



Defending Democracy: How Young Changemakers Are Demanding Progress Policy Recommendations

Globally, youth are becoming increasingly disaffected with traditional democratic institutions and processes. Over the last decade, countries around the world have experienced a decline in young people's formal political participation as well as a growing distrust among young people in established political processes. The current generation of young people is also inheriting a slew of complex and intersecting challenges, including economic and social inequity, environmental degradation, and geopolitical conflict. As these circumstances converge, questions arise about young people's belief in democratic values and the types of leaders and political systems they're willing to support. At the same time, many young people remain interested in politics and are participating in civic and political life in ways that challenge established norms and institutions and address socio-political and environmental challenges on their own terms.

Through NDI's dialogue series, [Defending Democracy](#), developed in partnership with [Foreign Policy](#), three youth leaders shared their thoughts on young people's relationship to democracy. The panelists discussed their personal and professional experiences as democratic activists and articulated a set of policy recommendations that respond to the needs and challenges facing young people today and that aim to repair the relationship between young people and democratic governance.

1. Narratives around democratic renewal and strengthening democratic institutions should emphasize key priorities that affect the lives of young people and their communities.

Young people are more likely to engage with and support democracy when they see a direct connection to issues that impact their everyday lives. In other words, young people want to know that their lives will be better as a result of democratic norms and processes. Many young people are struggling to reach the basic markers for adulthood, such as completing school and becoming financially independent, and a primary source of concern is livelihood. Political leaders and democracy and governance practitioners should frame communication and programming in ways that directly relate to the day-to-day concerns and experiences of young people and their local communities.

Specifically, the panelists recommended that policymakers emphasize the connection between democracy and economic opportunity by supporting job creation and entrepreneurship, as well as investing in sustainable socio-economic development. Tailoring messages to the specific challenges and needs of young people can draw them into democratic processes. This can

include highlighting how democratic decision-making can be instrumental in addressing environmental challenges or linking democratic values to well-being by emphasizing how well-functioning democratic systems can contribute to a better public health infrastructure that can benefit all citizens.

Additionally, policymakers and civil society should highlight the power of community engagement within the democratic process by showing examples of how active participation in local governance or community organizing can lead to positive outcomes. By grounding messages about democracy in the context of issues that directly impact the daily lives of young people and their communities, policymakers can make democratic principles more relatable, accessible, and compelling for the current generation of young citizens and civic leaders.

2. Prioritizing young people who are traditionally excluded from politics is critical to understanding how to better involve them in policy-making processes.

Young people care about bringing traditionally marginalized voices and people into democratic governance and policymaking processes. People of diverse identities and backgrounds have valuable expertise, lived experience and a nuanced understanding of policy issues that directly impact them, which can contribute to more informed and effective policies. Policymakers should recognize that individuals from underrepresented and marginalized communities bring unique perspectives and insights that are crucial to creating policies that address the needs of all citizens. Young leaders described an investment in bringing people on the margins into the political processes and policymakers can actively foster trust by involving citizens from diverse backgrounds, including young people, in a way that respects the nuances of diversity and responds to the barriers and challenges experienced by diverse communities. Policymakers should prioritize ongoing consultation and collaboration with citizens from marginalized communities at various stages of the policy development process to ensure that policies are not only well-intentioned but also effective.

Public deliberation and participatory policymaking can be used to build bridges and mainstream the involvement of marginalized communities. Deliberative processes are a means of exploring and designing policies in collaboration with members of the public. These processes bring together a representative group of people who might be affected by or have a vested interest in a policy, provide them with evidence and information, create a forum to debate the issues involved and enable them to develop policy proposals and recommendations. Additionally, because deliberative processes bring together groups that are representative of the population, they can help to mainstream the participation of marginalized groups. Deliberative policymaking can ensure that groups who will be directly affected by policies are able to influence decisions and, in turn, increase trust in the policy process and generate public support. These opportunities also help marginalized groups increase their visibility and build working relationships with others. Additionally, deliberative models that feature youth participation include youth juries, and participatory budgeting or legislative theater in schools.

3. Engage young people on issues they care about through social media and partnering with creatives.

The panelists underscored the importance of leveraging social media platforms to connect with and involve young people in discussions and actions related to issues that matter most to them. Meeting young people where they are - including on social media - involves understanding their values and issues that are relevant to them. Engaging young people on social media is an opportunity to build trust by being authentic and transparent and actively listening to their feedback.

Policymakers can identify and utilize social media platforms that are most popular among young people. Different age groups may favor different platforms, so it's important to tailor engagement strategies to a target audience. Crafting visually appealing, interactive, and easily shareable content is equally important. Young people are drawn to content that is concise and allows for participation, such as polls, quizzes, and interactive stories. Social media can also be used to create opportunities for young people to actively participate in discussion. This can include hosting virtual town hall meetings, question and answer sessions, or online forums where young people are invited to share their opinions.

Young people look to social media for political information. When institutions aren't delivering messages about strengthening democracy, other actors fill the space with polarizing messages and mis- and disinformation. Using social media not only equips young people with knowledge, it also fosters a sense of civic responsibility. Social media can also be leveraged to inspire action by encouraging young people to get involved in community projects, civic activities, collective organizing, and other initiatives related to issues they care about by providing a platform to share tools and resources to make a tangible impact.

Collaborating with influencers, organizations, and artists who have a strong creative presence on social media can amplify messages of democratic values. The right partnerships can increase the reach and impact of these messages and bring in more diverse perspectives. By implementing these strategies, policymakers can create a more inclusive and participatory environment that resonates with young people and harnesses the potential to catalyze positive change through social media.

4. Governments, civil society, and political parties should prioritize civic education.

Strong civic education programs are directly linked to higher levels of political engagement. Civic education is a cornerstone of a thriving democracy and an informed citizenry is essential to preserving democratic values. Panelists discussed the responsibility of governments to invest in civic education, underscoring the importance of allocating resources to formal and informal civic education programs that support citizen knowledge, skills, and engagement. Policymakers should integrate civic education into formal education at all levels, starting in primary school as well as invest in informal civic education programs. Civic education programs should be

comprehensive and cover topics such as government structure, citizen rights and responsibilities, voting, and the democratic process.

Formal and informal civic education programs should emphasize critical thinking and media literacy to equip students with the ability to critically evaluate information, discern biases, and navigate the complexities of policy issues. Civic education programs should provide opportunities for young people to engage in practical exercises, simulations, and real-world civic activities to foster deeper understanding and develop an informed and engaged citizenry. Such programs should be inclusive and representative of diverse perspectives and cultures, and encourage an environment of dialogue that promotes an understanding of diversity and encourages empathy and respect for people of different backgrounds. Civic education programs should also bring diverse communities together and encourage students to listen and participate in dialogue with people whose perspectives differ from their own.

Many young people have ideas on how to improve their governments and communities and they should be supported with the resources they need to bring their thoughts to life. The panelists suggested government grant programs for young activists, social entrepreneurs, and civil society organizations led by young people who are interested in reinvigorating democracy and civic engagement among their peers.