



e-DEVOY Handbook

# e-Democracy: Empowering European Youth Voices



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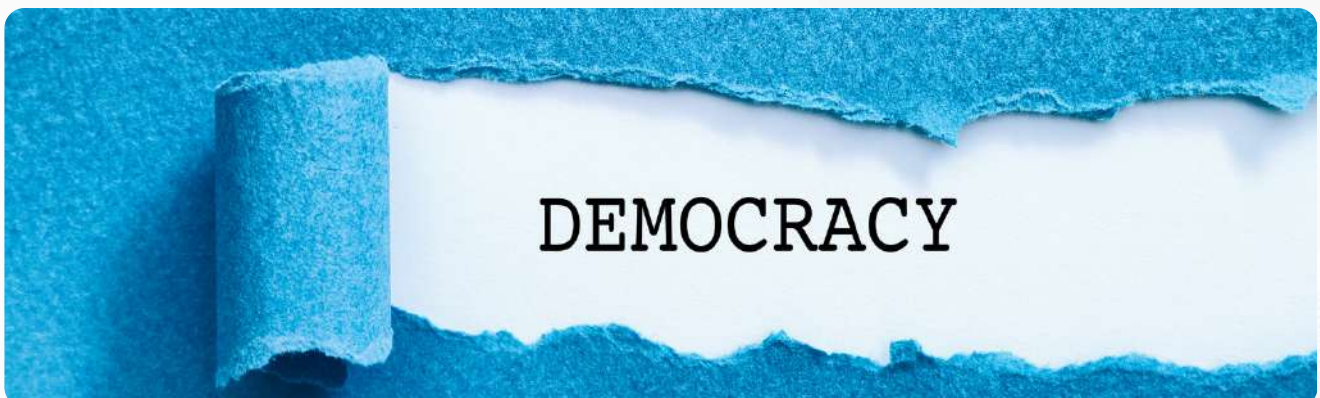
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# Introduction

Digital transformation has changed the way people communicate, learn, organise, participate, and express their views. In recent years, and especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, online spaces have become an essential part of social, educational, professional, and civic life. Young people are at the centre of this transformation. They use digital tools not only to communicate and access information, but also to create content, build communities, support causes, discuss social issues, and participate in public debates. This reality creates new opportunities for democratic engagement, but also new challenges related to misinformation, exclusion, privacy, online safety, and unequal access to digital participation.

In this context, e-democracy has become an increasingly important concept. E-democracy refers to the use of digital technologies to support democratic processes, civic engagement, consultation, dialogue, participation, and decision-making. It includes tools such as e-voting platforms, online consultations, digital campaigns, participatory forums, civic apps, social media initiatives, and virtual spaces for public debate. However, e-democracy should not be understood only as a technical solution. Digital tools can support democracy only when they are designed and used in ways that are inclusive, transparent, accessible, safe, and connected to meaningful participation. Technology can create new channels for engagement, but democratic culture depends on trust, dialogue, critical thinking, and active citizenship.

Youth participation is a key part of democratic life in Europe. Young people are not only future citizens; they are already members of society with ideas, concerns, rights, experiences, and the capacity to contribute to change. Their perspectives are essential in discussions about education, employment, climate action, digital rights, equality, inclusion, mental health, mobility, and the future of Europe. At the same time, many young people feel disconnected from formal political processes or believe that their voices are not taken seriously. For participation to become meaningful, young people need spaces where they can express themselves, develop skills, interact with decision-makers, and see how their contributions are used.





Digital civic engagement can help respond to this challenge by making participation more flexible, visible, and accessible. Through online platforms, digital campaigns, youth consultations, e-voting processes, webinars, simulations, and cross-border networks, young people can engage with democratic issues in ways that reflect their everyday realities. Digital participation can reduce geographical barriers, support transnational dialogue, and offer different forms of expression for young people with different needs and preferences. However, access to digital tools is not enough. Young people also need media literacy, digital citizenship competences, communication skills, leadership opportunities, and safe environments where they can participate responsibly and confidently.

Non-formal education plays a central role in this process. It provides participatory, learner-centred, and experiential methods that help young people develop the competences needed for active citizenship. Through discussions, debates, simulations, role-plays, workshops, group work, reflection activities, digital storytelling, design thinking, and collaborative problem-solving, young people can practise democracy in real and practical ways. Non-formal education also supports inclusion, intercultural dialogue, peer learning, and recognition of learning outcomes. It helps transform digital participation from a simple online action into a meaningful learning experience.

