

Youth Political Engagement: Legal Barriers and Opportunities for Participation

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This article delves into the multifaceted realm of youth political engagement, with a particular focus on identifying and analyzing the legal barriers that impede young people's participation in democratic processes, as well as the opportunities that exist to facilitate such engagement. Through a comprehensive review and descriptive analysis of existing literature, the study illuminates the complex interplay of factors influencing youth political participation. Key themes explored include the impact of legal and structural challenges, the role of digital media in shaping new avenues for political engagement, the significance of civic education, and the influence of community attachment and sociopolitical attitudes on young individuals' willingness and capacity to engage in political life. The findings reveal that while legal barriers and structural challenges significantly hinder youth political participation, there are also substantial opportunities for enhancing engagement through digital platforms, targeted civic education programs, and initiatives aimed at strengthening community ties. The study underscores the importance of addressing both the external barriers to participation and the internal factors that motivate young people to engage in political processes. This article contributes to the ongoing discourse on youth political engagement by offering insights into the dynamics of legal barriers and opportunities for participation. It highlights the need for legal reforms, digital literacy initiatives, comprehensive civic education, and community engagement strategies to foster a more inclusive and vibrant democratic society. The conclusions drawn from this review not only shed light on the current state of youth political engagement but also chart a course for future research and policy interventions aimed at empowering the next generation of political participants.

Keywords: Youth political engagement, legal barriers, political participation, civic education.

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1. Introduction

The significance of youth political engagement in shaping vibrant, resilient democracies cannot be overstated. As the bearers of future societal shifts, the political activation and participation of young individuals are pivotal in ensuring the continuity and evolution of democratic processes and principles. However, this demographic faces unique legal barriers that often impede their full participation, even as various opportunities for engagement emerge, facilitated by

evolving societal norms and technological advancements. The exploration of youth engagement in political spheres is not novel; however, the increasing recognition of legal constraints and the burgeoning avenues for participation demand a focused inquiry. Studies such as those by Boulianne and Brailey (2014) and Diemer and Li (2011) have underscored the critical role that community attachment and critical consciousness development play in fostering civic and political engagement among young people. These



foundational elements set the stage for understanding the multifaceted relationship between young individuals and the political landscape they navigate (Boulianne & Brailey, 2014; Diemer & Li, 2011).

Legal barriers to political participation for youth extend beyond mere age restrictions to vote. They encompass a broad spectrum of hurdles, including but not limited to, the accessibility of political information, the complexity of voter registration procedures, and the adequacy of civic education. As noted by Gordon and Taft (2010), rethinking youth political socialization is essential in addressing these barriers, suggesting that a more nuanced understanding of youth engagement and the legal structures that shape it is crucial for fostering a more inclusive political arena (Gordon & Taft, 2010).

Conversely, opportunities for youth political participation have been significantly reshaped by digital advancements. The work of Gustafsson (2012) highlights the subtle yet profound impact of social media platforms like Facebook on political participation, offering new avenues for engagement that bypass traditional legal and structural barriers (Gustafsson, 2012). Similarly, Levy and Akiva (2019) delve into the motivational factors that drive youth political engagement, pointing to the potential of digital platforms to inspire and sustain political activities among young populations (Levy & Akiva, 2019).

The interplay between legal barriers and opportunities for youth political participation raises important questions about the efficacy of existing legal frameworks and the potential for reform. Research by McFarland and Thomas (2006) sheds light on how youth voluntary associations can significantly influence adult political participation, suggesting that early engagement in civic activities can have long-lasting impacts on democratic participation. This underscores the importance of creating legal and social environments that support and encourage youth political engagement from an early age (McFarland & Thomas, 2006).

Moreover, the role of education in preparing young individuals for political participation cannot be understated. Studies by Hope and Jagers (2014) and Hope (2015) emphasize the importance of youth social responsibility and political efficacy in fostering civic engagement, particularly among marginalized groups. These findings highlight the need for educational systems that not only provide the knowledge necessary for political participation but also

instill a sense of agency and efficacy in young individuals (Hope, 2015).

