

## **How Youth Civic Experiences Shape What Young People Want from Their Institutions**

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### **Abstract**

Young people are often described as the future of civic life, however their perspectives are repeatedly missing from decisions that shape their lives. PARALLAX conducted the Listening Project to better understand how young people experience civic participation – and what they believe meaningful participation looks like.

The Listening Project is grounded in the notion that youth participation cannot be solely understood through systems such as voting or advisory councils. Civic participation can also take place in schools, digital spaces, communities, and other environments where youth play an important role. By documenting these experiences across numerous communities, states, and countries, PARALLAX aims to identify patterns in how youth experience civic participation and how it affects what they want from their schools, communities, and decision makers.

Ultimately, the Listening Project was made with the intent to voice youth's opinions about how civic participation shows in their lives, as well as how institutions around them can support their civic voice. PARALLAX seeks to better understand how youth are being affected, being heard, and how they can have a meaningful influence.

## **Executive Summary**

Concluding from 50 interviews with young people from diverse communities, ages, and backgrounds, this report explores how youth experience civic participation and how it affects what they ask from their institutions.

Across the interviews, 4 key findings emerged. First, young people believe that they should have a meaningful role in decisions that affect their lives and have firsthand experience with issues, specifically in education, technology, the environment, and the media. Second, youth frequently claim that although being directly impacted by decisions mandated by powerful institutions, they have limited opportunities to shape those decisions, especially in school policies such as cell-phone restrictions, grading, course scheduling, and extracurricular activities. Third, young people view long term outcomes, such as in policy, artificial intelligence, and the environment, as an incentive to have a meaningful opportunity to influence decisions made in the present. Finally, youth participation is mainly seen as having a voice rather than being involved in the decision-making process, which highlights a gap between being heard and actually having meaningful influence.

Together, these findings suggest that the reason why young people want to participate in civic life is not simply because they want a voice; they are often influenced by direct implications for their lives, impact on their communities, and a responsibility for their future.

## Methodology

PARALLAX's team used a qualitative interview-based data collection to explore how young people perceived civic engagement, youth voices, and issues that were important to their communities. This process valued respondents' perspective rather than a predetermined hypothesis.

Participants were recruited through a variety of networks such as personal outreach to family members and friends, youth networks, academic programs, or other connections. All participation was voluntary and was either conducted through the Listening Survey located on the website or a live interview using recorded audio. This sample essentially then is a convenience/purpose sample rather than a representative random sample. Additionally, participants were not required to answer any or all questions.

Participants responded to a set of open-ended questions addressing a variety of questions.

### Questions Asked (not including basic information):

|                                                                                                                     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. What is one issue that matters to most young people in your community?                                           |
| 2. Can you describe a time when a decision affected you, but you had little or no say in it?                        |
| 3. What does meaningful youth participation look like to you?                                                       |
| 4. If young people could help shape one type of policy or decision, what should it be and why?                      |
| 5. What barriers prevent young people from having influence in their schools, communities, or governments?          |
| 6. Imagine you were advising a policymaker. What is one thing you would want them to understand about young people? |
| 7. At what point should young people be involved in decisions that affect them? Why?                                |
| 8. What is something about your life, community, or generation that most people don't fully understand?             |

These questions were all open-ended, which allowed participants to introduce issues that are not specifically prompted by the researchers.

Responses were reviewed individually, highlighting key quotes and themes. Researchers identified common themes across interviews, recorded supporting evidence using quotes, and grouped

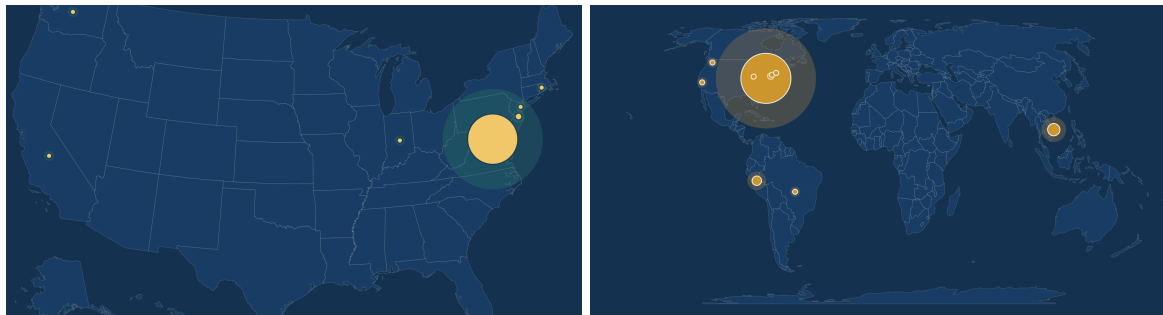
related responses into categories such as education, mental health, climate change/environment, and social media/artificial intelligence. Findings were then developed from recurring patterns rather than individual responses. The analysis also considers counterexamples and differences between participants to avoid treating the experience of individuals as a universal one.

