Youth Reimagine Democracy

Canada–EU Youth Perspectives on Meaningful Democratic Engagement

Parliamentary Centre
Canada's Global Leader for Democracy

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au Canada

Youth Reimagine Democracy

June 2026

Youth Reimagine Democracy is a statement paper developed as part of Youth and the Future of Democracy, a Canada–EU project led by the Parliamentary Centre in partnership with the Delegation of the European Union to Canada.

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Founded in 1968**, the Parliamentary Centre** is one of the leading and longest serving non-governmental, non-partisan organizations dedicated to the strengthening of parliamentary democracy in Canada and around the world. The Parliamentary Centre has become a source of expertise and advice and a partner of choice for more than 120 legislatures in over 70 countries, along with a host of civil society groups and other democratic actors. Our partners include emerging and developed democracies, as well as democratic actors working in non-democratic contexts.

As a trusted facilitator of dialogue and exchanges we are uniquely positioned to support efforts to advance the key areas of collaboration outlined in the "Joint Statement: Enduring Partnership" and other relevant documents guiding the deepening Canada-EU relationship.

Our mandate and work include a targeted focus on youth perspectives on democracy, including the challenges of youth disillusionment and disengagement, the impact of social media and the challenges and opportunities of civic education, re-engagement, agency and empowerment.

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The Delegation of the European Union to Canada represents the European Union (EU) in Canada and works to strengthen cooperation between Canada and the EU. Since 1976, the Delegation has served as a bridge between the European Union and Canada, advancing political dialogue, expanding trade and investment, supporting research and innovation, and working together on climate action and global challenges.

The European Union (EU) is a unique political and economic partnership of 27 European countries working together to promote peace, prosperity, democracy, and solidarity. Its mission is to improve the lives of its citizens by fostering sustainable economic growth, protecting fundamental rights, supporting social inclusion, and addressing shared challenges through collective action. The EU seeks to strengthen cooperation among its member states while respecting national diversity and sovereignty. It advances common policies in areas such as trade, climate action, security, research, and digital transformation, and promotes its values of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, and the rule of law both within Europe and globally.

About the project

Youth and the Future of Democracy

The Youth and the Future of Democracy paper initiative was developed by the Parliamentary Centre in partnership with the Delegation of the European Union to Canada. It brings together youth organizations from both sides of the Atlantic to identify shared priorities and develop actionable recommendations for more meaningful democratic engagement.

The Process

1. **Mapping Youth Organizations**
   Identifying youth-led organizations across Canada and the EU to build the foundation for the survey and future initiatives.
2. **Survey on Youth and Democracy**
   Collecting perspectives on youth priorities, trust in institutions, barriers to participation, formal engagement mechanisms, and equity of access.
3. **Statement Paper: Youth Reimagine Democracy**
   Bringing together preliminary findings and common themes as a basis for discussion at the Forum.
4. **EU–Canada Youth Forum**
   Convening participants on June 21–22 to test the findings, deliberate across regions, and build shared recommendations.
5. **Policy Brief**
   Turning Forum discussions into concrete recommendations for policymakers and institutions in Canada and the EU.
6. **Dissemination and Impact**
   Sharing the findings with policymakers and identifying opportunities for continued collaboration and joint action among youth organizations across the Atlantic.

Executive Summary

Survey results at a glance

This report summarizes responses from 24 youth organizations: 13 from Canada and 11 from the European Union. The survey was designed to capture what youth organizations are hearing through their work with young people: what issues matter most, where participation feels meaningful, what barriers remain, and what should change. The findings offer a snapshot of what youth organizations identified as priorities ahead of the Canada-EU Youth Forum, where participants will test, challenge, and refine these findings into concrete recommendations.

What the survey found

24
Youth Organizations Surveyed

13 Respondents from Canada

11 Respondents from the European Union

Democratic trust is shaped by daily life.

Youth engagement depends on whether institutions are seen as responding to the issues shaping young people's futures. In Canada, respondents emphasized affordability and housing. In the EU, they placed greater emphasis on rights, education, peace and security, discrimination, war, and displacement. In both contexts, meaningful engagement requires responsiveness to young people's most urgent concerns.

Access to participation is unequal.

Respondents in both regions identified barriers that prevent some young people from accessing formal engagement spaces. The survey suggests that general invitations are not enough. Meaningful inclusion requires targeted outreach, accessible formats, trusted intermediaries and partners such a organizations that already have relationships with excluded youth.

Youth organizations are democratic infrastructure.

Youth organizations were described as spaces where young people often first experience participation, representation, and collective action. They help young people navigate institutions that may otherwise feel distant or untrustworthy. However, respondents also warned that youth organizations cannot play this role sustainably without long-term funding and structural support.

Trust shapes whether engagement feels worth it.

The survey suggests that trust is uneven across institutions. In Canada, political parties and the media received the lowest trust scores. In the EU, national governments and national political parties scored lower than EU-level institutions such as the European Parliament and the Court of Justice of the EU. This matters because participation mechanisms are judged not only by their design, but by whether young people trust the institutions behind them.

Participation works when it leads somewhere.

Respondents did not reject formal participation. They valued mechanisms that offer visible outcomes, direct access to decision-makers, collective power, meaningful representation, and opportunities to shape decisions early. Participation loses meaning when it becomes a "black box": when youth input is collected, but there is no feedback, no follow-up, and no visible connection to decisions.

Digital spaces matter, but digital tools are not enough.

Respondents recognized that young people learn, debate, organize, and mobilize online. They also raised concerns about misinformation, polarization, harassment, and declining trust. Only one organization selected expanding digital participation tools as a top-three measure to strengthen youth engagement. This suggests that digital tools may help institutions reach young people, but they cannot replace trust, accessibility, feedback, and meaningful influence.

Canada and the EU share the same foundational priorities.

Despite different institutions and participation mechanisms, respondents in both regions emphasized similar recommendations. The highest-ranked measures were long-term funding for youth engagement initiatives, stronger civic education, and stronger media literacy. This suggests that youth across the Atlantic are not only asking institutions to fix individual mechanisms or create more opportunities to participate. They are asking for the foundations that make participation meaningful.

From findings to Forum: What to test

The survey points to shared priorities, but the Forum should help turn them into clearer recommendations. Key questions include:

01 What separates a meaningful participation mechanism from a symbolic one?

02 What kind of feedback loop should institutions provide after engaging young people?

03 What would stable, useful funding for youth engagement initiatives actually look like?

04 What should civic education include, and who should deliver it?

05 When are digital tools useful, and when do they reproduce the same problems as offline engagement?

06 How can media literacy be strengthened in a way that is youth-friendly?

07 How can institutions reach young people who are usually missing from engagement spaces?

08 What forms of Canada-EU youth collaboration would be most useful after the Forum?

The survey shows that youth in Canada and the EU are facing many of the same challenges: weak feedback loops, barriers to inclusion, unstable funding, low trust in some institutions, and uncertainty about whether participation leads to change.

The Forum is an opportunity to move from broad findings to shared demands. Participants can identify what institutions should do differently, what implementation could look like, and how youth organizations across Canada and the EU can work together toward a more inclusive, responsive, and accountable vision of democratic engagement.

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1

Introduction

Introduction

74% **of the world's population now lives in autocracies.**

Democracy is at a critical juncture. As of 2026, 74% of the world's population, about 6 billion people, live in autocracies with ten new autocratizers identified in 2025 (V-Dem Institute, 2026).[1] Established democracies, like Canada and European Union Member States, are not immune: six out of the ten new autocratizing countries are in Europe and North America.[2]

Young people are both among the biggest losers of democratic decline and, in some cases, part of what is driving it. Growing up amid overlapping crises, including rising costs, climate change, and geopolitical instability, many young people feel anxious and pessimistic about their futures. This is shaping their democratic attitudes, including increased openness for authoritarian systems (TUI Young Europe 2024). Whether this generation becomes a driver of democratic erosion or renewal depends largely on whether institutions give young people real, meaningful ways to participate and respond to their demands.

