



# **Bridging the Divide: Strengthening Partnerships Between Young People and Political Parties**

National Democratic Institute



# Summary

Increasing the political participation and leadership of young people is a longstanding component of democracy and governance assistance. Predominantly, these efforts focus on equipping young people with political leadership skills and strengthening youth participation in traditional, formal political processes and institutions, such as parliaments or political parties. These types of programs and initiatives are more likely to reach a homogenous, elite pool of young people who are predisposed to political opportunities and have greater access to political actors, processes and institutions. Additionally, these types of programs and initiatives rarely acknowledge gender diversity and often fail to create an enabling environment for young women and young people who identify as gender diverse. Traditional youth political participation approaches often exclude the majority of young people and their priorities, especially young people with different starting points and needs based on identity,<sup>1</sup> location, experience and other circumstances. Considering rampant political exclusion and social marginalization, the divide between young people, especially those with diverse identities and backgrounds, and political actors and institutions, specifically political parties, is becoming difficult to bridge. Young people are increasingly turning away from parties and institutions and turning toward informal, nontraditional methods of political participation. However, turning away from political parties and institutions comes with negative consequences. Political parties continue to play a central role in the competition for power and how government functions. If young people only engage with democracy by employing acts perceived as “civil disobedience,” they will inevitably be left out of crucial decision-making processes. At the same time, political parties that continue to offer limited opportunities for engagement will only appeal to a small segment of young people, leaving the majority of the youth demographic excluded and disengaged from political decision-making.



In response to these trends, the Citizen Participation and Inclusion and Political Party teams at the National Democratic Institute (NDI) launched the Bridging the Divide initiative with a focus on understanding the factors contributing to the growing divide between young people and political parties and developing resources that foster greater collaboration and solidarity across generations.

Throughout 2020 and 2021, NDI conducted a global review of youth political participation programs that included nonpartisan engagement with political parties. This report describes general trends in young people’s political participation through both informal and formal avenues and includes a series of abbreviated case studies on collaboration between young people and political parties from Chile, Ireland, Lebanon, Nigeria, North Macedonia, Spain and Tunisia.

---

<sup>1</sup> Identity refers to gender, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity and other characteristics.

Based on the findings from each case study, this report describes three approaches that resulted in meaningful consultation or collaboration between young people and political parties:

### **1 Youth-sensitive party platforms and communication styles**

The Ireland and Spain case studies focus on political parties that actively involved young people and their views in shaping party platforms during the election cycle, including the benefits of youth-friendly communication mechanisms.

### **2 Cooperative and inclusive policymaking**

The North Macedonia and Nigeria case studies focus on collaboration between young people, political parties, and other stakeholders to develop laws and policies. The Chile example focuses on the power of youth-driven protests and the consequences of excluding young people from the constitutional reform process.

### **3 Youth-led political party formation and candidacy**

The Lebanon and Tunisia case studies focus on the efficacy of youth-led parties as an avenue to increase youth inclusion within the political party system and better engage young constituents.

Each chapter describes the political environment, the shifting relationship between young people and political parties, and the benefits and limitations of each approach. The approaches discussed in each chapter are accompanied by examples of young people's political engagement and efforts to bridge the divide between young people's extra-institutional political participation and opportunities to substantively engage with political parties. Drawing from the case examples, this publication provides lessons and recommendations for young people, democracy assistance practitioners, and political parties as they support and strengthen young people's collaboration with political parties and their inclusion in political decision-making.

## **Methodology**

Based on the premise of bridging the political divide between young people and political parties, NDI identified the following questions:

- What is the nature of youth disaffection from political parties and what are the implications for democracy support?
- What are the contextual factors to consider in identifying strategic entry points for meaningful collaboration between young people and political parties?
- Who are the political actors best suited to serve as interlocutors between young people and political parties?
- Which types of interventions or programs can help bridge the divide between young people and political parties?

Based on the research questions, NDI conducted a desk review to identify trends contributing to the growing rift between young people and political parties, trends in youth-focused collaboration or engagement with political parties, and mechanisms or initiatives that support meaningful collaboration between civil society youth and political parties. Based on the desk review and

interviews with NDI staff, technical experts and partners, NDI conducted a series of case studies in Chile, Ireland, Lebanon, Nigeria, North Macedonia, Spain, and Tunisia to examine the status, challenges and opportunities of youth participation in formal politics and identify entry points for collaboration between young people and political parties. Each case study highlights examples of collaboration between young people and political parties, lessons learned and recommendations to strengthen future programs.

## Recommendations

Identifying the intersection between young people's informal political activities and the efforts of political parties and formal governing institutions is imperative for the future of democracies. As the youth demographic moves steadily away from joining or engaging with political parties, youth mistrust and disaffection regarding political systems are unlikely to change. This is further perpetuated by parties that are unwilling to build a collaborative, dynamic and accountable relationship with young citizens. Additionally, political parties that are unwilling to consider gender inclusion beyond gender parity are at risk of reinforcing dominant, masculine party culture that is disempowering for all young people, particularly young women. Young people of diverse identities and backgrounds have innovative ideas and methods of participation and organizing that require visibility, validation and inclusion as necessary first steps to begin repairing the relationship. The case studies presented in this document are the basis for several practical recommendations.



