



# YOUTH

Key findings from the qualitative  
and quantitative research

# Introduction

Youth is one of the most important groups in the electoral process because the foundation of tomorrow's democracy is built on the habits of democratic participation of youth.

This research examines civic and political participation of youth to better understand the barriers and motivating factors that influence their participation. It explores three groups of youth: 1) youth in general, 2) first time voters, and 3) rural youth and aims to identify common barriers, motivating factors, and specific characteristics of each group in regards to their level of knowledge, political awareness, attitudes, and motivation. The findings of this research help define a number of actionable recommendations to increase youth participation, particularly in the election and political processes.

## **The importance of youth participation in civic and political life**

When young people are disengaged from civic and political life, they are excluded from the decision-making process, which may lead to frustration, distrust, and further disconnection from the overall political and public environment. Political participation is a necessary precondition for a democratic society.

*“ Young people are oftentimes not heard by authorities and decision makers. They have better chances to achieve something if they are a big group, therefore, they should be encouraged and empowered to unite their voices. ”*

*Woman, 27, Tetovo*

# Youth - Definition and Size

Youth is often defined as “the passage from a dependent childhood to independent adulthood” when young people are in transition between a world of rather secure development to a world of choice and risk.<sup>7</sup> That is why, as a category, youth is more fluid and evasive to statistical prediction than other fixed age groups.

There is no universally accepted definition of the term youth. “Youth” in North Macedonia is defined as a socio-ethical category of the population aged 15-29.<sup>8</sup>

This research targets youth aged 18 to 29. Of the total number of voters, this group represents around 19% or 338,000 voters.<sup>9</sup>

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7 “Defining youth in contemporary national legal and policy frameworks across Europe” Youth partnership, available at: <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261653/Analytical+paper+Youth+Age+Bojana+Perovic+4.4%.1%6.pdf/eb59c5e2-45d8-4e70-b672-f8de0a5ca08c>, accessed on October 20, 2020.

8 Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies of the Republic of North Macedonia, p.2

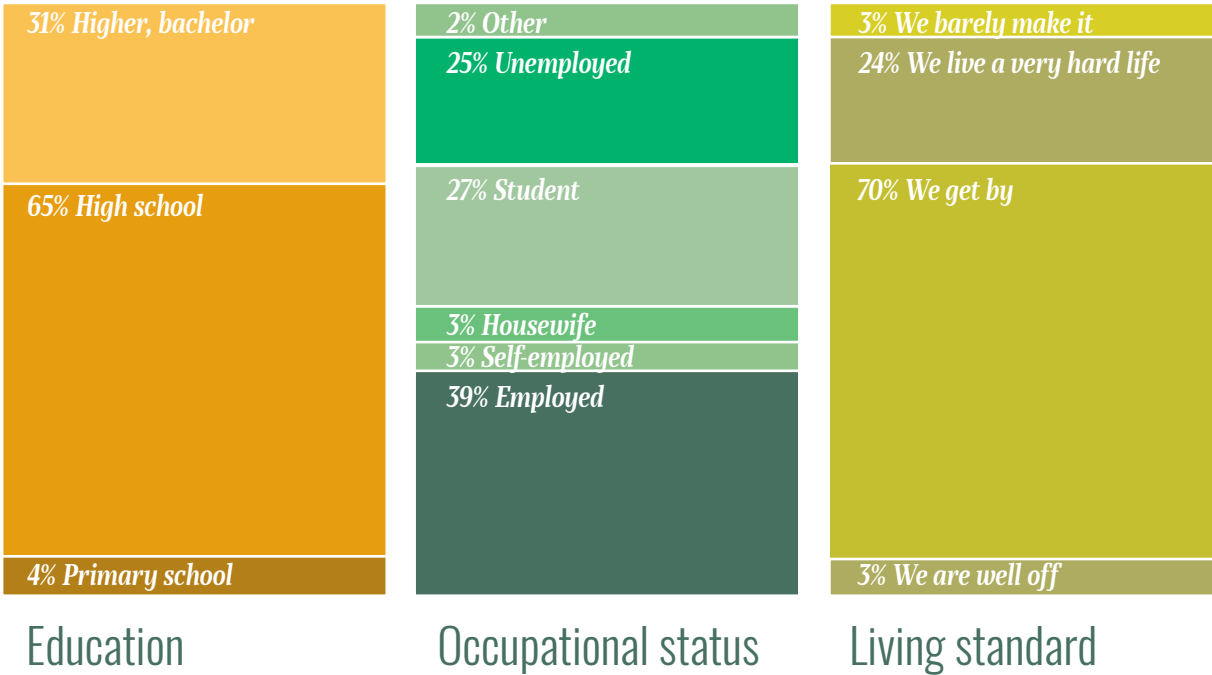
9 State Statistical Office, Estimations 2019, “Population of the Republic of North Macedonia, according to age and sex”, <https://www.stat.gov.mk/>