This handbook brings together key concepts, methods, and practical approaches related to youth e-democracy and digital civic engagement. It is designed for youth workers, facilitators, educators, youth organisations, civil society actors, and young people who are interested in strengthening democratic participation through digital and non-formal learning methods. It can be used as a guide for understanding e-democracy, designing youth participation activities, facilitating digital discussions, supporting inclusive engagement, developing civic competences, and building sustainable youth participation initiatives.



The handbook is structured around six chapters. The first chapter introduces the concepts of e-democracy, digital citizenship, youth participation, European youth policies, and the opportunities and risks of digital participation. The second chapter focuses on youth empowerment through digital civic engagement, including active citizenship, media literacy, advocacy, leadership, and inclusion. The third chapter explores digital democracy in practice, presenting participation models, digital democracy activities, simulations, safe digital spaces, and youth networks. The fourth chapter focuses on non-formal education methods, including facilitation techniques, interactive learning activities, reflection, learning recognition, and evaluation. The fifth chapter looks towards the future of European youth e-democracy, with emphasis on policy influence, sustainability, dissemination, recommendations, and long-term civic impact. The final chapter brings together the main messages and reflects on how digital democracy can contribute to a more inclusive and participatory Europe.

The overall aim of this handbook is to support a democratic culture where young people are informed, empowered, included, and heard. Digital democracy offers important possibilities, but its value depends on how it is implemented. It should promote participation that is not symbolic, but meaningful; not exclusive, but inclusive; not isolated, but connected to real dialogue and follow-up. By combining digital tools with non-formal education, youth work, and European democratic values, it is possible to create spaces where young people can participate actively, develop civic competences, and contribute to shaping the future of their communities and of Europe.

# Understanding E-Democracy and Youth Participation

## What is E-Democracy?

E-democracy, or electronic democracy, refers to the use of digital technologies to support, strengthen, and expand democratic processes. It is not limited to online voting, although e-voting is often one of its most visible expressions. More broadly, e-democracy includes all digital tools and practices that allow citizens to access information, express opinions, participate in consultations, engage with institutions, collaborate with others, and influence decision-making.

In the European context, e-democracy can be understood as part of a wider transformation of democratic life, where participation is no longer restricted to physical spaces such as polling stations, public meetings, schools, parliaments, or municipal halls. Instead, democratic engagement increasingly takes place through online platforms, digital forums, social media, e-petitions, virtual assemblies, webinars, participatory apps, and digital campaigns. This shift reflects the reality of contemporary societies, where digital communication has become a central part of everyday life, especially for young people. The aim of e-democracy is not to replace traditional democratic institutions, but to make democracy more accessible, interactive, transparent, and responsive to citizens' needs.

The evolution of digital democracy is closely connected to the development of the internet and the rapid expansion of digital communication. In the early stages, digital tools were mainly used by public authorities to provide information to citizens, for example through official websites or online documents. Over time, this one-way model of communication gradually became more interactive. Citizens started to use digital channels not only to receive information, but also to comment, ask questions, mobilise, campaign, organise communities, and participate in public debate. Today, e-democracy includes a wide spectrum of practices, from simple online surveys to complex participatory budgeting processes, digital deliberation platforms, crowdsourced policy proposals, and secure e-voting mechanisms. This development has created new opportunities for democratic participation, but it has also raised important questions about trust, security, inclusion, digital literacy, and the quality of online debate. For this reason, e-democracy should be understood both as a technological innovation and as a democratic challenge: it can strengthen participation only when it is designed with transparency, accessibility, accountability, and human rights at its core.

Traditional democracy is usually associated with formal institutions and procedures, such as elections, political parties, parliaments, local councils, public consultations, and representative decision-making. These mechanisms remain essential for democratic governance. However, they often operate through fixed moments of participation, such as voting every few years or attending specific public meetings. Digital participation can complement this model by creating more continuous, flexible, and accessible ways for citizens to engage with public life. Through digital tools, young people can participate in discussions, share proposals, vote on priorities, follow institutional processes, and connect with decision-makers without always being physically present. This is particularly important for young people who may face geographical, social, economic, or time-related barriers to participation. For example, a young person living in a rural area, studying abroad, working irregular hours, or feeling uncomfortable in formal political spaces may find it easier to contribute through an online platform. In this sense, digital democracy can help reduce the distance between citizens and institutions, provided that digital participation is meaningful and not merely symbolic.