Participation was completely voluntary, and the analysis focuses on participant's perspectives rather than attempting to identify or evaluate individual respondents. Identifying information will not be included unless otherwise consent has been obtained.

Findings should not be interpreted as a generalization of all young people as participants were recruited through youth networks and opportunities, and may have resulted through selection bias towards young people who are already civically engaged in current issues. The interview also represents the participant's self-recorded experiences and perspectives. Because the qualitative interviews and the sample were not randomly selected, the findings establish patterns between the respondents not an overall population conclusion. The purpose of this analysis is to document how participating young people describe their experiences and perspectives, and inform future PARALLAX research and initiatives.

### Who We Heard From: Listening Across Borders

PARALLAX gathered interview responses from young people across 11 countries/regions, with participants ranging from 11 to 25 years old. Participants came from a variety of educational and geographic backgrounds, allowing researchers to understand how youth experience civic participation across numerous contexts. Additionally, participants were recruited through a multitude of education backgrounds such as post graduate school, undergraduate school, high school (magnet, public, private), and even middle schools.



|             |                 |                  |            |
|-------------|-----------------|------------------|------------|
| 4 countries | 50 participants | Age Range: 11-25 | 10 regions |
|-------------|-----------------|------------------|------------|

### Participant Age Distribution

| Age | Participants |
|-----|--------------|
| 11  | 1            |
| 14  | 7            |
| 15  | 4            |
| 16  | 22           |
| 17  | 5            |
| 18  | 1            |
| 19  | 3            |
| 20  | 2            |

|    |   |
|----|---|
| 22 | 1 |
| 23 | 1 |
| 24 | 2 |
| 25 | 4 |

Participants represented multiple stages of adolescence with the largest concentration in 16 years of age. This allowed responses to reflect experiences from students at different points in their educational and personal development.

### **How should this sample be interpreted?**

Participants were recruited through voluntary participation and existing networks. As a result, the sample should not be taken as representative of the youth population worldwide. The participants may have more access to education and civic participation opportunities than other members of the youth population. The purpose of this sample, however, is to identify recurring perspectives and experiences that can inform research.

### **Finding 1: Youth Participation is tied to direct experience and future stakes**

Across interviews, participants connected their desire for civic participation to a direct experience with a policy or issue. Education was one of the clearest examples, many participants mentioning cell phone policies, grading systems, course schedules, and extracurriculars as an area to which students felt that there needed to be the most change. Rather than saying that participation was simply a right associated with being young, respondents often justified their involvement through how affected they were by the issue. “I think that the type of policy or decision young people should affect is the decisions surrounding their education. I believe that their education shapes not only their lives in the moment, but it sets up a foundation for their future, whatever it may be.” - Participant A

Other participants provided more substantial evidence to this claim by stating that students possess practical knowledge that regular decision makers do not because they experience the educational systems everyday. Participant B states that students should have a role in education policy because they are the ones experiencing it and therefore could provide ideas on how their school system could be improved. “Young people should help shape education policy because we're the ones experiencing it every day. Students can offer valuable ideas on school activities and ways to make learning better.” - Participant B

The reasoning for this finding is broader than education. Multiple participants talked about climate change and environment policy, emphasizing that young people have a particularly significant place in decisions whose consequences may extend decades and generations into the future. Several respondents argued that decisions made about the environment will shape conditions in how their generation will live, work, and raise families. “Young people should help shape climate change and environmental policy because they will live the longest with the consequences of today's environmental choices, yet they are often left out of current political decisions, which could potentially result in negative impacts within their own careers.” - Participant C “Most people don’t understand that the damage being done by the generation before us (Climate damage, broken international ties, etc.) will fall onto the shoulders of my generation.” - Participant D

The environmental responses expand the argument beyond immediate firsthand experience. While students experience education policies in the present, young people also describe having a long term stake in environmental issues. In both cases of environmental and educational, respondents use their relationship to the consequences of the policy, whether currently experiencing or far in the future, to explain why their perspective should be considered.