# Demographic profile

A total of 208 young respondents took part in a quantitative face-to-face survey.

In order to gain an in-depth insight into the background, perceptions, and opinions of the group, the quantitative survey was complemented by one focus group.

The demographic structure of the young respondents in the quantitative face-to-face survey shows a similar distribution of the place of living, gender, and standard of living with the distribution in the general population.



# TOPICS OF INTEREST

## Interest in the socio-political developments in the country

*How interested are you in the current socio-political developments in our country and in the world?*



The research shows that 60% of the survey respondents are “not at all” or “not very interested” in the current socio-political developments in the country and in the world, while 39% are “very” or “somewhat” interested.

Focus group findings show that some young people tend to avoid political news, while others are prone to incidental sourcing of information on the social networks of their choice.

Almost two thirds of the survey respondents (65%) rarely or never discuss political developments with other people.

There are no significant differences in regards to the interest in current socio-political developments across gender, ethnicity, education and household incomes for this group.

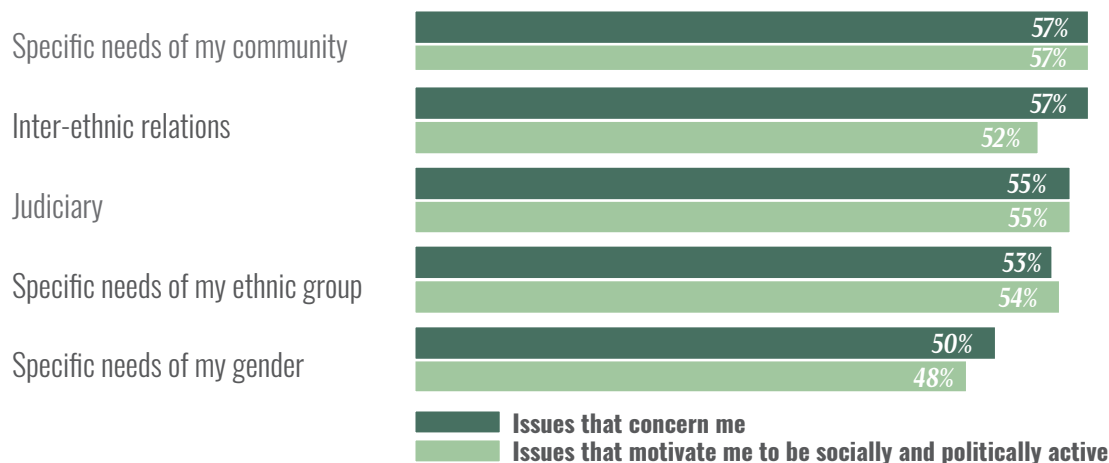
On the other hand, this research shows that young people who were previously engaged in civic activities or show interest to be engaged, are also more interested in socio-political developments and more often prepared to take part in discussions on these issues.

## Concerns

*How much would you say the following information/issues/ topics concern you?*

*How much would you say the following issues/topics motivate you to be socially or politically active?*





Health care, education, and economic and social stability are the top three issues of concern for young survey respondents, indicated by more than 70% of the respondents. In addition, these are the key motivators for social and political activism among youth.