Digital democracy also changes the rhythm and style of participation. In traditional democratic systems, citizens are often asked to participate at specific moments, such as elections, hearings, or public consultations. In digital environments, participation can become more continuous and immediate. A young person may comment on a public issue, sign a petition, join a campaign, participate in an online consultation, or vote on a community proposal within a few minutes. This immediacy can make democracy feel more accessible and relevant. However, it also creates the risk of superficial engagement, where participation becomes limited to quick reactions, likes, shares, or emotional responses. A strong e-democracy approach must therefore encourage not only fast participation, but also informed participation. Citizens should have access to clear information, balanced perspectives, and opportunities for dialogue before making decisions. In this sense, e-democracy should combine accessibility with democratic quality.

Digital citizenship is a key concept for understanding e-democracy in the modern European Union. It refers to the ability of individuals to participate responsibly, critically, safely, and actively in digital environments.



A digital citizen is not only someone who knows how to use technology, but someone who understands how digital spaces influence rights, responsibilities, communication, identity, participation, and democracy. In the EU, digital citizenship is strongly connected with European values such as democracy, human dignity, freedom, equality, rule of law, non-discrimination, inclusion, and respect for human rights. The European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles promotes a human-centred digital transition based on European values, aiming to ensure that people can benefit from digital transformation in a safe, fair, and inclusive way. For young people, digital citizenship means being able to recognise reliable information, participate respectfully in online discussions, protect personal data, understand digital rights, challenge hate speech, and use technology as a tool for civic engagement.

### **Youth Participation in European Democracy**

Youth participation is essential for the health and future of European democracy. Young people are not only future citizens; they are already citizens, rights-holders, community members, learners, workers, activists, volunteers, creators, and digital users.

Their experiences and perspectives are necessary for shaping policies that respond to current social realities. Issues such as climate change, digital transformation, education, employment, mental health, migration, equality, social inclusion, housing, and democratic trust directly affect young people's lives.





When young people are excluded from decision-making, policies risk becoming disconnected from their needs and expectations. On the contrary, when young people are meaningfully involved, democratic systems become more legitimate, innovative, and responsive. Youth participation also helps young people develop a stronger sense of belonging to their communities and to Europe. It teaches them that democracy is not only about voting, but also about dialogue, responsibility, solidarity, critical thinking, cooperation, and active contribution to the common good.

One of the main challenges facing European democracies is youth disengagement from formal political processes. Many young people feel that institutions do not listen to them, that politics is too distant from their everyday lives, or that their participation will not lead to real change. This feeling can lead to apathy, distrust, frustration, or withdrawal from democratic life. At the same time, youth disengagement should not be misunderstood as a lack of interest in social or political issues. Many young people are highly engaged in causes, movements, online campaigns, volunteering, community initiatives, environmental activism, human rights advocacy, and peer-to-peer education. The problem is often not that young people do not care, but that traditional participation channels do not always match the ways in which they communicate, organise, and express themselves. This is where e-democracy can play an important role. By creating digital spaces that are accessible, interactive, youth-friendly, and connected to real decision-making processes, institutions and civil society organisations can make participation more relevant to young people's lives.

The role of young people in shaping Europe is especially important because Europe depends on active citizenship, intercultural dialogue, and democratic participation across borders. Young Europeans live in societies that are increasingly interconnected, diverse, and digitally mediated. They are exposed to European challenges not only at national level, but also through transnational experiences such as Erasmus+, volunteering, youth exchanges, online communities, and cross-border cooperation.



This gives young people a unique capacity to think beyond national boundaries and to contribute to a more inclusive and democratic Europe. Through participation, young people can bring new ideas, challenge outdated structures, promote social innovation, and demand accountability from institutions. They can also help make European democracy more visible and understandable to their peers. A strong European democracy requires young people who feel that their voices matter, who know how to participate, and who have access to tools that allow them to influence public debate and decision-making.