In this context, the Parliamentary Centre, in partnership with the Delegation of the European Union to Canada and the EU-Canada Policy Support Facility, developed Youth and the Future of Democracy - a transformative new initiative with two primary purposes:

01

Develop youth-driven[3] recommendations for meaningful democratic engagement.

The project seeks to understand how youth perceive democratic institutions, participation mechanisms, and barriers to engagement. These findings will support the development of actionable, youth-driven recommendations for governments and institutions. The aim is to identify practical ways to improve existing engagement mechanisms, while also setting out a longer-term vision for how young people should be included in democratic decision-making.

02

Strengthen Canada–EU collaboration on shared democratic challenges.

Young people in Canada and the EU are facing similar pressures, including, cost of living, housing insecurity, climate anxiety, disinformation, and defence and security concerns. At the same time, opportunities for youth organizations across the Atlantic to compare experiences, share strategies, and develop joint approaches to democratic resilience have been limited.

The project asks whether youth organizations in Canada and the EU can identify shared priorities. If common demands emerge, they may provide a basis for future collaboration including shared advocacy or coordinated action across the Atlantic.

[1] Find V-Dem's Democracy Report 2026 here: https://www.v-dem.net/documents/75/V-Dem_Institute_Democracy_Report_2026_lowres.pdf

[2] The six new autocratizing countries in Europe and North America include: Croatia, Italy, Slovakia, Slovenia, the UK, and the US.

[3] For the purposes of this project, youth is defined as people aged 18–30. We recognize that the meaning of "youth" varies across contexts, communities, and institutions. This age range was selected for practical purposes.

Methodology

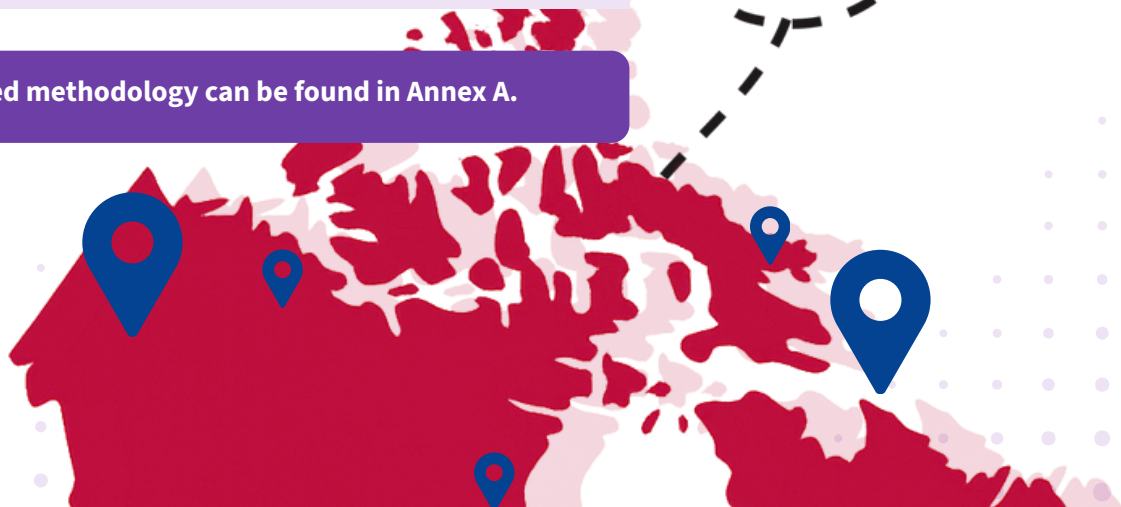
The project began with a mapping of youth-led organizations across Canada and the EU. Mapped organizations were then invited to complete the digital survey on youth priorities, trust in institutions, barriers to democratic participation, formal engagement mechanisms, equity and access, and opportunities for Canada–EU collaboration.

In total 24 Organizations submitted responses: 13 from Canada and 11 from the EU

The survey was designed to draw on the depth of experiences and knowledge of youth organizations that work directly with youth. Respondents answered based on their organizational work, their own research, and their direct experience with youth engagement. This was a small, non-random sample, so findings are meant as a starting point for dialogue, a qualitative backbone to existing data, rather than a definitive measure of youth opinion.

This statement paper brings together the preliminary findings and identifies common themes. This will serve as the basis for the Canada–EU Youth Forum on June 21–22, where participants will deliberate, question, and build on the results in order to develop shared, concrete, youth-led policy recommendations.
Following the Forum, the recommendations will be shared with policymakers and institutions in Canada and the EU. They will also help identify opportunities for continued collaboration and joint action among youth organizations across the Atlantic.





A detailed methodology can be found in Annex A.

2

What we already know

What we already know

Youth support of democracy is declining

According to a 2024 study of youth in Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Greece, Poland and Great Britain, around **one-fifth of European youth favor an authoritarian form of government over a democratic** one under certain circumstances and only 57% of youth are satisfied with democracy (TUI Foundation, 2025).[3]

In Canada, the picture is less stark but still concerning. Recent data suggests that younger adults are not especially dissatisfied with democracy, but they are **less likely than older Canadians to strongly agree that democracy is the best form of government**, and more likely to say it does not matter whether government is democratic or non-democratic. At the same time, the evidence does not show a clear increase in youth support for authoritarianism (Environics Institute, 2026).

Young people still tend to support democracy, but that support is more conditional.

Existing research does not suggest that young people in Canada or the EU have broadly rejected democracy.

In Europe, youth continue to value democracy, human rights, peace, and freedom of speech, and many hold a broadly favourable or reform-oriented view of the EU and the European Parliament (EP Youth Survey 2024[4]; TUI Foundation, 2025).

In Canada, over 60% of youth still believe that "Democracy is preferable to any other form of government". However, they are less likely than older Canadians to express strong support, and many believe governments are working but only with major problems (Apathy is Boring, 2021; Environics Institute, 2026).



The gap between democratic support and formal participation

There is a gap between democratic support and formal participation. Voting remains one of the clearest examples of this gap. In 2024, 64% of young people surveyed in the EU expressed an intention to vote in the European elections (Flash Eurobarometer 545, 2024), but only 36% aged under 25 reported having voted in 2024's European election (EU Post-Electoral-Survey, 2024).[5]

In Canada, youth turnout increased by 9.2% from the previous election (2021) to reach 56% in the 2025 federal election, but young people still voted at lower rates than older age groups (Elections Canada, 2025).

[3] Find the full TUI Foundation report here: https://www.tui-stiftung.de/unsere-projekte/junges-europa-die-jugendstudie-der-tui-stiftung/jugendstudie-2025/

[4] Find the full EP Youth Survey report here: https://cdn.edupedu.ro/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Youth_Survey_2024_FL013EP_report_en.pdf

[5] Find the full EU Post-electoral survey 2024 here: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3292

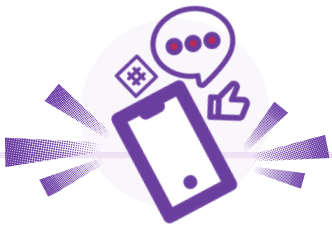
Young people do not feel represented by political institutions

Lower formal participation is closely linked to how young people experience governments and decision-makers. When young people do not feel represented, do not trust institutions, or do not believe their concerns are reflected in policy, formal participation can feel distant or ineffective. In the EU, a strong majority of young people report that politicians do not adequately represent their concerns (AEGEE/Y Vote, 2024). In Canada, young people who view government as broken often point to poor decisions, weak responsiveness, low trust, and lack of leadership (Apathy is Boring, 2021).

Lower participation is not simply apathy.

Existing research shows that youth engagement is shaped by more than motivation. Political knowledge, education, income, geography, time, socialization, and access to civic resources all affect whether young people can participate. **In the EU, young people report feeling less informed about EU-level politics** than national politics, and awareness of EU engagement channels beyond elections remains low (Flash Eurobarometer 545, 2024; EP Youth Survey 2024).

