

#CoDYouthLeads Event Summary

Youth Participation in Political Processes: Voters, Candidates, Elected Officials

July 1, 2021

The virtual event featured young activists and elected officials from Andorra, Estonia, Lithuania and Morocco who shared their experiences and practices utilized in their countries aimed at increasing youth participation in electoral processes, including in pre- and post- electoral periods. Watch the full event [here](#).

The event was initiated by the CoD YouthLeads, a group of young activists and democracy leaders from different countries and world regions from Canada to Estonia through Nepal to Haiti. Each speaker had an inspirational tone aimed at empowering youth participants to fully engage in the political processes in their societies and also outlined specific desired policy recommendations to achieve their goals. Panelists described the issue of youth's lack of confidence in democratic institutions that often results in low youth voter turnout, as well as various barriers for youth electoral participation across the world.

Speakers:



The Value of Youth Participation in Politics

The unfortunate reality, that **Roger Padreny** outlined, is that “half of the world's population is under 30 and yet only between 2 and 6 per cent of members of parliament (MPs) globally represent this age group.” As the only MP under 30 in his parliament, Roger emphasized the need for government, parliaments, and political parties to ensure that younger parliamentarians are provided with prominent opportunities to represent their constituents and age group.

On the importance of youth participation in politics, panelists described the necessity of such participation at all levels – in parliament and councils – to ensure a future that can accommodate the wants and desires of the younger population. **Nidal Benali** strongly said, “if we want something for our future, we need to be part of the process... We need to be in the parliament to promote better laws [for youth]. We need to be in local councils if we seek changes for our cities.”

Tomas Martinaitis and Nidal Benali both spoke to the role of social media and online communication in promoting youth participation and recognition. By finding communication networks that are prominent among the younger generation, young people in Lithuania were able to get seen and eventually create a new political party, the Freedom Party.

Barriers for Youth Electoral Participation

- *Voting Age Requirement*

Although she felt lucky that she hadn't faced many barriers to political participation in Estonia, **Laura Danilas** mentioned how higher voting ages can present an obstacle to youth participation in the electoral process. In Estonia, after lowering the voting age in 2015, more young people had the chance to vote and influence their future.

In fact, Tomas described the same voting age barrier for participation and spoke of his desire to lower the requirement in Lithuania. "Since young people often leave their cities to go to school, they end up voting for councils of cities they no longer live in," he said.

- *Lack of Communication Between Youth and Politicians*

Panelists also spoke to the intimidation that sometimes arises from the idea of youth speaking to politicians in both informal and formal settings. Tomas debated the frequently made statements by politicians that "[their] doors are always open to youth." Instead, he asserted that young people are not always brave enough to enter such doors. Rather than making young people approach politicians, the politicians should be the ones actively initiating conversations with youth.

Along these lines, Roger underscored the importance of parliament and political parties providing support and mentorship of young MPs and aspiring candidates for office. Not only does this remove intimidation and lack of formal communication, but also ensures "an invaluable transfer of knowledge and expertise," he said.

Building Trust and Capacity

Another prominent theme arising during the panelists' discussions was the lack of trust in the youth's abilities to meaningfully participate in public life and decision-making processes.

Nidal began the discussion on this topic by describing a program he has been part of in Morocco where the Youth Council hosted monthly meetings bringing together politicians and young people. He said, "this is the first step in the process of building trust in youth at the local level and making the connection with youth leaders".

Roger discussed the trust barrier in relation to political parties and said "the important thing is that parties trust in the capacities of young people to be active politicians. Since our democratic systems are built around political parties, improving the diversity of parties is crucial". According to Roger, trust in the abilities of young people will empower them to become elected officials.

Laura also spoke to this topic and urged the need for young people to recognize that "age is just a number – their expertise is what matters." Reframing peoples' attitudes is a main step towards promoting trust in youth leaders.

Recommendations

The discussion offered several recommendations drawn from speakers' remarks regarding youth participation in political processes and decision-making.

1) Protect free speech online and promote equal access to online media platforms

Since social media is the main tool utilized by rising youth politicians to promote their ideas and campaigns, it is crucial to ensure that technology regulations allow for the full enjoyment and protection of online free speech and media.

2) Foster inter-generational communication and practice sharing

Understanding that building trust between youth leaders and seasoned politicians is crucial for advancing youth participation and making democratic processes more inclusive, it is key to establish mediums (such as routine meetings or more formal forums) for communication between these groups.

3) Provide capacity-building opportunities for youth to fully engage in politics

Encouraging mentorship and training opportunities for aspiring young candidates will equip them with necessary resources and tools to run successful campaigns and represent their constituents.