Additionally, a similar logic appears in social media and technology. Some participants emphasized youth's heavy involvement with social media, digital platforms, and technology, suggesting that experience could provide useful perspectives when regulating these online spaces. "Young people should help shape technology policy. With the rise of AI and LLMs, there is a lot to learn and many issues that remain unsolved surrounding these technologies. Young people are the ones that will ultimately be affected by AI systems, so if they shape policies today, their lives will be easier tomorrow. Additionally, technology is the way of the future and young people should utilize it to do as much good as possible in the world. We truly cannot move forward until we become active, engaged citizens."

To conclude, all of these responses suggest that young people's arguments on civic participation aren't solely based on age or a desire to "have a voice". Instead, participants frequently justify participation through lived experiences, direct exposure to an issue, or long term consequences that may affect them. This distinction is vital as it shifts the question from *"Should young people have a voice?"* to *"When and how should people affected by a decision be involved in shaping it?"*

## **Finding 2: Youth Participation is restricted by the Lack of Available Opportunities**

Across interviews, young participants have expressed their concern for the policy changes and decisions revolving around them, while having no meaningful participation themselves. Not only did respondents explain the voicelessness they experienced, but the lack of opportunities to be heard. Accordingly, many participants hinted that the recurring issue may not simply be a lack of youth representation, but a disconnection between agency and meaningful influence. One of the most prominent examples of this phenomenon is the socioeconomic status of a participant's country, often limited by its own development. "In my country, this type of support would be beneficial because certain political decisions are not entirely trustworthy for citizens, especially since there is no real stability that we can rely on." - Participant E

Moreover, it was a common theme that when asked, meaningful youth participation in a person's community is viewed as volunteering, civic duty, and stewardship. Not only was this a common answer from all the participants, but it was found in volunteering, civic duty, and leadership. What does meaningful youth participation look like to you? (Question) : "Volunteering and opportunities to gain experience in desired fields or interests." (Answer). This was significant because of how these forms of participation allow youth to contribute to their communities, but do not necessarily give them a position to actually shape the decisions that affect them.

The distinction between participation and influence became apparent when participants discussed policies in their education. Participants referenced cell phone policies, grading chances, extracurricular activities, course scheduling, and curriculum as decisions that affected students while providing them with little to no opportunities to contribute, "The VA General Assembly passed a bill banning cell phones in schools. This decision affected me because as a student in the public school system, my record could be tarnished if my cell phone is out during the day or if there is an emergency and I need to call parents/guardians. I had little to no say in this decision and felt like students were not made aware that this was happening, so there was not a lot of advocacy for students. In this instance, it felt like the adults were in a way flexing their power and not considering all perspectives. " - Participant F. Another

participant summarized this idea by stating, “I think that the type of policy or decision young people should affect is the decisions surrounding their education. I believe that their education shapes not only their lives in the moment, but it sets up a foundation for their future, whatever it may be. Having a strong, solid education to lean on is important, and the participation of youth can allow for more engagement in learning and more interest in school.” - Participant G. These responses suggest that students aren’t lacking the interest in participating, but they lack the opportunities where the experiences and opinions can influence a decision being made.

A similar pattern presents itself in environmental focused responses. Young people described environmental policy as especially important because they will experience its consequences for a long period of time. “I believe youth should be engaged in environmental related issues and policies considering that they will be the most affected by future climate related disruptions.” - Participant H. However, having a long term stake in an issue does not provide youth with the opportunities to affect the decision-making processes surrounding it. This creates a tension within the interviews: young people recognize that they are being affected by an issue yet they do not see a clear pathway in how their perspectives could reach decision makers.

Ultimately, participant’s responses recognize a broader gap between civic participation and civic influence. Young people are already engaging with their communities in many meaningful ways, but their participation doesn’t correlate to the policies and institutions around them. “Teens and youth in general have a lot of potential to positively impact decision making and by ignoring them as has been common practice has had negative consequences.” - Participant I. Addressing this gap may be required, not only to create more opportunities for young people to participate, but also ensuring that the decision making process gives their perspectives a place within it.