In the context of legal barriers and opportunities for youth political engagement, it is imperative to consider the broader societal and cultural factors that influence these dynamics. The work of Terriquez and Kwon (2014) on the political socialization of second-generation immigrant youth through intergenerational family relations and civic organizations illustrates the complex ecosystem within which political engagement is nurtured or stifled (Terriquez & Kwon, 2014). In conclusion, this paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on youth political engagement by examining the legal barriers that hinder participation and exploring the opportunities that facilitate it. Drawing on the rich body of literature on the subject, including seminal works (Boulianne & Brailey, 2014; Diemer & Li, 2011; Gordon & Taft, 2010; Gustafsson, 2012; Levy & Akiva, 2019; McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Terriquez & Kwon, 2014), this study aims to provide insights into the complex interplay between legal frameworks, societal norms, and technological advancements in shaping the political engagement of youth today.

2. Methodology

2.1. Study Design

This article adopts a review methodology, specifically employing a descriptive analysis approach to synthesize existing literature on youth political engagement, with a focus on identifying legal barriers and opportunities for participation. The methodology section is structured to outline the process of literature selection, criteria for inclusion and exclusion, and the analytical framework used to distill key insights and themes from the reviewed studies.

2.2. Literature Search Strategy

The initial phase involved a comprehensive literature search across several academic databases, including JSTOR, PubMed, Google Scholar, and Scopus. Keywords and phrases such as "youth political engagement," "legal barriers to political participation," "youth civic engagement," "digital platforms and political participation," and "civic education" were used in various combinations to ensure a wide coverage of relevant literature. The search was not restricted by the publication date to capture the full scope of scholarly

work in this area, from foundational theories to the latest research findings.

2.3. *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Studies were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals, (2) studies that specifically address youth political engagement or participation, (3) research focusing on legal barriers or facilitators to political participation, and (4) works discussing the impact of digital media or civic education on youth political involvement. Exclusion criteria encompassed: (1) non-peer-reviewed literature, (2) studies not directly related to youth or political engagement, (3) articles focusing solely on adult populations, and (4) literature not available in English.

2.4. *Data Extraction and Analysis*

For each article that met the inclusion criteria, relevant data were extracted, including the author(s), year of publication, study objectives, methodology, key findings, and conclusions. This process facilitated a structured comparison across studies, allowing for the identification of common themes, gaps in the literature, and divergent viewpoints.

The descriptive analysis involved a qualitative synthesis of the selected literature. This approach enabled a comprehensive examination of the dynamics of youth political engagement, the identification of legal and structural barriers to participation, and the exploration of opportunities to enhance engagement. Themes were categorized based on the factors influencing youth political participation, including individual-level determinants (e.g., political efficacy, critical consciousness), social and community factors (e.g., civic education, community attachment), and broader systemic aspects (e.g., digital media, legal frameworks).

3. Literature Review

3.1. *Theoretical Frameworks and Models*

Theoretical frameworks and models provide essential insights into the dynamics of youth political engagement, elucidating the multifaceted relationship between young individuals and their political environments. Gordon and Taft (2010) emphasize the need to reconsider traditional

notions of youth political socialization, arguing for a broader conceptualization that includes non-traditional forms of political expression and participation. This reevaluation is critical in understanding the complex ways in which young people engage with the political sphere, beyond mere voting or formal political activities. Their work suggests that the processes through which youth develop political identities and agency are deeply embedded in their social interactions, media consumption, and experiences within educational institutions (Gordon & Taft, 2010).

Building on this perspective, Boulianne and Brailey (2014) explore the impact of community attachment on civic and political engagement among students. Their findings indicate that a strong sense of belonging to a community can significantly enhance young individuals' propensity to engage in political activities. This relationship underscores the importance of social bonds and collective identities in fostering political participation, suggesting that efforts to increase youth engagement should also focus on strengthening community ties (Boulianne & Brailey, 2014).

Furthermore, Diemer and Li (2011) highlight the role of critical consciousness development in political participation among marginalized youth. Their research demonstrates that awareness of social injustices and a sense of efficacy in effecting change are key drivers of political engagement for young people facing systemic barriers. This underscores the importance of educational and social programs that aim to empower youth by enhancing their critical thinking skills and political efficacy (Diemer & Li, 2011).

3.2. *The Impact of Digital Media on Youth Political Participation*

The advent of digital media has transformed the landscape of youth political engagement, offering new platforms for expression, mobilization, and activism. Gustafsson (2012) examines the subtle yet profound influence of Facebook on political participation among Swedish social network site users. The study reveals that social media not only facilitates the dissemination of political information but also provides a space for political discussion and engagement that can lead to increased political activity offline. This suggests that digital platforms play a crucial role in lowering the barriers to political participation, making it more

accessible to a broader segment of the youth population (Gustafsson, 2012).