In Canada, research similarly points to knowledge, resources, time, access, and efficacy as major barriers to youth civic engagement (Western & C-Dem, 2025; Rideau Hall Foundation, 2022). These barriers are especially acute for Indigenous youth, whose participation is also shaped by poverty, inadequate education, geographic isolation, low institutional trust, and the ongoing effects of colonial histories and relationships with Canadian political institutions (Alfred, Pitawanakwat & Price, 2007; Bouchard & Bourgeois, 2023).



Young people are still engaged, but not through formal channels.

The literature consistently shows that young people participate in civic and political life in ways that are not always captured by voter turnout or formal consultation data. In Canada, youth are active through digital participation, protest, community work, volunteering, and boycotts (Western & C-Dem, 2025).

In the EU, young people also engage through organizations, petitions, volunteering, social media, boycotts, hashtags, and protests (Flash Eurobarometer 545, 2024; EP Youth Survey 2024). The issue is not only how to make young people participate more, but how to recognize the participation already happening and connect it more meaningfully to decision-making.

Digital spaces are central, but uneven

In both Canada and the EU, young people use digital spaces to follow politics, discuss public issues, and interact with political content. In the EU, social media is the primary source of information about the EU for young people (Flash Eurobarometer 545, 2024).

In Canada, young people are more likely than older adults to follow politicians on social media, interact with political content online, and use social networks to discuss political issues (C-Dem Democracy Checkup Survey, 2021). At the same time, digital engagement is shaped by disinformation and a varying level of confidence in identifying false information.

Affordability is at the centre of youth concerns

Across both contexts, young people's democratic concerns are closely connected to the pressures shaping their daily lives. In the EU, cost of living and inflation are the most frequently cited concerns, followed by climate change, jobs, poverty, social inequality, human rights, democracy, and peace (EP Youth Survey 2024; Flash Eurobarometer 545, 2024). I

In Canada, cost of living, housing, the economy, healthcare, inequality, and poverty dominate youth priorities, while climate change remains important but has lost salience as young people face immediate economic pressure (Abacus Data, 2024).

Some youth are missing from the data

Across both regions and multiple research studies, youth are often treated as one broad group. While some data explores differences by education, geography, or rural and urban location, there is still limited understanding of how participation differs among young people facing intersecting barriers related to disability, migration, race, religion, language, sexuality, or income.

In Canada, this gap is especially clear for Indigenous youth. There is limited recent research on how Indigenous youth conceptualize democracy and perceive political participation. Major datasets often have small Indigenous subsamples that are not disaggregated by age (Alfred, Pitawanakwat & Price, 2007; Bouchard & Bourgeois, 2023; McMahon, Alcantara et al., 2024).

3

Survey Findings

Survey findings

Theme A

Young people judge democracy through the conditions of their daily lives

Youth leaders and organizers who responded to the survey indicated that young people judge democracy on whether institutions respond to the issues shaping their daily lives. When young people feel that the government is not addressing their needs, trust and confidence can erode. Understanding what matters to young people, therefore, is central to building democratic trust.

In Canada, the clearest issue was affordability. Cost of living was the strongest policy priority, with housing affordability also ranking high. Respondents consistently linked financial instability and housing precarity to rising anxiety and mental health problems for youth who are overwhelmed by financial pressures and concerned about their futures. For some young people, these pressures also limit participation directly with one Canadian respondent noting that youth may be working multiple jobs and have little time left to engage in democratic processes. Climate change was also important, but respondents placed greater emphasis on immediate economic pressure. As one respondent explained, young people remain "very environmentally conscious," but rising costs, housing insecurity, and difficulty meeting basic needs are placing greater pressure on institutional trust.

European respondents also identified cost of living and housing as important, but their responses were less concentrated around affordability. EU organizations placed comparatively more emphasis on fundamental rights, peace and security, education, discrimination, war, and displacement.

Across both regions, however, respondents suggested that young people's policy priorities cannot be separated from democratic engagement. Cost of living, housing, mental health, climate change, and global instability affect young people's daily security and well-being but they also shape whether young people have the time, trust, and capacity to engage with democratic institutions.

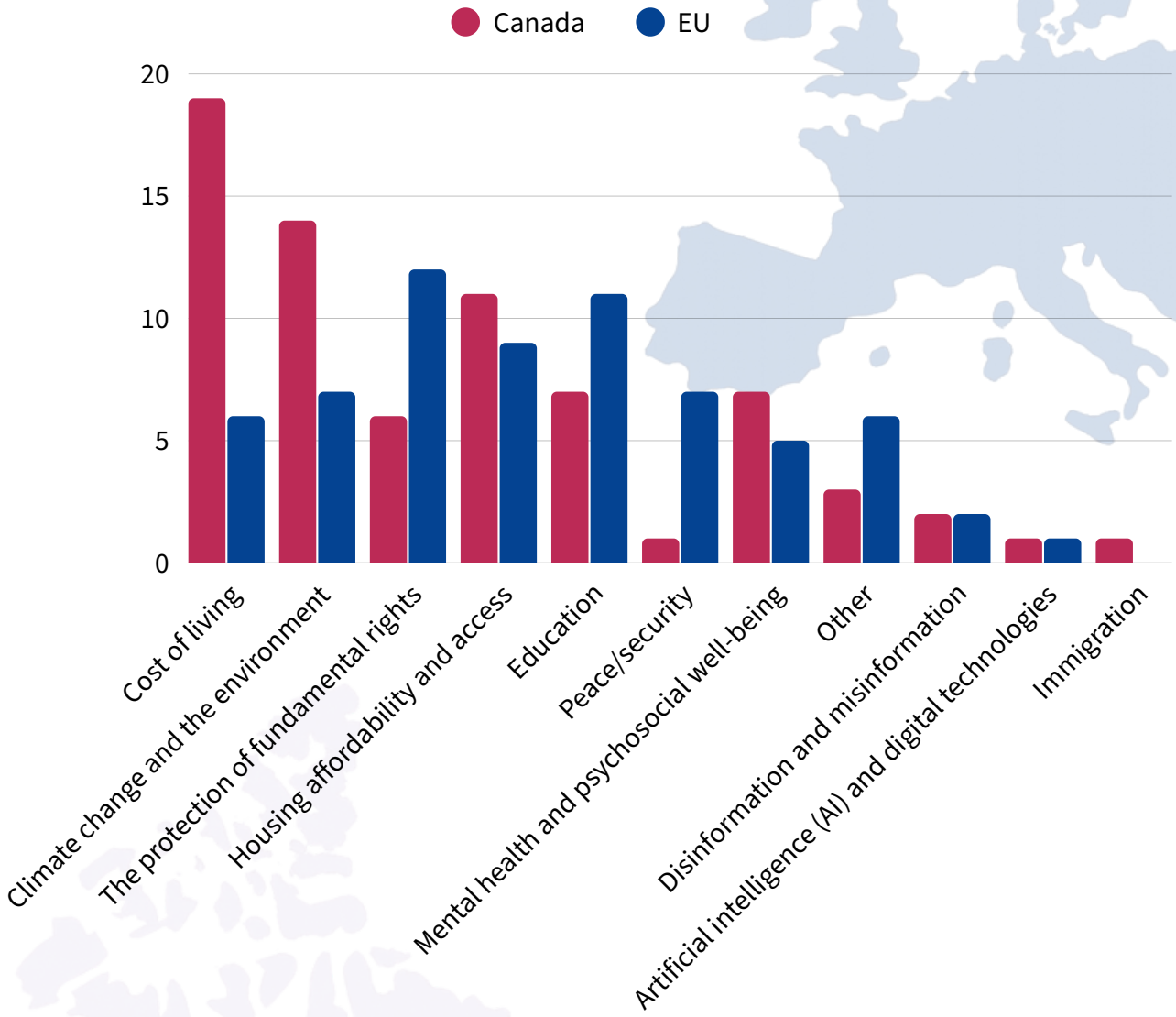
One EU respondent made this connection explicitly in relation to mental health, describing the current "permacrisis" as a driver of burnout and noting that mental well-being is "a precondition for civic engagement" because **"an exhausted generation cannot lead or innovate."**



Survey Evidence

Top policy priorities at a glance

Weighted score: first priority = 3, second = 2, third = 1.
Canada had 13 responses and the EU had 11 responses



> "When young people face precarious employment, unaffordable housing, and rising costs of living, they experience the failures of democratic governance in a direct and daily way. This erodes trust in institutions and fuels disillusionment with the political system as a whole." - *Survey Respondent*

Theme B

Access is not experienced equally

Every organization surveyed pointed to numerous barriers faced by youth based on their socioeconomic background, education, gender, ability and identity. Several patterns stood out.