### **Finding 3: Youth Participation is Seen as Meaningful Input instead of Actual Authority**

While interviewees stated that they expressed a desire to have a role in decisions that affect them, their responses did not frame their perspectives having actual authority in their local decision making process. Instead, participants often described their experiences as being consulted, and not even that. The distinction suggests that, for many participants, the issue is not exactly if young people should have complete control, but whether they have a meaningful opportunity to contribute to decisions before they are made.

This idea specifically appeared in responses that included education policy. One participant said that “Young people should help shape education policy because we're the ones experiencing it every day. Students can offer valuable ideas on school activities and ways to make learning better.” - Participant B. Rather than arguing that students should completely determine education policy, this respondent specifically uses the keyword “shape” as a suggestion to allow youth to contribute to education policies instead of completely deciding them. Similarly, another participant stated that youth should be able to “help shape policies on in school regulations or any decision that alters the way they are taught material in order to help these policies/decisions be made with the intent to improve education” - Participant J. These responses suggest that youth participation can be an opportunity to contribute knowledge and perspectives to the decision-making process.

However, participants also distinguished between having a peer representative and actually having a voice. One respondent discussed a change regarding county grade policy and explained that “I had no say in it and my only form of representation was the student member of the board” - Participant K. This response is significant because it demonstrates that formal representation does not mean that participants perceive themselves as having meaningful input. Similarly, when discussing Virginia’s statewide cell phone policy, another participant stated that students “should have a bigger say in it.” - Participant L. There’s an emphasis on “say” which dictates that students don’t want to control the policy, but they want to have their input be valuable in making the policies.

This pattern also appears in how participants described the relationship between the students and

the institution in charge of making policies affecting them. One participant said that students have experienced the “pros and cons of their institutions” and therefore “know when something works for them and their peers” - Participant M. From this perspective, student participation provides decision-makers with knowledge that is missing from the policymaking process. Participant M also connected this experience to the ability to shape the educational institution, suggesting that meaningful participation should involve real life experience without putting all of the decision making in the hands of the students.

The same distinction can also be applied beyond education. When participants discussed issues such as social media regulation and censoring, their reasoning centered on young people’s direct experience and the overall importance of why they should contribute to decisions affecting their lives. In these responses, ideal participation was stated not as independent authority but more as having access to the decision making process and an opportunity for youth perspectives and experiences to influence its outcome.

Putting all of these points together, these responses suggest that meaningful youth participation is not the same as youth authority. Participants frequently described wanting to be heard, consulted, and given a genuine opportunity to help shape decisions. This does not mean that youth prefer consultation and not having shared or direct authority. But there was a recurring language of having a “say”, being consulted, and overall helping shape decision, indicating that meaningful input was an important component of how youth participation was understood.

This distinction creates an important question for youth participation: what exactly makes input meaningful? If young people are invited to share their perspectives but policy makers don’t take them into account, participation may only exist formally to make it seem like their perspectives are being used. The interviews therefore point toward a spectrum between simply being represented, being heard, influencing a decision, and sharing authority; raising the question of where meaningful youth participation actually begins and how institutions can create mechanisms that actually include their perspectives in decisions.

### **Cross Cutting Themes**

Across findings, a consistent theme is the gap between being affected by decisions and having the opportunity to influence them. Participants connected their desire for youth participation to direct experiences and future stakes, while also describing the limited opportunities to be heard. At the same time, they often viewed meaningful participation as having a say and contributing perspectives rather than having complete authority. Together, these findings suggest that youth participation involves access to decision making and real meaningful influence.

### **What Young People Want**

Participants expressed a desire to have their experiences be actually heard and considered when creating policies that affect them such as educational, environmental, and social. In particular, they emphasized being consulted, contributing ideas, and having a meaningful say. Their responses suggest that young people want opportunities to move beyond being informed about decisions and instead having their perspectives considered as part of the decision making process.

### **Implications**

These findings suggest that institutions seeking to involve young people may need to create clearer and more meaningful opportunities to include youth voice. Representations alone may not be sufficient if young people do not feel that their perspectives can influence outcome. Institutions should therefore consider mechanisms that allow youth to provide input way earlier on in the process and understand how that input is considered.