Young survey respondents are the least concerned about specific needs of their gender group, ethnic group, and the judiciary.

In addition, the participants in the youth focus group are mostly interested in learning about education and the start of the new academic year during the pandemic, local sports events, entertainment and cultural events as well as projects of youth organization and student exchange programs.

## INFORMATION SOURCES

Almost half of the young people (47%) indicated that social media (Facebook and Instagram) are the predominant sources of information.

Two out of ten young people are typically informed about the current socio-political developments via television.

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**f** 47%

Although social media is the most frequently used source of information by young people across all ethnic groups, the ethnic Albanian youth are more informed through television, family, friends and relatives.

*“ I am mainly interested in sports. As far as political topics are concerned, I follow the latest news and my social media feeds. If I get information - it's OK, if don't get it - I don't actively search for it... ”*

*Male, 21, Kumanovo*

## CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Seventy-five per cent (75%) of the young people in general have never been involved in any event, activity or process that could have an impact in the community or their local surroundings and 73% have no interest in becoming more civically engaged.

Compared to the rural youth, the percentage is similar (25%), but younger generation (first time voters) are less involved in events or activities in the community (10%) showing that when entering adulthood, young people become more interested to be involved in the civic life.

*Have you been involved in any event, activity, or process that could have effected change in the community or the place where you live?*



*Are you interested in greater civic involvement?*



Young men and youth with higher education tend to indicate involvement and interest to become more civically engaged.

Interestingly, half of the young people who were previously involved in civic activities indicate an interest in more active civic involvement. Only 14% of young people who have never been involved in any civic activity before are interested in more active civic involvement.

The research shows that more than half of the survey respondents indicate disbelief in positive change (both by individual engagement and by NGO engagement), while almost a third point out the lack of interest in politics as the main reason for abstention from civic activities.

In addition, the young people in the focus group discussion indicate the following factors that contribute to insufficient civic involvement and low level of civic participation:

- ♦ Indifferent and passive youth.
- ♦ Young people focus on personal interests and benefits, instead of collective interests.
- ♦ Political parties attribute civic activities to opponent parties and most of the civic activities are labeled as being politically biased/motivated.
- ♦ Perception that civic initiatives are a waste of time and effort, since most of them are unsuccessful.
- ♦ Lack of positive examples/role models and lack of influential public figures showing support to civic initiatives.

**“ Unfortunately, in a heavily politicized society, the fear of standing up for your beliefs is strong. The last student attempt to gather to protest was immediately politicized. Everyone present there was labeled as opposition ”**  
**Male, 21, Kumanovo**

## Factors that promote involvement

Responsiveness of the institutional system is a key motivator for the survey participants to be more involved in activities that could effect change in the community, as cited by one third of the respondents. Other important motivating factors are related to their representation (indicated by 23%), and transparency and accountability of the authorities (indicated by 9%).

In addition, young people emphasise the need for positive examples showing that civic involvement can have an impact while at the same time calling for unity and solidarity in the civic activities.

**“ Young people do not have a voice in the institutions. They could achieve something only if they are a big group. They should be encouraged to unite. ”**  
**Woman, 27, Tetovo**

More than half of the survey participants do not believe they can make a positive impact as a citizen (55%), whereas more than one quarter (27%) believe they can make a meaningful impact in their municipalities. Less than 5% believe they can influence the Prime Minister, the Parliament, ministers and the President of the country.

## Willingness and ability to participate in civic activities

With regards to participation in public life, young people prefer opinion polling (38%), meetings with colleagues/friends to discuss personal or family issues (35%) and brochures or leaflets (34%).

*In which of the civic activities are you willing to participate?*

**38%**

Respond a questionnaire



**34%**

Read a brochure or a leaflet



**35%**

Meet colleagues, friends to discuss



## ELECTION PROCESS

Focus group participants tend to perceive elections in the country as “frequent”, “not legitimate”, “decided by the USA”, “fake democracy”, “strong political pressures” and “fear of loss of employment”.