Meaningful youth participation requires more than inviting young people to express opinions. It requires structures, methods, and attitudes that allow young people to contribute seriously and to see how their input is used. Tokenistic participation, where young people are consulted only for appearances, can create more frustration and mistrust. Genuine participation means that young people receive clear information, understand the purpose of the process, have enough time and support to form opinions, are treated as equal contributors, and receive feedback on the outcomes of their involvement. Non-formal education can support this process by creating safe and inclusive learning spaces where young people can explore democratic values, develop communication skills, practise debate, understand institutions, and build confidence. In youth participation initiatives, e-voting platforms should therefore be seen not only as technical tools, but also as part of a broader participatory ecosystem. Their success depends on whether young people feel ownership, trust the process, and understand how their digital participation connects with real democratic life.

Youth participation also has an educational dimension. Through participation, young people learn by doing. They learn how to express an opinion, listen to others, disagree respectfully, negotiate, build arguments, identify community needs, and propose solutions. These are not skills that can be developed only through formal teaching; they require practice, reflection, and interaction. Non-formal education is particularly valuable because it creates participatory learning environments where young people can experiment with democratic roles in a safe and supportive way. Activities such as simulations, debates, group work, civic challenges, and peer-led discussions allow young people to experience democracy as a living process. When combined with digital tools, these activities can help participants understand both the opportunities and responsibilities of online democratic engagement. In this way, e-democracy can contribute not only to higher levels of participation, but also to stronger democratic competences among young Europeans.

For youth participation to be effective, young people must also be able to see the impact of their involvement. One of the reasons young people may lose trust in democratic processes is the feeling that consultations, surveys, or meetings do not lead anywhere. If young people are asked to share their views but never receive feedback, the process may appear symbolic rather than meaningful. Therefore, any youth participation mechanism, including an e-voting platform, should include clear follow-up. Participants should know what happened after they voted, what proposals were selected, how results were analysed, and whether their input was shared with stakeholders or decision-makers. Even when not all ideas can be implemented, transparency helps build trust. A simple explanation of why certain proposals were prioritised, adapted, or not taken forward can make participants feel respected. In democratic participation, feedback is not an administrative detail; it is a core element of accountability.



### **European Youth Policies and Strategies**

The European Union has recognised youth participation as a central element of democratic life and social cohesion. The EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 provides the framework for European cooperation in the field of youth policy. It is built around three key areas of action: Engage, Connect, and Empower. These three words reflect a broad vision of youth policy: young people should be encouraged to participate in democratic life, connected through mobility and solidarity opportunities, and empowered through quality youth work, innovation, and recognition of their potential. The strategy aims to support young people’s social and civic engagement and to ensure that they have the necessary resources, skills, and opportunities to participate fully in society.

The “Engage” dimension of the EU Youth Strategy is particularly relevant to digital democracy because it focuses on young people’s participation in democratic life. Engagement means more than encouraging young people to vote in elections. It includes creating opportunities for young people to discuss public issues, express their needs, participate in consultations, influence policies, and become active in their communities. Digital tools can support this dimension by creating new channels of participation that are more flexible, visible, and familiar to young people. However, engagement must be meaningful. A digital platform should not only collect opinions; it should also help young people understand issues, exchange perspectives, and connect their participation with broader democratic processes. In this way, digital participation can contribute to the EU objective of strengthening youth engagement while also responding to the digital habits and expectations of younger generations.

The “Connect” dimension is also central to e-democracy and youth participation. Young people across Europe often face similar challenges, but they may experience them in different social, cultural, economic, or national contexts. Mobility activities, youth exchanges, webinars, online debates, and transnational digital platforms can help them recognise common concerns and learn from each other’s realities.



Connection is not only about travelling or meeting others; it is also about building a sense of European belonging and mutual understanding. An e-voting platform or digital participation space can support this by allowing young people from different countries to discuss common European issues, compare priorities, and participate in shared democratic exercises. This can strengthen the idea that European democracy is not something distant or abstract, but something that young people can experience, shape, and influence together.

The “Empower” dimension highlights the importance of giving young people the knowledge, skills, confidence, and support they need to participate actively in society. Empowerment is not achieved simply by offering a platform or inviting young people to an activity. It requires preparation, guidance, facilitation, and recognition. Young people need to understand how democratic processes work, how to identify reliable information, how to formulate proposals, how to communicate with others, and how to advocate for change. Youth workers and facilitators play a key role in this process. They help create safe learning environments, encourage participation from all members of the group, and support young people who may lack confidence or experience. In the context of digital democracy, empowerment means enabling young people not only to use digital tools, but also to understand why their participation matters and how it can contribute to democratic culture.