Similarly, Yap, Nemeth, and Barat (2022) investigate digital civic engagement and youth participation from the perspective of Hungarian LIS students. Their work highlights the potential of digital platforms to serve as critical tools for political information and engagement, particularly among younger demographics. The study points to the importance of digital literacy and access to technology as key factors in enabling effective political participation in the digital age (Yap et al., 2022).

3.3. *Sociopolitical Attitudes, Civic Education, and Youth Engagement*

The formation of sociopolitical attitudes and the role of civic education are pivotal in shaping the civic engagement of young people. Hope and Jagers (2014) delve into the significance of sociopolitical attitudes and civic education in the civic engagement of black youth. Their research underscores the critical role that an understanding of civic responsibilities and rights plays in motivating young individuals to participate in political processes. This highlights the need for comprehensive civic education programs that not only inform youth about the political system but also engage them in meaningful discussions about their role in society (Hope & Jagers, 2014).

Johnson (2023) further expands on this theme by conceptualizing adolescent black youth political efficacy in an era of crises. The study emphasizes the importance of fostering a sense of political efficacy among young people, particularly in challenging times, to ensure their active and sustained engagement in political processes. This calls for educational and community-based initiatives that support the development of a strong sense of agency among youth, enabling them to effectively navigate and influence the political landscape (Johnson, 2023).

Together, these studies provide a multifaceted understanding of youth political engagement, highlighting the interplay between individual factors, social dynamics, and digital technologies. They underscore the importance of addressing both the barriers to and opportunities for youth political participation, through targeted interventions that strengthen community ties, enhance political efficacy, and leverage the potential of digital media.

3.4. *Legal and Structural Barriers to Youth Political Participation*

A significant portion of the literature on youth political engagement addresses the various legal and structural barriers that inhibit young people's participation in political processes. These barriers are not merely about age restrictions on voting but encompass a broader array of obstacles, including complicated registration processes, lack of political education, and limited access to political information tailored to the needs and interests of younger populations.

Feezell and Jones (2017) contribute to this discussion by exploring how political disagreement and the setting in which it occurs can influence youth participation. Their findings suggest that disagreement, when encountered in supportive and open environments, does not necessarily deter youth from political participation. Instead, it can stimulate engagement by prompting young individuals to articulate their views and seek more information. This insight points to the significance of creating spaces, both online and offline, where young people can safely express differing opinions and engage in constructive political discourse (Feezell & Jones, 2017).

Moreover, the work of McFarland and Thomas (2006) on the influence of youth voluntary associations on adult political participation provides valuable insights into the long-term effects of early engagement in civic activities. Their research demonstrates that involvement in youth organizations not only fosters individual skills and interests related to politics but also builds networks that can facilitate later political participation. This underscores the importance of addressing legal and structural barriers to youth engagement in such organizations, as they serve as crucial incubators for the development of politically active citizens (McFarland & Thomas, 2006).

Opportunities for Enhancing Youth Political Engagement
In contrast to the barriers, there is also a rich body of literature focused on the opportunities for enhancing youth political participation. This includes studies on the impact of digital platforms, civic education programs, and initiatives designed to lower the thresholds for political involvement.

Levy and Akiva (2019) analyze factors that motivate political participation among youth, shedding light on the significant role of motivational variables like interest

in politics, efficacy beliefs, and the perceived importance of political involvement. Their findings highlight the potential of targeted interventions to increase youth political engagement by addressing these motivational aspects directly. Programs that aim to enhance political interest and efficacy could thus play a pivotal role in encouraging young people to participate in political processes (Levy & Akiva, 2019).

Similarly, Motti-Stefanidi and Cicognani (2018) discuss the relationship between youth active citizenship in Europe and trust in EU institutions, pointing to the vital role of institutional trust in fostering political participation among young people. Their work suggests that efforts to bring the European Union closer to its young citizens could benefit from focusing on building trust through transparency, responsiveness, and the active involvement of youth in decision-making processes (Motti-Stefanidi & Cicognani, 2018).