*Do you think that every vote is important and can affect the election results?*

**67%**

Yes

**26%**

No

**1%**

Refuses to answer

**6%**

Does not know

More than two thirds of the respondents believe that every vote counts and can impact election results (67%), while 26% do not believe in the importance of every vote.

Half of the respondents indicate that voting per se is not sufficient to engage citizens to effectuate changes in policies, three out of ten believe voting is sufficient, while one out of ten claimed ignorant on the issue.

## Motivation to vote

*How regularly do you vote?*

According to the research, 44% of the respondents indicate they vote almost regularly, 16% often, 17% sometimes, 10% usually do not vote and 7% never vote.

44% regularly

16% often

17% sometimes

10% usually not

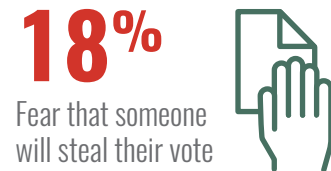
7% never

In addition, 43% of the respondents state they regularly vote for the same party and 26% vote for different political parties.



## Factors that influence their decision to vote:

The research shows that the top three factors that influence young people's decision to vote are: belief that voting is a civic right and duty (48%), better prospects (38%), and fear that someone would steal their vote (18%).



The group further underlines the importance of voting in terms of ensuring accountability and fulfilment of promises made by the elected officials.

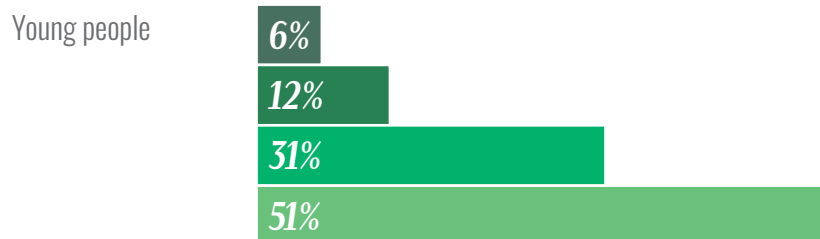
*“ If you don't vote today, you don't have the right to complain tomorrow or ask for responsibility. ”*  
**Male, 18, Gostivar**

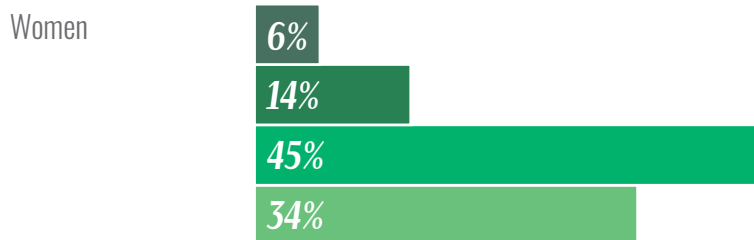
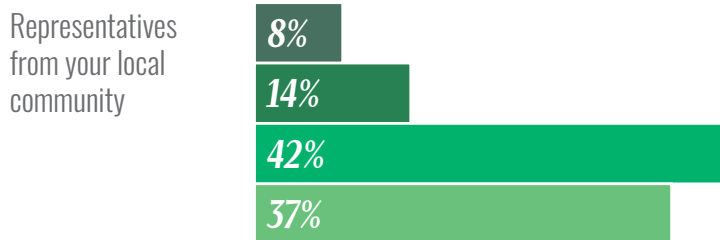
Almost half of the respondents (48%) indicate that their decision to vote is the same or most often the same as that of their families, while almost the same percentage (47%) state their decision is not the same or most often not the same as that of their families.

With regards to their friends' influence on voting, two thirds of the young people point out that their decision to vote is not the same or most often not the same as that of their friends.

Young people prefer youth representatives, local and familiar people on the candidate lists.