The European Youth Goals are another important reference point for understanding youth participation in Europe. They were developed through the EU Youth Dialogue process and reflect the views and aspirations of young people across Europe. The eleven Youth Goals address areas such as connecting the EU with youth, equality, inclusive societies, information and constructive dialogue, mental health and wellbeing, rural youth, quality employment, quality learning, space and participation for all, sustainable green Europe, and youth organisations and European programmes. These goals reflect the views of European youth and represent the vision of those active in the EU Youth Dialogue. They show that young people’s concerns are broad and interconnected. Participation cannot be separated from access to information, social inclusion, education, wellbeing, sustainability, and opportunities for engagement. In e-democracy initiatives, the European Youth Goals can be used as thematic inspiration for debates, consultations, voting topics, workshops, and digital campaigns. They can help ensure that digital participation does not focus only on abstract political issues, but also on topics that young people identify as relevant to their everyday lives.

The **EU Youth Dialogue** is one of the main mechanisms through which young people can contribute to European youth policy. It brings together young people, youth organisations, decision-makers, researchers, and civil society actors in a structured process of consultation and dialogue. Its purpose is to give young people a voice in the implementation and follow-up of the EU Youth Strategy, with particular attention to young people with fewer opportunities. This mechanism is important because it demonstrates that youth participation should be organised, inclusive, and connected to policy processes. It also shows that dialogue is not a one-time activity, but a continuous relationship between young people and institutions.

E-voting platforms and digital participation initiatives can draw inspiration from the EU Youth Dialogue by creating spaces where young people do not only vote, but also discuss, reflect, formulate proposals, and interact with stakeholders. A strong e-democracy approach should combine voting with deliberation, because democratic participation is not only about counting preferences, but also about understanding different perspectives and building common solutions.

European youth policies also underline the importance of inclusion and equal access. Not all young people have the same opportunities to participate in democratic life. Some face barriers related to economic difficulties, disability, rural isolation, migration background, discrimination, limited digital skills, language, education level, or lack of confidence. Digital tools can reduce some of these barriers, but they can also create new ones if they are not designed inclusively. For example, an online platform may be useful for young people who cannot attend physical meetings, but it may exclude those who lack stable internet access, appropriate devices, digital literacy, or trust in online systems. Therefore, digital youth participation must be designed with an inclusion-first approach. This means using accessible language, mobile-friendly design, multilingual communication where possible, clear instructions, data protection safeguards, and support from youth workers or facilitators. Inclusion should not be treated as an additional feature, but as a core principle of democratic design.

### **Digital Tools for Civic Engagement**

E-voting platforms are among the most direct tools of digital democracy because they allow users to express preferences, choose priorities, or make decisions through online voting processes. In a youth participation context, an e-voting platform can serve several purposes. It can help young people vote on topics that matter to them, select proposals developed during workshops, prioritise policy recommendations, evaluate activities, or take part in simulations of democratic decision-making. However, e-voting should be approached carefully. Voting is meaningful only when participants understand the issue, trust the process, and believe that the result will be taken seriously. Therefore, an e-voting platform should not simply ask young people to click on options without context. It should provide accessible information, balanced arguments, space for discussion, clear voting rules, and transparent results. It should also explain how the outcomes will be used by organisations, youth workers, institutions, or relevant stakeholders. Trust is central to any voting process, whether physical or digital.

For an e-voting platform to be effective in a youth context, it must be designed around the needs, habits, and expectations of young users. This means that the platform should be simple to navigate, visually clear, mobile-friendly, and accessible to users with different levels of digital competence. The language should be understandable and not overly institutional. Instructions should be short, practical, and easy to follow. At the same time, the platform should not oversimplify democratic issues to the point where complexity disappears. Young people should be supported to understand different sides of an issue before voting. For example, before voting on a topic related to climate action, digital rights, education, or youth mobility, participants could access short background information, arguments, examples, or questions for reflection. In this way, the platform can become not only a voting mechanism, but also a learning space that strengthens democratic literacy.





