



Roundtable Discussion Summary

Bridging the Divide: Youth Disaffection & Political Institutions

Tuesday, August 20, 2019

Background

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) has involved young men and women in its programs for more than 20 years and is currently exploring youth disaffection and the role of political institutions. With a grant from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), NDI's Citizen Participation and Political Parties teams' are implementing a program to improve NDI's understanding of how democracy support programs can better bridge the gap between young people and political parties. Through this program we are planning to develop materials that democracy support groups, youth and political parties can use to assess the political interests and preferences of youth and identify strategic entry points for more constructive engagement between young people and political parties.

In an effort to better understand and address young people's disaffection, including their withdrawal from formal political processes and traditional forms of political participation, NDI convened 20 development practitioners in the field of democracy, human rights and governance for a three-hour discussion roundtable discussion. The roundtable had the following objective:

Objective: Brainstorm with democracy, human rights and governance practitioners on the implications of youth disaffection and identify approaches or points of entry to bridge the divide between young people and political institutions.

Opening Remarks

Global Trends

In search of something or someone that can deliver solutions to basic quality of life issues, people are increasingly turning to informal and non-traditional methods of participation in politics, such as leaderless protests and movements, anti-establishment parties and strongman leaders. Increasingly, anti-democratic populists in nascent and long-standing democracies are also winning over supporters from traditional parties by proposing simple solutions to complex problems.

In spite of these trends and challenges, we believe this current environment presents an opportunity for institutions and assistance providers to reimagine democracy in the 21st century. In some contexts, a "back to basics" strategy of outreach and communication is necessary,

however, others offer the current context as a space to think about engagement and participation in new ways, and for new groups of people. More and more citizens, especially young people, are becoming disengaged with democracy when it becomes reduced to merely voting in elections, and only hearing from their representatives during campaign season. While political parties have maintained their position in democracies writ large, their monopoly as the gatekeeper of political information and representation is beginning to diminish. However, turning away from traditional institutions, including parties, has a cost. Political parties still play a central role when it comes to earning the right to govern in a democracy and developing policies that can deliver solutions to national issues.

Young people also continue to face barriers to civic and political participation and over the last several years we have witnessed them move farther away from participation in traditional political activities, political parties or government-sponsored initiatives and gravitate towards more informal ways to express their views and improve their communities. Politics for young people needs to be done differently and the challenge for organizations like ours is to find a way to help young people and institutions work together as equal partners.

NDI Democracy & Governance Programming & Response

Programming around youth in politics has traditionally focused heavily on increasing youth participation in formal processes and institutions and has steered young people towards this type of participation. As such, this type of program has appealed mostly to young people who are predisposed to engage in formal processes and institutions. Research suggests that this is at odds with the forms of participation that are most likely to appeal to most young people. In 2016, NDI completed a study of youth participation programs and trends in youth political activism and leadership. As a result of the study, NDI developed internal [guidance](#), including a youth political participation theory of change, on how best to assist young women and men in becoming more politically organized and active.

Generally, program support has included efforts to:

- Equip young people with political leadership skills, including knowledge about politics and civic engagement, democratic concepts and political entry points; technical skills, as well as emphasis on soft skill development;
- Support youth-led collective action, including issue-based mobilization and advocacy;
- Strengthen their network of political leaders of all ages;
- Strengthen their intergenerational relationships through increased opportunities for collaboration; and
- Create safe spaces for young people to interact with power holders and build healthy relationships.

Political Parties Work

In addition to working with political parties on becoming more youth-inclusive, such as improving methods for outreach to young people and strengthening political party youth wings, NDI's work with young people in political parties generally covers three areas:

- Helping youth better position themselves for leadership roles within their parties;

- Expanding opportunities for youth to engage their leaders and peers on their policy priorities; and
- Facilitating cross-party collaboration on issues of mutual interest

Providing support for youth political participation programs also includes efforts to meet young people where they are, recognizing their diversity and unique starting points, as well as recognizing and addressing the structural barriers that limit their participation.

Plenary Discussion

Key plenary discussion themes:

- It's important to remember that this divide is not being defined as a problem with young people or their informal political efforts. Institutions and political parties are too often disinterested in the meaningful inclusion of young people. Therefore, it is vital for organizations like us or other relevant actors to find (or build) a bridge to close the gap between young people and the institutions themselves.
- The barriers to political participation that young people face are widely known and understood, however, there is less awareness around how to get institutions to invest and embrace new strategies for engaging young people.
- In order to sustainably connect young people with institutions, it is critical to identify the relevant political institutions, in addition to political parties, and establish a clear understanding of their internal structure and organizational motivations.
- Part of the question moving forward is “how do we reframe what is political” and validate alternative forms of participation as legitimate spaces where politics is happening.
- How can we better identify opportunities to work across sectors, either in cross-sectoral programs, such as pairing an economic livelihood program with a political leadership program, or supporting cross-sectoral coalitions that are youth-inclusive.