*If there are representatives of the following groups on the candidate lists, how likely is it that you would vote for that political party?*



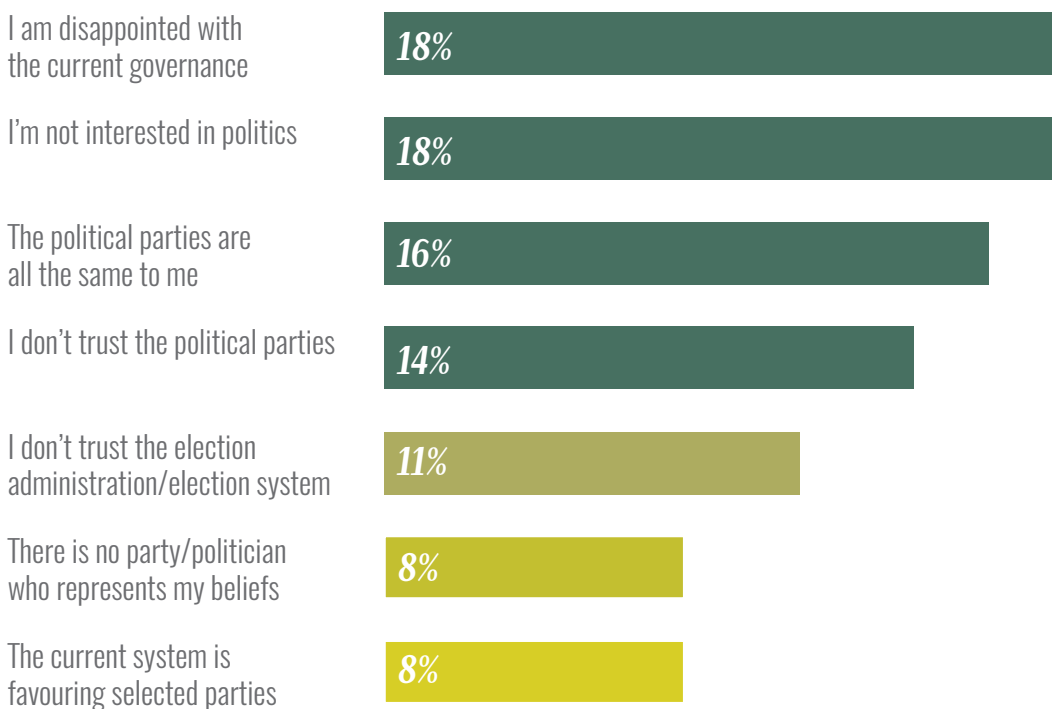


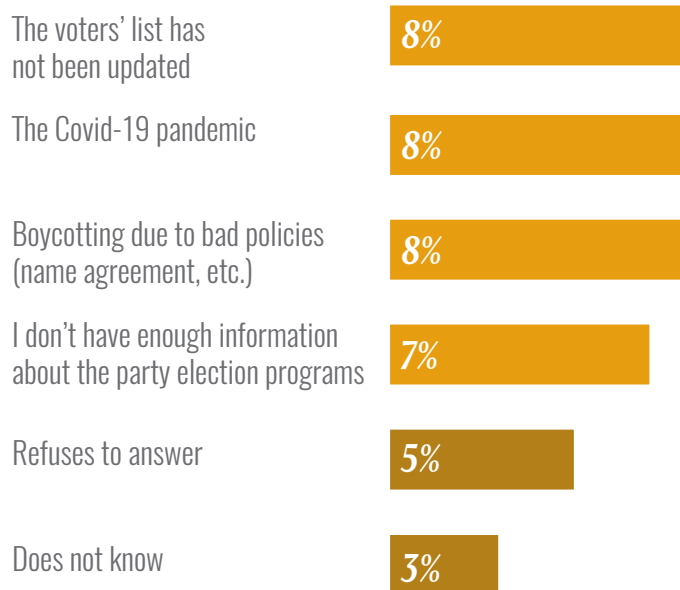
More likely No impact Less likely Do not know

## Demotivation to vote

Dissatisfaction with political parties, lack of interest in politics and lack of trust in the election system/election administration are the key factors that influence first time voters' decision to abstain from voting.