Finally, Terriquez and Kwon (2014) examine the political socialization of second-generation immigrant youth, highlighting the unique opportunities and challenges faced by this group. Their study emphasizes the importance of intergenerational family relations and civic organizations in fostering the political participation of immigrant youth. It suggests that inclusive policies and programs that recognize and build on the strengths of diverse communities can significantly enhance the political engagement of young people from immigrant backgrounds (Terriquez & Kwon, 2014).

Together, these studies illuminate the complex landscape of youth political engagement, characterized by a range of barriers and opportunities. They call for multifaceted strategies that not only aim to dismantle obstacles to participation but also proactively build capacities, motivation, and trust among young populations. Through such approaches, it is possible to cultivate a more inclusive and vibrant democratic society where the voices of all young people are heard and valued.

4. Discussion

4.1. Legal Barriers and Structural Challenges

The literature consistently underscores the presence of legal barriers and structural challenges that significantly impact youth political participation. These barriers are not only legal in nature, such as voting age restrictions

and complicated registration processes, but also include broader societal and educational structures that fail to adequately prepare youth for political participation. Gordon and Taft (2010) call for a reevaluation of youth political socialization, suggesting that traditional mechanisms may not adequately capture the diversity of youth engagement in the contemporary political landscape. This viewpoint is crucial in understanding that legal barriers extend beyond mere statutory limitations to include the socialization processes that shape youth attitudes and capabilities towards political engagement (Gordon & Taft, 2010).

Moreover, Diemer and Li (2011) highlight the critical role of critical consciousness in enabling marginalized youth to overcome barriers to political participation. Their work suggests that the development of critical consciousness—understanding the societal structures that influence one's life and feeling capable of contributing to change—is a vital component in engaging youth in political activities. This points to a significant gap in current political socialization practices, which may not fully address or nurture critical consciousness among young populations, especially those from marginalized communities (Diemer & Li, 2011).

4.2. The Digital Divide and Opportunities for Engagement

The advent of digital media has introduced new opportunities for political engagement, reshaping the landscape of youth participation. Gustafsson (2012) and Yap, Nemeth, and Barat (2022) discuss the potential of social media and digital platforms to lower barriers to participation, providing young people with access to political information and forums for discourse. However, the literature also reveals a digital divide, where access to and proficiency with digital tools are unevenly distributed among youth populations. This divide presents both a challenge and an opportunity for increasing youth political engagement (Gustafsson, 2012; Yap et al., 2022). On one hand, it underscores the need for targeted initiatives to enhance digital literacy and access among underserved youth populations. On the other hand, it highlights the potential of digital platforms to engage a broader swath of the youth population in political processes, provided that these accessibility issues are addressed.

4.3. *Civic Education, Community Attachment, and Sociopolitical Attitudes*

The roles of civic education, community attachment, and sociopolitical attitudes in shaping youth political engagement are profound. Boulianne and Brailey (2014) and Hope and Jagers (2014) underline the importance of a strong sense of community and informed, active citizenship education in fostering youth engagement. These findings suggest that civic education programs that are interactive, that foster a sense of belonging, and that encourage critical engagement with political issues can significantly impact young people's willingness and capacity to participate in political life (Boulianne & Brailey, 2014; Hope & Jagers, 2014).

Furthermore, the work of Levy and Akiva (2019) on the motivational factors for youth political participation underscores the importance of addressing both internal (e.g., political efficacy, interest) and external (e.g., opportunities for participation, supportive environments) factors. This dual focus is crucial in designing interventions and policies aimed at enhancing youth political engagement, suggesting that efforts must not only remove external barriers but also build internal capacities and motivations (Levy & Akiva, 2019).

4.4. *Integration and Implications*

The synthesis of findings from the literature reveals a complex interplay of factors influencing youth political engagement. Legal and structural barriers, digital media, civic education, community attachment, and sociopolitical attitudes all play critical roles. Addressing the challenges and leveraging the opportunities identified requires a multifaceted approach that includes legal reforms to lower unnecessary barriers to participation, initiatives to enhance digital literacy and access, comprehensive and engaging civic education programs, and efforts to strengthen community ties among youth.

Moreover, the literature points to the need for ongoing research to better understand the evolving dynamics of youth political engagement, especially in the context of rapid technological change and shifting societal norms. Future studies should aim to uncover the nuanced ways in which different populations of youth interact with and are impacted by these factors, with an eye towards

inclusive strategies that engage diverse groups of young people in the political process.