Language

Barriers for **linguistic minority youth** were raised in both regions. In Canada, this included francophone youth, English-speaking youth in Quebec, and migrant youth facing language barriers. In the EU, respondents pointed to the need for local-language youth media and outreach beyond major capitals.

Geography

Rural and remote youth appeared as a shared concern across both regions. In Canada, respondents pointed to distance, transportation, digital inequity, and limited access to participation spaces. In Europe, rural exclusion was described through the concentration of political life around major centres, including the "Brussels bubble," with rural youth sometimes treated as "second class citizens".

Education and Information

Less educated youth and youth outside institutions were also identified as harder to reach. Responses suggested that youth engagement often runs through schools, campuses, and established organizations, leaving out young people who are not in these spaces.

Discrimination & Exclusion

Survey respondents, most strongly in the EU, identified numerous barriers for **LGBTQI youth.** Respondents described hostile political rhetoric, discrimination, online harassment, backlash, and fear of being targeted as barriers that can limit visibility and participation.

Migrant and non-white youth were also described as facing exclusion and backlash. In Europe, respondents noted that these experiences can make young people less likely to speak openly about their political concerns and needs. In Canada, migrant youth were said to face barriers such as language, unfamiliar systems, and difficulty navigating participation processes.

Canadian respondents also discussed the barriers **Indigenous youth** face including geographic isolation, differences in service delivery and the ongoing effects of colonial policies, including the Indian Act and residential schools.

> **"Civic infrastructure is built around an implied participant who is urban, institutionally connected, able-bodied, financially secure, and already trusting of government, so anyone outside that default pays an added cost in distance, accommodation, language, status, stable address, or safety to take part, with the cost of time and money sitting beneath all of it and falling hardest on those with the least."**

Survey Evidence

Barriers to equal participation

Survey responses identified seven distinct categories of barriers preventing youth from engaging equally in civic and policy processes.

Geographic barriers
Rural youth, remote and Northern youth, Indigenous youth

Accessibility barriers
Youth with disabilities, youth with mental health challenges

Economic and time barriers
Low-income youth, youth receiving income assistance, youth in care, youth working multiple jobs, rural and remote youth

Institutional trust and colonial barriers
Indigenous youth, racialized youth, newcomer youth, youth with past experiences of exclusion from institutions

Discrimination and exclusion
Racialized/non-white youth, visible minority youth, Indigenous youth, autochthonous minority youth, migrant youth, religious minority youth, LGBTQ+/LGBTQI youth, young women and girls

Process-design barriers
Youth unfamiliar with policymaking, youth not directly invited, youth outside schools/campuses/established organizations, youth facing complex or inaccessible processes

Language and information barriers
Linguistic minority youth, newcomer and migrant youth, religious minority youth, autochthonous minority youth

The implication is that engagement cannot rely on general invitations. Institutions need to invest in targeted outreach, flexible formats, language access, safer spaces, and trusted intermediaries. This work is more effective when done in partnership with youth-led and youth-serving organizations that already have relationships with young people who are least likely to be reached through formal processes.

Theme C

Youth organizations are critical democratic infrastructure

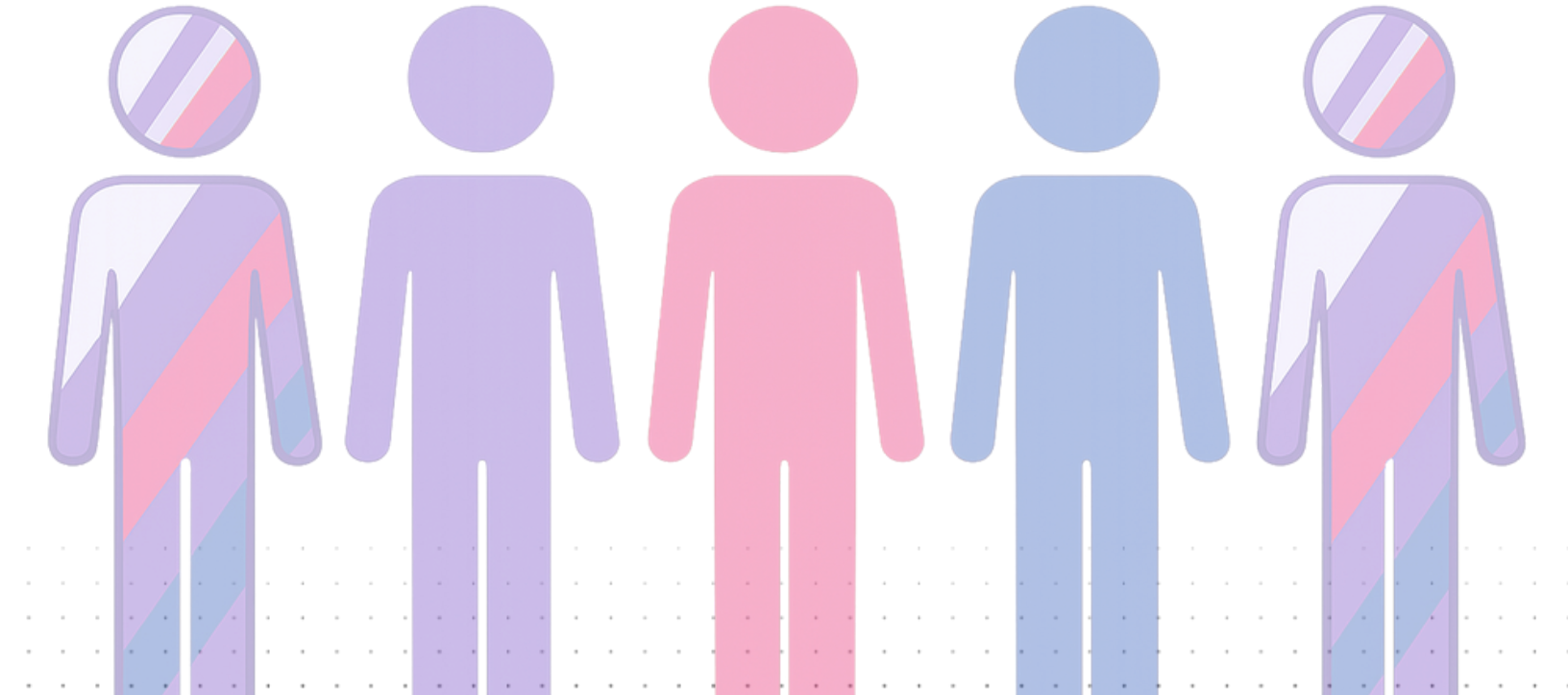
Respondents from both regions positioned youth organizations as key partners in democratic strengthening. According to survey responses, youth organizations are where young people often first experience participation, representation, and collective action. Through youth organizations, young people can engage with institutions that might otherwise feel intimidating, distant, or untrustworthy. They help young people act collectively, learn how democratic processes work, and build the confidence needed to participate over time.

> **"Youth organisations offer the practical space where young people actually experience democracy… These groups empower youth to influence decision-making processes directly, the most effective way to build long-term trust in democratic institutions and counter political apathy."**

Youth organizations were also described as important partners for governments designing youth engagement initiatives. Respondents emphasized that these organizations have the knowledge and relationships needed to make engagement more accessible, relevant, and inclusive.