Reflections on the trends and the growing divide between youth and political institutions:

- Young people still want to be politically engaged, even if they are not predisposed to traditional politics, and traditional political participation programs are missing large segments of the youth population.
- Young people are often at the forefront of political movements, but that does not translate into opportunities within formal spaces to participate or have decision-making power; the traditional hierarchies remain.
- For example in Tunisia, young people found the political party climate to be inhospitable, which is reflective of other political party environments, and CSOs are facing some of the same challenges. Young people also abstained from voting because the candidates didn't reflect them or their values.
- Organizations need to develop programming that engages youth as early as possible. Research shows that civic education is more effective the earlier it is deployed, but we

also need to understand the political barriers accompanying working in schools (and with ministries of education) and what's necessary to work with a younger cohort.

- Gender socialization is also key in identity development (among young women and young men) in a way that impacts their future participation in politics.
- Skills training for young people is not sufficient, institutional barriers continue to prevent youth from demonstrating competency and exercising leadership. Existing research demonstrates that young people want access to true leadership, which they equate with decision making opportunities.
- Programming that engages only youth while ignoring other actors or potential partners will not create new opportunities or sustained, meaningful engagement.

Q1: How can democracy practitioners build meaningful, sustained engagement between young people and political institutions?

- Political parties are failing to provide opportunities for substantive youth involvement, and young people have lost interest in parties. Political parties and institutions don't see that they need young people to combat some of the worrying global trends around democracy, and young people are a key part of the solution.
 - Programs need to approach youth with an intent to listen and let them lead the program in meaningful ways. There also needs to be better incentives for young people to engage with political parties.
- Sustained change is difficult without altering social and institutional norms to be more inclusive and accepting of youth leaders, and programs need to work at multiple levels to influence substantive norm change.
 - Political parties and institutions need to see informal methods of participation as legitimate types of political participation, which requires a shift in our (D&G practitioners; institutions; ect.) thinking.
- It's critical to accurately identify the barrier and whether it is disinterest on the part of political parties or a different or more contextual barrier. If it is disinterest, this could be an opportunity to work with other formal bodies or more deliberately support movements.

Q2: What forms of participation or political processes present the best opportunity or opening for bridging the gap between young people and institutions?

- Young people can engage with other sources of power outside political parties, including social influencers, unions, and other community groups.
- Programs should incorporate creative, youth-led initiatives or participatory processes for decision-making such as participatory budgeting.
- If successful efforts in the nontraditional space are getting support from international organizations and/or democracy support practitioners, they may be able to persuade political parties and other institutions to engage young people in those spaces.
- Hire young people as consultants on programs. This also creates an avenue to work with young people or youth-led initiatives that aren't part of or affiliated with formally registered organizations.

Breakout Discussion

During the breakout discussion, three questions were written on flip chart paper and participants wrote responses on sticky notes, which were then posted on the flip chart paper. Each participant then voted on their priority responses. Listed below are the **top** responses.

Q1: How can we help youth groups identify institutional allies and opportunities to increase their agency and impact?

1. Ask young people who they want to work with and then help them pursue it -- even if it's not who we would have chosen to work with.
2. Have youth groups create their own engagement plans based on their contextual knowledge, political expertise, needs, and demands. Put the decision making power in their hands vs. prescribing solutions.
3. Use social accountability tools, power/gender analysis, community feedback mechanisms.
4. Promote youth leadership in societal institutions other than parties, such as unions, civil society and educational institutions.

Q2: What would incentivize political parties to be more open to engaging youth in nontraditional formats?

1. Building alliances between youth and/or marginalized groups inside, across and outside of political parties can help put pressure on leadership.
2. Focus our funding efforts on working with youth who are trying to bring about change so political parties are drawn to them.
3. Proof of Concepts that demonstrate the end value, such as research data and case studies or fundraising.

Q3: How can D&G organizations help influence institutional/traditional norms and attitudes about young people in politics?

1. Give young people meaningful leadership roles in our own work.
2. Redefine what it means to be political and to participate politically. Include those new definitions in organizational frameworks, calls for proposals, outreach materials etc.
 - a. Create a shared understanding around these new pathways and models for participation.
 - b. Incentivize groups that embrace this approach.
 - c. Prioritize proposals or initiatives that incorporate these new things.
3. Use media and social media to share messages and experiences of young people in politics (open audience driven dialogue).