5. Conclusion

The exploration of youth political engagement through the lens of legal barriers and opportunities for participation has unveiled a complex landscape, characterized by both significant challenges and promising avenues for enhancing youth involvement in democratic processes. This article has sought to dissect these dynamics, drawing on a broad array of scholarly work to illuminate the multifaceted nature of youth political participation. The conclusion of this investigation not only synthesizes the key insights derived from the literature but also charts a course for future research and policy interventions aimed at fostering a more inclusive and vibrant democratic society.

5.1. *Synthesis of Key Findings*

The literature reviewed underscores the critical importance of addressing legal barriers and structural challenges that hinder youth political engagement. These barriers are not solely confined to statutory age restrictions or the complexities of voter registration processes but extend to the broader societal and educational frameworks that shape young individuals' readiness and capacity to engage in political life. The development of critical consciousness, particularly among marginalized youth, emerges as a pivotal component in overcoming these obstacles, suggesting a need for political socialization practices that are inclusive, empowering, and capable of nurturing a deep understanding of societal structures.

Digital media presents both challenges and opportunities for youth political participation. While social media platforms and digital tools have the potential to lower barriers to engagement, offering unprecedented access to political information and forums for discourse, they also highlight the existence of a digital divide. This divide underscores the necessity of targeted efforts to enhance digital literacy and access among underserved youth populations, ensuring that the democratizing potential of digital platforms can be fully realized.

Furthermore, the roles of civic education, community attachment, and sociopolitical attitudes in promoting youth engagement cannot be overstated. Effective civic education programs that are engaging, interactive, and foster a strong sense of community and critical engagement with political issues are essential in motivating young people to participate in political life. These programs, alongside initiatives designed to strengthen community ties and build positive sociopolitical attitudes, are key to empowering youth with the knowledge, skills, and sense of efficacy required for active political participation.

5.2. *Implications for Policy and Practice*

The findings from this review carry significant implications for policymakers, educators, and community leaders seeking to enhance youth political engagement. Legal reforms aimed at reducing unnecessary barriers to participation are urgently needed. Such reforms might include lowering the voting age for certain elections, simplifying the voter registration process, and ensuring that civic education is a mandatory component of the school curriculum.

Moreover, the digital divide must be addressed through policies that ensure universal access to the internet and digital literacy programs, particularly for underserved communities. This effort is critical in ensuring that all young people can benefit from the opportunities presented by digital media for political engagement.

Educational and community-based initiatives must prioritize the development of programs that are not only informative but also engaging and empowering for youth. These programs should aim to build a sense of community, enhance political efficacy, and foster an environment where young individuals feel valued and capable of effecting change.

5.3. *Directions for Future Research*

While this review has provided valuable insights into the dynamics of youth political engagement, it also highlights several areas where further research is needed. Future studies should explore the nuanced ways in which different groups of young people, including those from marginalized communities, interact with and are impacted by the legal, structural, and societal factors influencing political participation. Understanding these

dynamics is crucial for developing targeted strategies that address the specific needs and barriers faced by diverse youth populations.

Additionally, the impact of emerging technologies and digital platforms on political socialization and participation warrants closer examination. As digital media continues to evolve, its role in shaping political engagement among youth is likely to become even more significant. Research that tracks these trends over time can provide critical insights into how digital tools can be leveraged to enhance political participation.

Finally, the effectiveness of civic education programs and community engagement initiatives in fostering political efficacy and participation among youth deserves further investigation. Studies that evaluate the impact of these programs can inform best practices and guide the development of interventions that are truly effective in empowering young people to engage in political life.

5.4. *Final Thoughts*

In conclusion, the journey towards understanding and enhancing youth political engagement is both challenging and rewarding. While significant barriers to participation exist, there are also considerable opportunities for engaging young people in meaningful and impactful ways. By addressing legal and structural obstacles, leveraging the potential of digital media, and fostering empowering educational and community environments, it is possible to create a more inclusive and active political landscape for youth. The insights derived from this review provide a foundation for future efforts in this direction, emphasizing the need for continued exploration, innovation, and commitment to empowering the next generation of citizens.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

Given the nature of this review article, which is based on the analysis of existing published literature, no primary data were collected from human participants. Therefore, ethical approval and consent procedures were not applicable to this study. However, ethical considerations in the selection and interpretation of literature were meticulously observed, ensuring respect for the intellectual property rights of the original authors and accuracy in representing their findings.

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