagement, allowing young

people to express their views, organise movements, and impact policy discussions worldwide. As digital media progresses, it will be crucial to find strategies to tackle misinformation while encouraging inclusive dialogue to ensure it remains a beneficial force for youth involvement in politics.

Economic and Social Factors: Economic insecurity and social inequality significantly hinder youth political engagement. When faced with financial instability, such as unemployment, young people often prioritise immediate job security over getting involved in politics (Cohen & Dawson, 2017). This survival mindset can lead them to view the political system as disconnected from their realities, particularly when they believe that economic policies do not address the challenges their generation faces. For instance, research by Boulianne (2015) indicates that young individuals, especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, are less likely to engage in political activities like voting or protesting due to a lack of resources. This situation is worsened by limited access to education and digital technologies, which restricts their ability to stay informed about political matters and connect with like-minded individuals. As a result, many young people feel excluded from political discussions, fostering a sense of disillusionment with the system. These factors ultimately lead to lower political participation rates among youth, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. It is essential to address these barriers to promote greater political engagement and ensure that young people are included in the democratic process (Cohen & Dawson, 2017; Boulianne, 2015).

Discussion and Analysis

In recent years, the way young people engage in political discussions has changed significantly due to the emergence of digital spaces, especially social media platforms. Research indicates that although young individuals are politically conscious and active online, their involvement in governance is still quite limited. This gap between online activism and actual political participation poses challenges for democratic representation and accountability. It is essential to understand the factors at play, such as digital advocacy, civic education, and economic conditions, to tackle these obstacles and encourage more extensive youth involvement in politics.

Digital Activism: A Double-Edged Sword

The rise of social media has opened political discourse to a wider audience, giving young people the chance to express their views, engage in discussions, and tackle political issues like never before. With tools like hashtags, online petitions, and digital campaigns, youth

have found new ways to advocate for change, allowing them to shape policy debates and influence public opinion. However, there is still a notable divide between online activism and actual political participation (Gupta, 2021). While young individuals may share their political opinions, circulate articles, and sign petitions online, they often fall short when it comes to traditional political activities such as voting, campaigning, or engaging in policymaking.

This divide presents challenges for democratic accountability. Digital platforms frequently serve as echo chambers, where like-minded individuals reinforce each other's beliefs. In these environments, people mainly encounter information that supports their existing views, which can lead to increased political polarisation and a deepening of partisan divides (Gupta, 2021). Additionally, the prevalence of misinformation and fake news in online spaces complicates matters, making it harder for young people to make well-informed political choices.

Although digital advocacy has impacted policy discussions, its ability to drive real political change is still in question. The convenience of organising online does not always lead to meaningful participation in the political arena. Therefore, while the internet has created opportunities for youth engagement in politics, its effectiveness in achieving substantial political results remains limited (Gupta, 2021).

The Role of Civic Education in Shaping Political Engagement

A key factor that affects youth political participation is the quality of civic education. Civic education is essential for shaping political attitudes and promoting active citizenship. Unfortunately, in many countries, civic education is often lacking, resulting in a generation of young people who are politically disengaged or misinformed. The lack of strong civic education programs in schools leads to a poor understanding of political processes, governance structures, and the importance of participating in democratic activities (Singh, 2020).

Countries such as Finland and Canada, which have established comprehensive civic education programs, see higher levels of youth involvement in politics. These nations emphasise teaching young people about how democracy functions, the importance of voting, and the role of citizens in influencing policy. This type of education encourages informed participation and critical thinking, both of which are crucial for developing a generation of engaged voters (Singh, 2020). In contrast, in countries like India, where civic education is

fragmented and insufficient, young people often feel less empowered to participate in politics. Therefore, the need to improve civic education in India is critical. Reforming the education system to include thorough civic education programs would promote more informed participation and provide young voters with the necessary skills for active political engagement.

Economic Disillusionment and Its Impact on Political Participation

A major obstacle to youth political engagement is economic disenchantment, especially among those facing unemployment and underemployment. Many young individuals feel alienated from the political process, viewing it as ineffective in meeting their economic needs. The scarcity of job opportunities and the increasing cost of living foster a sense of disillusionment, leading to political apathy. For these young people, engaging in voting or political activities may seem pointless when their primary focus is on economic survival rather than political involvement.

Economic conditions also play a crucial role in youth participation in governance and policymaking. When young people encounter significant economic hardships, they may perceive political systems as unresponsive to their needs. This feeling of political exclusion can deter active participation, resulting in lower voter turnout and diminished engagement in political discussions (Kumar, 2022). To counter this trend, it is vital to create opportunities for young people to have meaningful representation in decision-making processes. Initiatives like the Youth Parliament have shown potential in involving young individuals in political activities, but their reach is still limited, and their overall impact has yet to be fully realised (Kumar, 2022).