However, respondents warned that youth organizations cannot sustain this role without stable support. Without structural funding, youth engagement depends too heavily on precarious project-based support, volunteer capacity, and organizations that are asked to do the work without the resources to sustain it.

Fifteen of 24 respondents selected improving long-term funding for youth engagement initiatives as one of their top three recommendations.



Theme D

Trust in institutions: a foundation for engagement

Trust is another condition for participation. Young people are less likely to engage with institutions they see as distant, unresponsive, or disconnected from their lives. The survey suggests that trust is not uniformly low, but uneven across institutions.

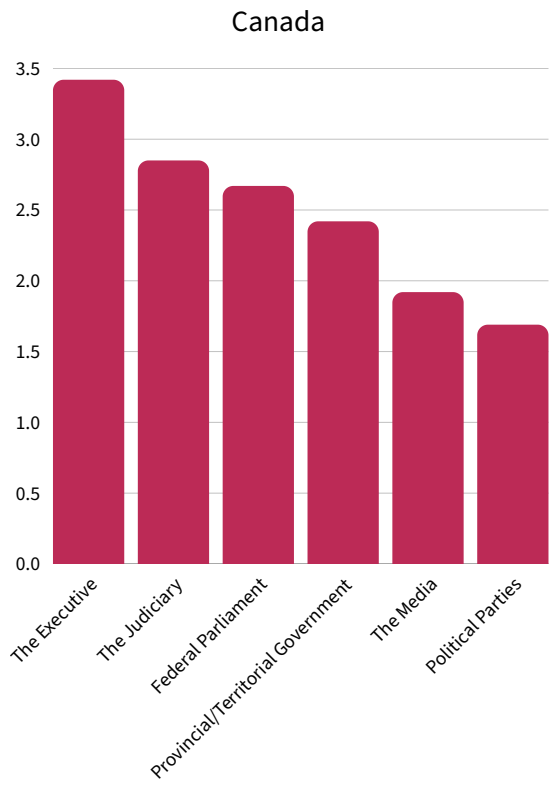
In Canada, political parties and the media received the lowest average trust scores. This matters because political parties are central to electoral participation, while the media shapes how many young people encounter public issues and political debate.

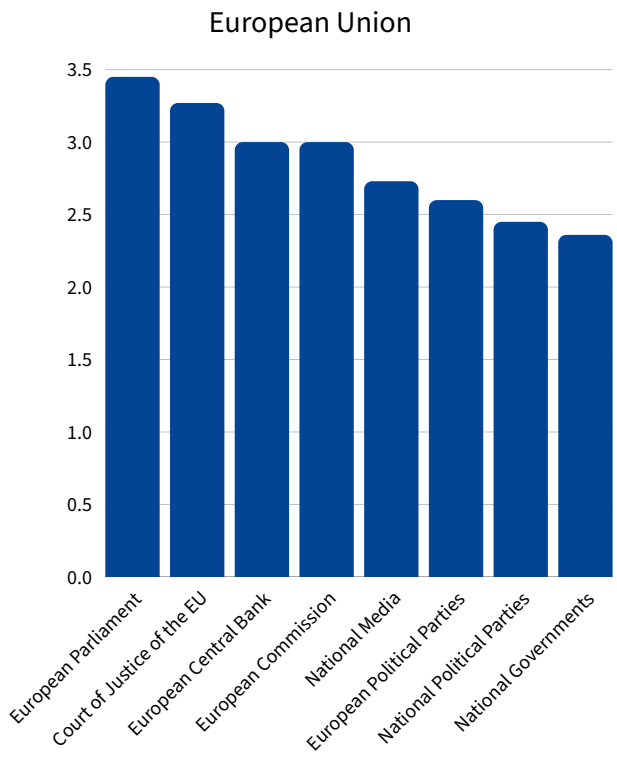
In the EU responses, National governments and National political parties scored lower than EU-level institutions such as the European Parliament and the Court of Justice of the EU.

Survey Evidence

Trust in institutions by region

Average trust scores on a 1–5 scale (1 = very low trust, 5 = very high trust).





Key Takeaway

Some institutions may still carry legitimacy, while others face a higher burden of proof. This matters for engagement mechanisms because a consultation, petition, advisory council, or public dialogue will be judged not only by its design, but also by whether young people trust the institution behind it.

Theme E

What youth value in participation mechanisms

Youth organizations do not reject formal participation. What they reject are mechanisms that feel symbolic, distant, or disconnected from outcomes. Across Canada and the EU, respondents indicated that participation is more likely to be perceived as effective when it offers at least one of the following

A visible outcome proving input was heard and acted on

Mechanisms that enable collective action and amplify youth voices together.

Direct access to decision-makers

Opportunities to shape decisions early, not only respond to them after they have already been framed.

Representation minority and marginalized young people in places of power.

Visible results matter. Voting emerged as one of the clearest examples of formal participation that retains legitimacy in both Canada and the EU. Unlike many consultation processes, voting produces a concrete and measurable outcome.

Petitions were more contested but respondents believed youth valued them for their accessibility and facilitation of collective action. In Canada, one organization noted that petitions to the House of Commons can allow young people to see the results of their actions and make their voices heard without waiting for the next election.

Direct access matters. Respondents in both regions noted that youth valued mechanisms that allow them to speak directly with elected representatives or decision-makers. These forms of engagement can feel stronger because young people can express their views directly, ask questions, and sometimes receive feedback. This helps avoid the “black box” effect of questionnaires and online consultations, where participants may not know what happens after they contribute.

In Canada, public consultations were also valued when they were done well. One Canadian respondent argued that young people feel more involved when they can directly express their opinions and experiences. The key point, however, was not that consultation is automatically effective. It becomes meaningful when young people can see that their input is heard, taken seriously, and connected to follow-up.

Representation matters. Running for elected office came up in both regions as a form of participation that youth may perceive as impactful. One Canadian organization noted that many young people they work with see running for elected office as one of the most direct ways to create lasting change. For respondents in both regions, representation is key for bringing others in. Seeing minority and marginalized young people in public institutions can reinforce the idea that democratic leadership is accessible to them.

Co-creation matters. Several respondents indicated that young people perceive EU Youth Policy Dialogues as effective because they offer a space to contribute ideas, receive feedback, and better understand how policy processes work. Surveys showed that youth do not only want to react to decisions that have already been shaped, rather, they want opportunities to shape policies from the start. At the same time, respondents emphasized that these mechanisms only work when there is continuity and political willingness to act on outcomes. Without follow-up, even well-designed dialogue processes can become symbolic.

Proximity matters. Canadian respondents placed particular emphasis on local and municipal participation. Two organizations described local engagement as an accessible entry point because wins can feel more feasible, visible, and close to home. This suggests that local participation can help young people build democratic confidence before engaging with more distant institutions.

Collective power matters. Respondents in both regions also pointed to informal participation as the primary way youth engage with democracy. Protests, marches, boycotts, petitions, and grassroots organizing were said to be seen by youth as more effective than formal engagement pathways because they create public pressure and draw attention to issues. They also give youth a channel for collective action when formal engagement channels feel too complicated, distant, or unresponsive.