### *What can influence your decision not to vote?*





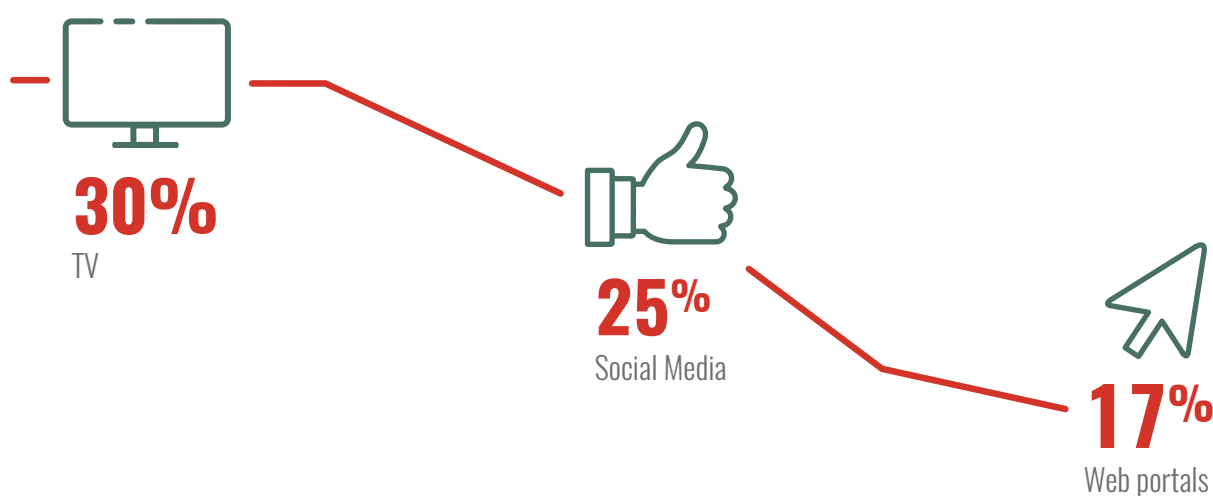
Focus group findings show that women from rural areas state that pressures from the parties were particularly strong in rural areas and that political party membership is often the most important condition for employment.

*“ Only if there is a massive boycott of the elections, a message will be sent to the political parties, a message of dissatisfaction and revolt about their work. ”*  
*Female, 26, Strumica*

# COMMUNICATION WITH CANDIDATES AND PARTIES

Predominant sources of election information are TV (30%), social media (25%) and web portals (17%).

Election-related information is mostly sourced via newscasts (cited by 43% of the respondents) and debates (cited by 24%). Almost one in five youngsters (21%) indicates that they do not get informed about elections at all.



Social media and traditional media are the most preferable types of communication with candidates and elected representatives between elections and young people mostly rely on the candidates' political track record in making an informed decision.

*“ I personally read the election programs to see what they have invented this time, but I do not believe anything that is written. Our experience shows that they do not follow what they write in the programs. ”*  
*Female, 26, Strumica*

In addition, young people demand political parties to focus on:

- ♦ Improving the standards of living.
- ♦ Increasing youth employment opportunities.
- ♦ Keeping young people in the country.
- ♦ Rule of law, independence of the judiciary and equal laws for all citizens.
- ♦ Reducing corruption.
- ♦ Protecting national history and values.

# BARRIERS

It is vitally important and challenging to ensure that the next generations participate in democracy. It requires commitment from governments, political parties, candidates, non-governmental organizations, and democratic citizens and groups. Indeed, numerous stakeholders play a critical role in creating conditions for increased and more equitable civic and political participation of the youth.

The research identifies the following barriers to more active civic and political participation:

**Scepticism about their power to influence:** Young people do not believe they can influence policies in the country.

**Underrepresentation:** Young people do not feel they are sufficiently represented and/or involved in addressing issues of concern in decision-making processes.

**Lack of knowledge and skills** to confidently participate in the civic and political life

**Lack of channels** for participation and expression of opinions

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Below are a set of recommendations that are:

- ♦ Youth centric.
- ♦ Context specific.
- ♦ Focused on using the right channels.
- ♦ Actionable.