## Democracy and Governance Practitioners

**To enable a stronger sense of ownership and commitment to political futures, intersectional, inclusive practices should be implemented. As a part of these efforts, practitioners should:**

- Encourage intergenerational collaboration through sustained, and if necessary mediated, dialogues between younger and older members of political parties and civil society organizations.
- Foster strong mentorship and allyship between older and younger organization members, with particular attention to the need for strong mentorship and allyship for young women and young people with disabilities.
- Create avenues for the participation of groups that reflect diverse sectors of the population concerning youth and gender diversity, ethnicity, religion, tribal affiliation, economic status and rurality among other possibilities.
- Connect young people with parties based on common goals or issues, beyond campaigning, and encourage political parties to develop mechanisms that allow them to regularly consult with youth constituents around the issues that matter most to them, such as climate change.
- Aim to establish strong working relationships among diverse, representative youth-focused or youth-led organizations and civil society actors who demonstrate a strong commitment to youth engagement or aim to enhance young people's status and place in society.

**Youth are often underrepresented in political institutions and at decision-making tables. To foster more inclusive decision-making practices and more representative institutions, practitioners should:**

- Encourage and support initiatives aimed at increasing young people's leadership and candidacy. Such initiatives may involve civic education initiatives; campaign strategies; interviews with current, young, political leaders; and youth-led education opportunities, where young people are educating other young people through community outreach and engagement.

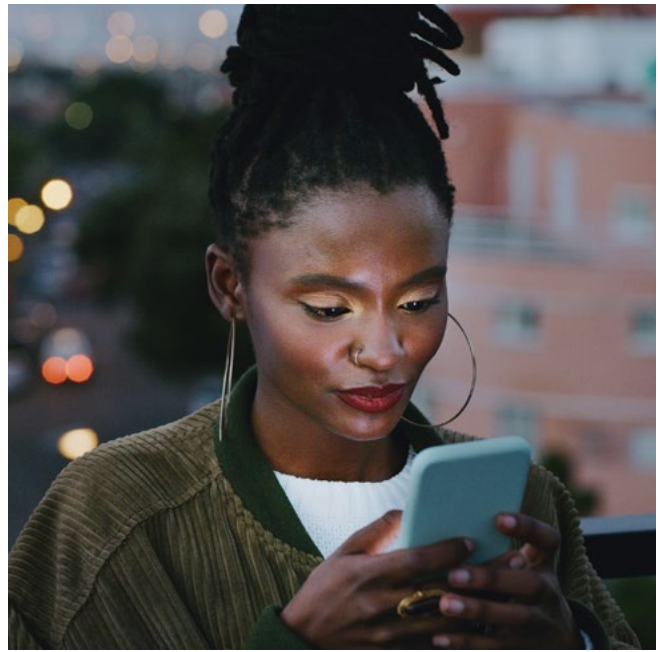
- Create and encourage youth inclusion in decision-making processes through the creation of youth caucuses or youth-inclusive mechanisms in legislative bodies at the local, regional or national levels.

## Young People

**To promote changes in policy outcomes and to foster stronger trust and engagement with formal political institutions, young civil society actors must find meaningful ways to engage with political parties.**

**As part of these efforts, young people can:**

- Identify opportunities to collaborate with political parties beyond traditional political party activities. For example, young people do not need to join a party or organize on behalf of a party to have their voices or perspectives included. Young people can collaborate with a youth caucus, a women’s caucus, an issue-based caucus, a party affiliated organization or a political party youth wing.
- Benefit from learning how to “deepen their engagement,” starting with a better understanding of available political entry points, including identifying key stakeholders and where to target their efforts. Young people have received a significant amount of training and capacity building but still require tangible leadership opportunities to use their skills and experiences.
- Deepen their commitment to inclusion by adopting a gender transformative approach and by collaborating with organizations representing segments of civil society that face additional barriers to political participation, including women; people with disabilities; ethnic and religious minorities; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) communities.
- Foster relationships between young party members and youth in civil society through joint efforts including community-based events, or through mutual aid programs that aim to foster mutual respect and knowledge sharing.
- Identify allies and entry points within different political parties instead of limiting themselves to one party when organizing campaigns or initiatives. Young people can also consider collaborating with other youth-focused organizations to strengthen their efforts, with a focus on young people and organizations beyond the traditional democracy and governance actors.



## Political Parties

**To meet young people where they are and through their preferred communication styles, political parties should seek ways to enhance their use of social media platforms and other forms of communication. To this end, they should:**

- Co-create outreach and communication strategies with young people, including both party-affiliated and non-affiliated young people.
- Include young people in the party’s media and communications team and provide them with decision-making power over method and content.
- Enable young party members and supporters the autonomy to create content on the party-sponsored social media platforms to create more authentic and relatable communication strategies.
- Use livestreams, photos, short informational clips and links to share town halls and public events on youth-oriented social media sites like Instagram and TikTok to create greater transparency.
- Utilize social media platforms to survey young constituents about their wants, needs and demands while also creating space in party agendas, manifestos and debates for these issues to be discussed.

## Organizations Working with Political Parties and Young People

To encourage greater representation of young people's perspectives and ideas in party platforms and activities, organizations should:

- Provide opportunities for young people, including young women and young people with diverse backgrounds and identities, to engage with party members through youth-inclusive town halls and conventions that meet in locations accessible to young people, such as academic institutions or community centers.
- Aim to create meaningful experiences for young people to engage with political elites through experiential learning opportunities, such as visits to legislative offices, guest speakers or lecturers, and if amenable, internship opportunities.
- Identify opportunities for collaboration between youth-focused civil society organizations and political parties on issues that both groups care about.
- Work to support a youth caucus that has meaningful representation in party meetings and assemblies. Ensure that young women and young people of diverse identities and backgrounds can participate equitably alongside their peers.
- Move beyond interactions between political parties and young people that tokenize young people, exploit them or are extractive. These types of negative interactions make it difficult for young people to identify reliable allies or build trustworthy, sustainable partnerships. Parties should also develop mechanisms that allow for regular input and consultation from their youth constituency, regardless of who is in elected leadership.