Insight

What Canada can learn from EU Youth Policy Dialogues

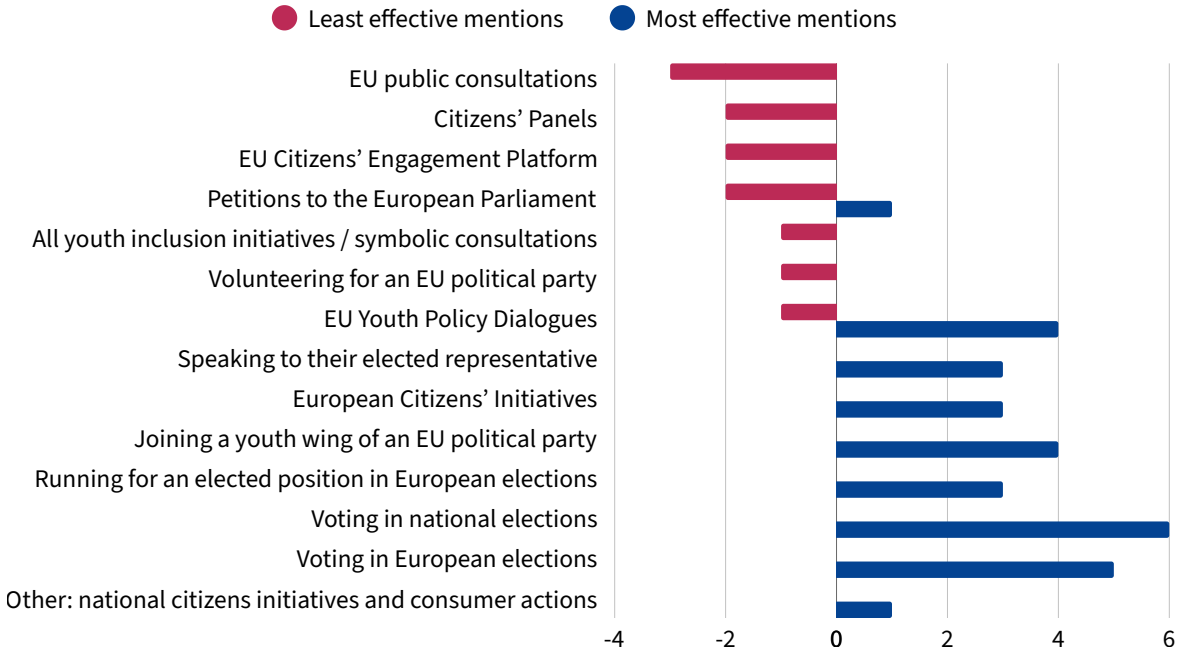
EU Youth Policy Dialogues stood out in the survey as one of the more positively viewed formal participation mechanisms in the EU responses. Respondents suggested that they work well because they give young people structured access to decision-makers, create space for dialogue rather than one-way consultation, and help youth understand how policy processes work. Canada can learn from what makes these dialogues more meaningful than many other engagement mechanisms while keeping in mind the limitations.

Survey Evidence

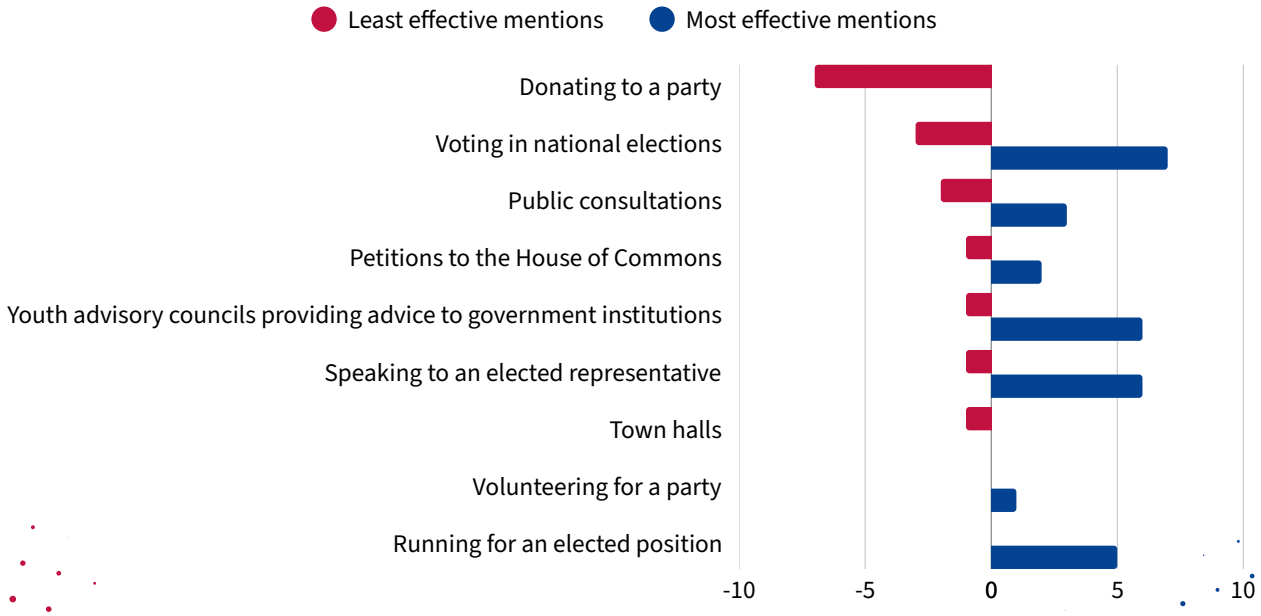
Views of formal participation mechanisms

Definitions of the formal participation mechanisms is available in Annex B.

European Union Responses



Canadian Responses



Theme F

When participation loses meaning

Respondents described ineffective participation as feeling like a "black box," lacking clear feedback loops, being extractive rather than participatory, or operating as one-off exercises. The main problem was not always the mechanism itself, but the disconnect between consultation and action.

This matters because symbolic engagement can do more than fail. It can deepen distrust. Young people are more likely to participate when they believe their input can shape decisions. When they are repeatedly asked for their views without seeing any visible impact, engagement can produce frustration, consultation fatigue, and greater distrust for institutions.

> **"Young people engage when they can see a decision change because they showed up. Consultation that gathers input without visible follow-through teaches the opposite lesson, and that lesson is far harder to undo than disengagement itself."**

Taken together, the responses suggest that participation feels effective when it is visible, direct, responsive, and connected to decisions. Mechanisms that collect youth input without feedback or follow-up are unlikely to build trust.

Theme G

Digital spaces matter, but digital tools are not enough

The surveys confirmed what we already knew. Young people are reading news, learning about politics, mobilizing around issues, and engaging in public debate online. One respondent described social media as "the primary lens through which young Europeans experience democracy," noting that algorithms and online narratives shape which issues become visible and how they are framed. They described the digital ecosystem as "the new public square."

Digital spaces may be accessible, but respondents also warned that they make youth vulnerable to misinformation, polarization, cynicism, harassment, and result in declining trust. As a result, respondents in both regions pointed to media literacy as an important part of strengthening youth democratic engagement.

At the same time, the survey cautions against treating digital participation tools as a solution on their own. When asked to choose their top three measures to strengthen youth engagement, only **1 of 24 organizations selected expanding digital participation tools.** This creates an important tension for policymakers. Institutions should meet young people where they are, but the foundation of engagement still needs to be improved for it to be effective. Young people need clear information, accessible language, feedback loops, trusted processes, and visible connections between participation and decisions.

Theme H

Policy demands

We asked respondents to identify policies they consider most urgent to strengthen youth engagement in democratic processes. Looking at the highest ranked recommendations, Canada and the EU look more similar than different. **Despite having different institutional structures, youth organizations in both regions put the strongest emphasis on the same foundational measures:**

Improve long-term funding for youth engagement initiatives

Strengthen civic education in schools

Strengthen media literacy programs

The similarities are important. Canada and the EU have different institutions and different youth participation mechanisms, but respondents in both regions pointed to the same underlying needs. Rather than focusing only on reforms to specific mechanisms, youth organizations were more likely to emphasize the foundations that make engagement possible, including, stable funding, stronger civic education, better media literacy, meaningful feedback, inclusive outreach, and direct dialogue with decision-makers.