The recommendations are clustered in three groups as follows:

**Increase the importance and relevance of the election process**

**Talk social, not political: I care for a lot of things - education, health, environment**

- ♦ Connect elections and voting to issues that affect the lives of the youth.
- ♦ Promote issues that impact youth the most and those that young people are likely to be more knowledgeable of and interested in (e.g. education, health, ecology).
- ♦ Conduct single-issue campaigns relevant to youth that address issues of concern to young people and relevant policy issues or upcoming political decisions that can motivate the youth which is otherwise alienated from institutional politics.
- ♦ Explicitly include youth issues in political party manifestos.
- ♦ Initiate joint activities with organizations and experts dealing with the issues of interest, e.g. environmental civic organizations.

**Focus on the impact they can make: I want to know that my vote and involvement in community life have an impact.**

- ♦ Promote different young activists, present their activities, and their impact.
- ♦ Promote small community projects that tackle specific issues, e.g. donations to libraries, eco-activism, healthy habits, etc.
- ♦ Promote ways in which young people can make an impact.
- ♦ Use examples that can prove that activism matters and has the power to influence/improve society.
- ♦ Consider different formats such as: testimonials, peer endorsement, third-party narratives, community projects on micro-level facilitated by political parties or other organizations.

**Provide channels for expression of opinion: I want space and opportunities to be heard**

- ♦ Create opportunities for direct and regular communication with the youth

**Make them feel visible: I would like to know that my needs and concerns as a young person are equally important and represented in electoral and political processes.**

- ♦ Top government leaders should promote and give attention to young activists and politicians to demonstrate their interest and support the important role of young people in democratic societies. Given their unique position and the intense media attention they attract, top government leaders can do more to place and keep youth issues on the public agenda and also promote young politicians and representatives as well as other successful young professionals.
- ♦ Social media and other online tools should be utilized to allow youth to participate in national and local decision-making. This could include sharing policy information in a youth-friendly fashion, providing direct youth feedback to the government on certain policies (e.g. through feedback forums), holding consultations between youth and politicians through social media or other online platforms, making use of structured citizen surveys, opinion polls, online petitions, policy consultations, and dialogues and involving youth in development planning.

**Formats and channels to consider include: social media, open day, coffee gatherings, joint projects as well as debates and conferences.**

**Create alliances.**

**With the media (digital and traditional)**

- ♦ Promote narratives focused on the positive and successful examples of youth activism (ex. Greta Thunberg).
- ♦ Promote young politicians and activists' presence in the media and increase their media coverage.

- ♦ Promote new channels and ways for civic participation of the youth.
- ♦ Include more young people in debates, talk shows, etc. and give them an opportunity to talk about issues that interest them.

### **With youth organizations**

- ♦ Create supportive spaces and opportunities for youth to come together and act on issues they care about.
- ♦ Provide guidance and resources that will encourage young people to confidently participate in civic life.
- ♦ Provide mechanisms that will support dialogue between young people and the government.
- ♦ Be more proactive in approaching young people to help increase visibility and public awareness.

### **With influencers and celebrities**

- ♦ Partner with micro-influencers relevant in different areas to young people's life to promote civic participation.

### **Choose the right communication channels.**

Social media plays a dominant role in the media habits of young people as it is typically their main source of information and channel for participation

- ♦ Use social media accounts dedicated to communication with youth, managed by young people within the organization/institution/party.
- ♦ Use a mix of all available direct communication channels (direct messaging, comments, reactions, chatbots, etc.)
- ♦ Promote youth-relevant social topics and issues.
- ♦ Provide space for young people to express their opinions.
- ♦ Partner with influencers/celebrities.
- ♦ Use more dynamic formats: motion, video, live streams, stories, etc.

Use traditional media and TV to educate them about the election process or present candidates. News and debates are the most popular formats.

Use direct, informal meetings to build relationships with young voters making them feel appreciated, valued, and heard

Consider formats such as informal coffee gatherings, debates, community projects that cater to youngsters, lectures on topics of interest, etc.

Organize artistic, cultural or sports activities to strike a balance between education and entertainment.