Addressing the Disconnect Between Digital and Real-World Political Engagement

The gap between online activism and real-world political involvement presents a significant challenge that must be tackled to enhance democratic accountability. While digital platforms provide young people with a venue to share their political opinions, this does not always lead to meaningful participation in governance. To close this divide, it is crucial to foster more inclusive environments for youth engagement in political decision-making processes.

One effective approach is to integrate youth representation into policymaking. This could involve creating youth councils or advisory boards that empower young individuals to express their concerns and take part in shaping policies that impact their lives.

By including youth in the decision-making process, governments can ensure that policies align with the interests and needs of the younger generation, ultimately fostering greater political engagement and accountability.

Additionally, initiatives that blend online and offline engagement can help connect digital activism with real-world political participation. Online campaigns can act as a catalyst for mobilising youth, while offline efforts, such as voter registration drives, public forums, and community organising, can motivate young people to move from online activism to tangible involvement in their communities.

Policy Recommendations for Youth Civic Engagement

Engaging youth in the democratic process is essential for building sustainable and inclusive political systems. As the leaders of tomorrow, the younger generations' active involvement is vital for tackling current issues and driving social change. The following policy recommendations are designed to enhance youth civic engagement through a comprehensive approach that encompasses education, digital literacy, political inclusion, employment, and institutional representation.

Civic Education Reform: A key foundation for developing informed and engaged citizens is the reform of civic education in schools and colleges. By integrating structured political and civic education into the curriculum, young people will acquire a better understanding of political systems, their rights and responsibilities, and how to engage in democratic processes (Niemi & Junn, 1998). An effective civic education framework should address topics such as political theory, electoral processes, and the significance of voting and community involvement. Moreover, experiential learning techniques, like simulations of parliamentary sessions or mock elections, can actively engage students and strengthen their connection to political institutions (Delli Carpini, 2000). This type of education can empower youth to become more critical and informed voters, thereby reducing political apathy and boosting engagement.

Digital Literacy Programs: The digital age has introduced new challenges to political discourse, with misinformation and polarised debates becoming increasingly common. Since young people are heavy users of social media, it's crucial to equip them with digital literacy skills to encourage constructive political discussions online. Digital literacy programs should focus on teaching critical thinking, identifying misinformation, and fostering respectful dialogue (Hobbs, 2010). By training youth to assess information

sources, recognise bias, and engage in healthy debates, we can lessen the effects of fake news and online toxicity on the political landscape. These programs ought to be incorporated into schools and community outreach efforts to ensure they reach a wide audience.

Political Inclusion: Political inclusion means making sure that young people can take on meaningful roles within political systems. This can be accomplished by motivating political parties to nominate younger candidates and creating youth wings that have real decision-making authority. To address the underrepresentation of youth in political positions, we can lower the age requirements for candidacy, provide mentorship opportunities, and establish youth councils within political parties (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). These efforts will empower young people to actively participate in policy discussions, ensuring their interests are reflected in legislation and that they have a voice in shaping the future.

Employment and Political Engagement: The link between job opportunities and political involvement is crucial, as financial stability often affects a person's readiness to participate in civic activities. Policymakers should connect youth employment initiatives with community service and political participation. This approach could involve encouraging youth employment in public service roles and creating volunteer opportunities that resonate with political and social issues (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). By merging work with civic engagement, young individuals will not only acquire valuable job skills but also cultivate a sense of duty towards their communities and the political landscape.

Strengthening Youth Representation: To ensure that the viewpoints of young people are included in policymaking, it is vital to establish advisory groups within legislative bodies. These groups would enable youth to share their insights on matters that directly impact them, such as education, job opportunities, and social services. By creating formal avenues for youth representation, like a national youth council or legislative youth representatives, policymakers can guarantee that the voices of younger generations are acknowledged (Harris, 2002). These advisory groups could serve as a platform for youth to shape policies, advocate for their interests, and develop leadership abilities along the way.

Conclusion

India's democratic future heavily relies on the active involvement of its youth. Although technological advancements have created new avenues for

engagement, actual political participation remains limited due to various structural obstacles. These obstacles include economic challenges that hinder youth from participating in political activities, insufficient civic education that does not adequately inform young people about their roles in democracy, and a pervasive distrust in institutions that discourages active involvement. To build a strong democracy, policy reforms need to tackle these issues by enhancing access

to civic education and promoting youth representation in governance. Encouraging young individuals to assume leadership roles and engage in decision-making processes can help foster a more inclusive and dynamic political culture (Gupta, 2023). Empowering the youth will not only fortify India's democratic institutions but also ensure that future generations are actively engaged in shaping the nation's policies and direction.

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