Other common recommendations raised by respondents point in the same direction. These include:

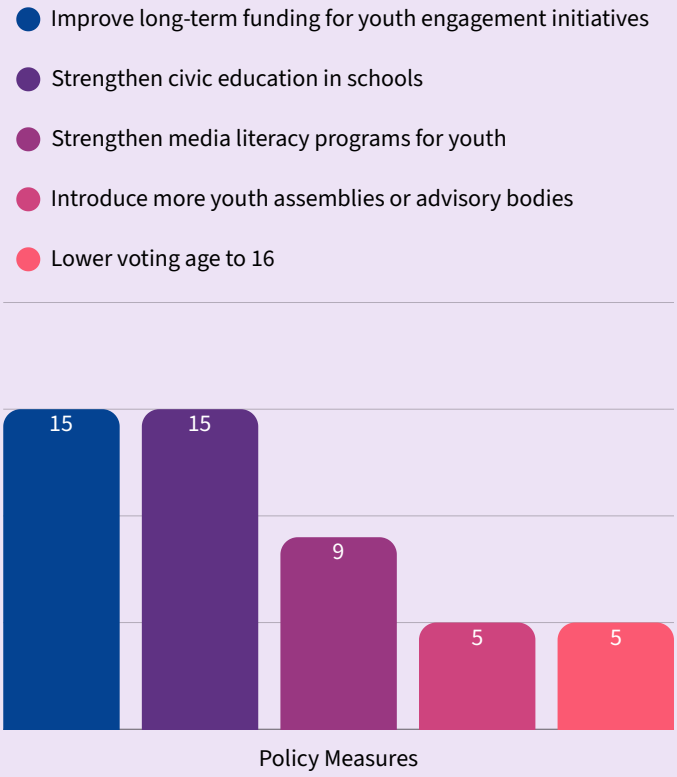
- **Create mandatory feedback loops** so that young people can see how their input is used and whether it leads to visible changes.
- **Reach excluded youth** through culturally competent and equity-centred outreach.
- **Create more direct opportunities for dialogue** between young people and policymakers.

All recommendations raised by respondents can be found in Annex C.

Survey Evidence

Measures to strengthen youth democratic engagement

Number of organizations from Canada and the EU selecting each measure in their top three.



4

Next steps

What Canada and the EU can learn from each other and together

The survey revealed more similarities than differences between Canada and the EU. While Canada and the EU have different institutions, political structures, and participation mechanisms, the survey identified a shared set of issues that would benefit from transatlantic dialogue, comparison, and joint problem-solving.

Sustainable funding models for youth engagement

Long-term funding for youth engagement initiatives was one of the strongest recommendations. The Forum can explore what kinds of funding models would best support youth organizations.

Approaches to inclusion

Respondents in both Canada and the EU described similar challenges reaching youth who are often excluded from formal engagement spaces, including rural, racialized, migrant and newcomer, Indigenous, LGBTQI/LGBTQ+, disabled, low-income, and linguistic minority youth. The Forum can explore how institutions can move beyond general invitations through targeted outreach, trusted intermediaries, accessible formats, language access, and partnerships with youth organizations rooted in these communities.

The role of digital spaces and tools

Both regions recognized that youth engage with politics and mobilize online. At the same time, respondents pointed to shared risks: disinformation, online harassment, and declining trust. The Forum can help clarify when digital tools are useful and how online engagement can be connected to meaningful influence rather than treated as a solution on its own.

Feedback loops and institutional accountability

Across both regions, respondents emphasized that youth participation loses meaning when input disappears into a process with no visible outcome. This creates an opportunity for Canada and the EU to compare approaches to follow-up. What should institutions be required to do after engaging youth?

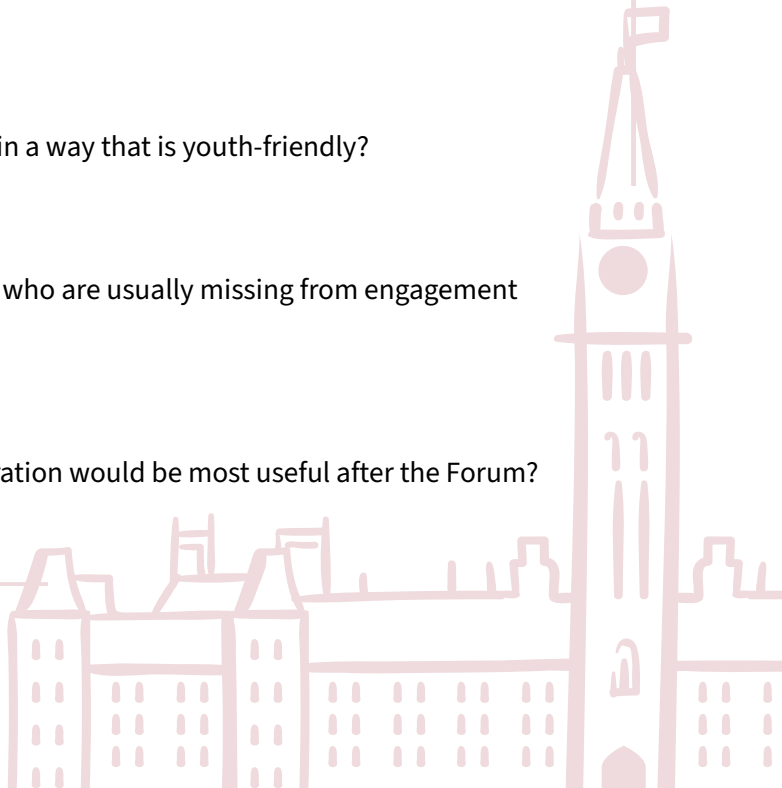
Opportunities for transatlantic youth collaboration

Only 7 out of 24 respondents had previously considered collaboration with Canadian/EU youth organizations. Yet many still described transatlantic collaboration as valuable when asked suggesting an interest, but not necessarily established pathways. The Forum can help identify what forms of collaboration would be most useful, such as knowledge exchange, joint advocacy, peer learning, shared resources, or future youth-led initiatives.

Building on the survey: Key questions for the Forum

The survey provides a starting point, not a final set of answers. The Forum should help participants test the findings, identify where Canada and the EU differ in practice, and turn broad priorities into concrete recommendations.

1. **Meaningful vs. Symbolic Participation**
   What separates a meaningful participation mechanism from a symbolic one?
2. **Feedback Loops**
   What kind of feedback loop should institutions provide after engaging young people?
3. **Sustainable Funding**
   What would stable, useful funding for youth engagement initiatives actually look like?
4. **Civic Education**
   What should civic education include, and who should deliver it?
5. **Digital Tools**
   When are digital tools useful, and when do they reproduce the same problems as offline engagement?
6. **Media Literacy**
   How can media literacy be strengthened in a way that is youth-friendly?
7. **Inclusion**
   How can institutions reach young people who are usually missing from engagement spaces?
8. **Canada–EU Collaboration**
   What forms of Canada–EU youth collaboration would be most useful after the Forum?



Annex A

Methodological Note on Data Collection and Analysis

Overview

Drawing on the experiences of youth organizations, this project seeks to understand

- How youth perceive established democratic institutions and processes
- How they experience formal avenues of political participation
- What barriers and opportunities shape their engagement
- What solutions young people propose to strengthen their voice in public life

The objectives are to :

- Generate evidence-based policies to strengthen youth participation in democratic processes, public diplomacy initiatives, and multilateral engagement.
- Create opportunities for structured Canada–EU youth forum centred on democratic innovation.

The study takes a comparative Canada–EU approach to identify shared challenges and open space for collaboration.

Mapping of Youth Organizations

The mapping exercise aimed to identify youth-led organizations in Canada and EU Member States that **actively engage young people on issues that concern them** and **seek to influence policy**.

These included organizations working on civic engagement, human rights, the economy, the environment, health, safety and security, and related areas. The objective of this phase was to establish a systematic overview of **key youth organizations** to inform survey outreach and provide a foundation for future initiatives.

The mapping was conducted using publicly available sources, existing networks of the Parliamentary Centre, EU Delegations, youth platforms, and civil society databases. Organizations identified through this process were assessed against inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure consistency and relevance.



Inclusion criteria

Organizations were included if they met all of the following criteria:

They were primarily youth-led or had a youth-led chapter, with youth defined as individuals aged 16 to 30*.

They had a primary mandate that involved advocacy, public policy, civic engagement, governance, human rights, social accountability, or related forms of public decision-making engagement.

