

UNMUTE THE YOUTH!

This document summarises the work of the Europaeum programme’s ‘Unmute the Youth!’ project. It presents a set of recommendations for policymakers regarding how to strengthen democracy by better engaging young people in e-democracy initiatives.

Setting the context

The disengagement of young people from politics continues to be a major challenge for democracies in Europe and beyond. Although the European Commission and national governments have made multiple efforts to mitigate this problem, young people are increasingly detached from traditional forms of politics such as political party and trade union membership and especially from voting. However, this does not mean that young people are indifferent to what policymakers do and decide. The recent mobilisations for the future of the environment through the Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion movements and other forms of protest clearly show that young people want to play an active part of change in their communities.

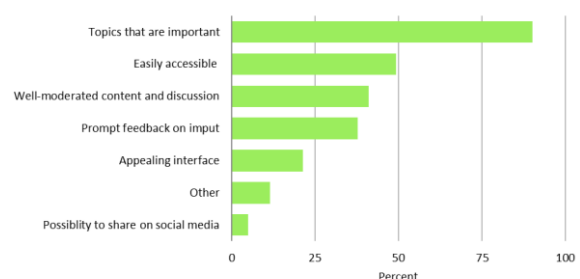
Young people must be allowed to freely express their concerns and must find ears that are willing to listen. Based on our research, we believe policymakers must take seriously their responsibility to cater to young people’s eagerness to get involved politically by providing tools and methods that this target group is familiar with and attracted to – for example by harnessing the opportunities presented by e-democracy platforms.

Our approach

To develop our recommendations, we adopted a multidisciplinary approach to our analysis. Firstly, we undertook desk research to learn about a range of successful e-participation platforms that have been deployed in various cities around the world to identify examples of best practices and to learn about cutting-edge technologies in this field, focusing on examples in the Alpine region, Iceland, Spain and Taiwan. We then gathered original data to strengthen our understanding of the pros and cons of e-democracy initiatives geared towards young people. Firstly we undertook interviews with local policymakers and leading world experts in this field. Secondly we conducted a survey among more than 60 young people in three European cities

regarding their attitudes towards e-democracy (see Graph 1). Drawing all this together, we identify several opportunities for the more effective provision of e-democracy initiatives which have informed our analysis. We believe that our recommendations can help to strengthen democracy at all levels, make policymaking more effective and accountable, and make our communities more sustainable and cohesive.

Graph 1: What would make it more likely that you participate in e-participation activities?



Our key findings

Misleading stereotypes

Young people actually are interested in politics, at all levels of decision-making.

Communication gap

Despite various attempts, reaching out to young people is particularly challenging; yet, the youth clearly shows interest in wanting to be engaged in democratic processes.

Substance and presence

Institutions' presence on social media is a step towards young people's participation in politics. Young people do care about issues of deliberation and not merely about presence on social media. In short, these systems have to be there - but they are not enough in and of itself.

Accountability and transparency

A crucial aspect of public consultation relates to accountability: young people not only demand to be heard but also for their input to be addressed. Transparent inclusionary features are key elements for a successful consultation tool.

Online is the new normal

Alongside an increase of civic education in schools, our results suggest a considerable potential to use e-democracy to promote democratic participation among young people.



Our recommendations

1. **Tangible** - E-participation platforms should focus on concrete policy issues that are dear to young people.
2. **Accessible** - E-participation platforms should be convenient and simple to use. Young people appreciate accessibility.
3. **Local** - By involving young people in local initiatives, policymakers can lean on pre-existing trust and deliver concrete results.
4. **Constructive** - E-participation platforms should be designed and moderated in a way that facilitates empathy and strengthens mutual understanding.
5. **Promotion** - Young people want to be approached. Policymakers should promote e-participation platforms proactively and with the cooperation of social stakeholders.
6. **Feedback** - Young people demand fast feedback about how their input is being processed and require more explanation than older participants.