They were based in Canada or an EU Member State, with a primary mandate and programming focus on domestic issues within Canada or the European Union.

They demonstrated evidence of ongoing activities, programs, or initiatives, indicating a meaningful level of reach or engagement.

The researchers used an **inclusive approach** to mapping, including **snowball sampling** to identify youth organizations that may be harder to reach, as well as **targeted outreach** to support the meaningful inclusion of under-represented youth organizations, including Indigenous, Black, and queer youth organizations. Attention was also given to representing a range of youth ages, Canadian regions, and EU Member States.

The mapping was compiled in a shared Google Sheets database with standardized fields to ensure consistency and support collaborative use between Canadian and EU partners.

*Our youth sample begins at age 18 due to ethical and regulatory restrictions associated with surveying individuals under 18 years of age.

Desk Research

Primary data collection was complemented by desk research reviewing existing literature, policy frameworks, and legislative instruments relevant to youth engagement and democracy in Canada and the EU. This review identified: key institutional frameworks and best practices for youth engagement at the level of EU institutions, EU Member States, and Canada; relevant data and trends on youth and democratic participation; and existing youth-led policy recommendations and reform proposals. The findings informed the design of the survey, shaped the agenda of the forum, and contributed to the development of the statement paper and policy brief.

Survey

A survey was developed and administered to youth organizations identified through the mapping exercise. Each participating organization was asked to submit **one survey response.**

Organizations were given discretion to decide how to complete the survey internally.
The survey collected **quantitative and qualitative data** from youth experts and practitioners on

(1) Perceptions of democratic institutions and processes
(2) Key issues young people want reflected in policy debates
(3) Current challenges and opportunities for engagement in democratic processes
(4) Recommendations to increase meaningful engagement
(5) Awareness of EU–Canada cooperation, counterpart youth organizations, and how collaboration could contribute to strengthening democracy.

The questions **built on existing research** by inviting organizations to reflect on available data and assess how it aligned with their experience. In addition to eliciting new proposals, the survey also asked respondents to **assess existing youth-driven recommendations** in order to identify which approaches were viewed as most relevant and feasible in practice.

The survey was administered online using the EU Survey tool to support broad geographic reach. It was designed to be accessible by using clear instructions and common language, offering multiple language options, and providing alternative participation options, such as interviews, where needed.

Data Analysis

Survey responses were analyzed using a mixed-methods approach.

- Closed-ended questions were reviewed using descriptive analysis to identify overall trends, patterns, and differences across respondent groups, including comparisons between Canadian and EU-based organizations where relevant.

- Open-ended responses were reviewed thematically, with recurring ideas, concerns, and recommendations grouped into common themes.

The analysis prioritized findings that appeared consistently across responses, while also noting specific examples or perspectives that added important context.

Given the size and targeted nature of the survey, the findings are not intended to be statistically representative, but rather to **capture the experiences**, **priorities**, and **recommendations** of participating youth-led organizations.

Annex B

Participation mechanisms explained

Canada

Voting in Federal Elections

In Canada, citizens can vote in federal elections if they are Canadian citizens and are at least 18 years old on election day. Federal elections are used to elect Members of Parliament to the House of Commons and usually take place every four years, but they can be held earlier if Parliament is dissolved.

Youth advisory councils

Youth advisory councils are groups of young people invited to provide advice to government institutions, elected officials, or public bodies. They are usually created to bring youth perspectives into policy discussions, program design, or decision-making processes.

Town halls

Town halls are public meetings where elected officials, government representatives, or public institutions hear directly from community members. They can include presentations, open discussion, questions from participants, or facilitated dialogue.

Public consultations

Public consultations are processes where governments or public institutions ask individuals, organizations, or communities to provide input on a policy, program, law, or decision. They can take different forms, including online surveys, written submissions, roundtables, meetings, workshops, or discussion papers.

Petitions to the House of Commons

Petitions to the House of Commons are formal requests submitted by members of the public asking the federal government or Parliament to take action on an issue. In Canada, petitions must follow specific rules and be sponsored by a Member of Parliament before they can be presented in the House of Commons.

European Union

Voting in EU Elections

Every 5 years every citizen with an EU-Passport (meaning any of the 27 Member States Passports) aged 18 or older (in some Member States also 16/17) has the right to vote and to stand as a candidate at elections to the European Parliament (Brussels/Belgium).

EU Public Consultations (Questionnaires)

“Have your say“, the EU’s Public Consultations and Feedback online platform for citizens and stakeholders allows them to give their views on the EU Commission's initiatives. With that the EU Commission commits to hearing citizens' and stakeholders' views on EU laws and policies both when these are being prepared and when they are implemented.

European Citizens' Initiative (ECI)

The European Citizens' Initiative is designed to contribute to strengthening democracy through the participation of citizens in the democratic and political life of the EU. It aims to give EU citizens a greater say in EU policies that affect their lives, with a procedure allowing them to call on the EU Commission to propose new laws in areas in which the Commission has the competence to do so. Once an initiative gathers 1 million signatures from seven different EU Member States, the Commission decides on what follow-up action to take, if any.

EU Youth Policy Dialogues

The main objectives of Youth Policy Dialogues are to enable young people to express their views on EU policy initiatives by providing a space for meaningful interaction with EU Commissioners, and to integrate youth views into the EU's political agenda. They happen several times a year, online and in Brussels and selected youths get invited.

Citizens' Panels

An EU Citizens' Panel brings together 150 randomly selected, everyday residents from all 27 member states to discuss and shape upcoming European policies. Acting as a "mini-public," these panels allow citizens to debate critical issues and issue concrete recommendations directly to the European Commission. Currently there is one in planning on democratic resilience.

Petitions to the European Parliament

The European Parliament's Petitions Web Portal is an online platform that allows citizens, residents, and organisations from EU Member States to submit petitions to the European Parliament. Its primary purpose is to provide a direct link between EU citizens and the Parliament, enabling them to exercise their right to petition.

Youth Wing of an EU Political Party

Youth wings are the official youth organisations affiliated with European-level political parties. They have proven to be an entry for and recruiting and training of young aspiring leaders, to equip them with the expertise to enter a political career.

Annex C

Additional Recommendations Raised by Survey Respondents

Canada

- Promote and expand the Register of Future Electors so that more 14 to 17 year olds pre-register and Elections Canada adds them to the voters list automatically when they turn 18.
- Resource First Nations, Métis, and Inuit youth engagement on their own terms, including support for on-reserve, remote, and Northern access to registration and voting.
- Build youth engagement at the municipal and school-board level, where turnout sits lowest and where many young people first encounter local democracy.
- Deliver every engagement programme in both official languages, with dedicated reach into francophone minority communities outside Quebec.
- Fund physical access alongside digital tools, including vote-on-campus sites, mobile polls, and outreach to fly-in and Northern communities that lack reliable connectivity.
- Create a civic-onboarding pathway for newcomer youth and recently naturalized citizens, so that new Canadians learn how to register and vote during their first years in Canada.
- Do more mock political debates with youth to teach them how different levels of government work.
- Move beyond consultation alone and create meaningful opportunities for youth participation and leadership.
- Ensure youth feel their input has a real impact on decision-making processes.
- Combine engagement activities and use existing research on youth priorities to inform policy recommendations.

European Union

- Introduce mandatory youth checks.
- Set up a future generations commissioner.
- Shift from symbolic consultation to binding co-management models, giving youth a decisive vote on policymaking.
- Grant official institutional access and press credentials to youth-led media outlets to bridge the gap between EU institutions and young citizens.
- Ensure young people are informed about the different ways they can influence decision-making at EU and national levels.
- Implement binding youth quotas in candidate lists for European and national elections, as well as within internal party structures.
- Increase the number of young people, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, in elected positions and governance roles.
- Provide dedicated financial support and mentorship programmes within political parties to remove structural barriers that prevent young people from running for office or ascending to leadership positions.
- Institutionalize regular, structured youth–decision-maker dialogue at all levels.
- Create low-threshold, hybrid participation formats, online and in person.