Online consultations can be organised by public institutions, municipalities, schools, universities, civil society organisations, or EU-level bodies. They can take the form of questionnaires, open calls for ideas, participatory mapping, digital forums, or feedback processes on specific policies. Petitions, on the other hand, often allow citizens to mobilise around a concrete demand and show public support for a proposal. For young people, these tools can be valuable because they provide accessible entry points into democratic participation. They can also help young people understand that civic engagement is not limited to party politics. Through petitions and consultations, young people can learn how to formulate arguments, identify problems, build support, and communicate with decision-makers. In a non-formal education context, these tools can be used as practical exercises to develop democratic literacy and advocacy skills.

Social media has become one of the most influential spaces for youth civic participation. Many young people first encounter political information, social issues, campaigns, public debates, and activist messages through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, X, Facebook, YouTube, or other online communities. Social media can help raise awareness, mobilise people quickly, create visibility for underrepresented voices, and connect young people across countries. It can also make democratic communication more creative, visual, emotional, and accessible. However, social media is not automatically democratic.

It can amplify misinformation, polarisation, hate speech, manipulation, superficial engagement, and algorithmic echo chambers. For this reason, social media should be treated as a powerful but complex civic tool. Youth workers, educators, and organisations should help young people understand how online visibility works, how to evaluate sources, how to communicate responsibly, and how to transform online awareness into meaningful participation. Digital campaigns, for example, can support e-democracy by encouraging young people to share personal experiences, explain democratic issues in accessible language, and invite peers to participate in civic dialogue.



Digital tools for civic engagement are most effective when they are combined with non-formal education methodologies. A platform alone cannot create democratic culture; it needs activities that help young people develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and confidence required for participation. Workshops, youth exchanges, webinars, simulations, hackathons, civic engagement challenges, and ambassador programmes can all support the use of digital tools. For example, a digital diplomacy simulation can help young people understand negotiation and policy-making. A hackathon can encourage them to design solutions to social problems. A civic challenge can motivate them to identify issues in their communities and propose actions. An e-democracy ambassador programme can train young people to promote participation among their peers. These activities create a bridge between digital participation and lived experience. They help young people see technology not as an end in itself, but as a means to communicate, cooperate, deliberate, and influence change.

The combination of digital tools and non-formal education is especially important because democratic participation requires both access and preparation. Access means that young people have the opportunity to participate through tools that are open, understandable, and easy to use. Preparation means that they have the knowledge and confidence to use these tools responsibly and effectively. For example, before participating in an online vote, young people may need to discuss the topic in groups, explore different perspectives, identify reliable information, and reflect on the possible consequences of different choices. This process transforms voting from a simple technical action into a democratic learning experience. In this sense, e-voting platforms and digital participation tools should be embedded in a wider educational journey. The platform can provide the digital space, while youth work and non-formal education can provide the learning, dialogue, and motivation that make participation meaningful.

### **Opportunities and Risks of Digital Participation**

Digital participation creates important opportunities for accessibility and inclusion. It can make democratic engagement easier for young people who cannot travel, who live far from urban centres, who have limited time, or who feel excluded from formal political spaces. Online tools can allow participation at different times and from different locations, making engagement more flexible.





They can also provide different forms of expression, such as written comments, voting, visual storytelling, video messages, or collaborative documents. This flexibility can be especially useful for young people who may not feel comfortable speaking in public meetings but are willing to express themselves online. Moreover, digital platforms can connect young people from different EU countries and create a sense of European dialogue beyond borders. This is particularly relevant for initiatives that aim to strengthen European identity, solidarity, and cooperation. When designed well, digital participation can make democracy more open, continuous, and youth-friendly.

Another important opportunity of digital participation is that it can make democratic processes more visible and understandable. Many young people experience institutions as distant, complicated, or inaccessible. Digital tools can help translate complex processes into more understandable formats. For example, a platform can explain a topic in simple language, show the steps of a consultation, present results visually, or provide updates on how young people's input is being used. This can reduce the feeling that democracy is something abstract or reserved for experts.

Digital participation can also encourage peer-to-peer learning. Young people may be more motivated to participate when they see other young people sharing experiences, asking questions, or leading campaigns. In this sense, digital tools can create a more open and relatable democratic environment. They can help young people move from passive observation to active involvement.

At the same time, digital participation carries serious risks related to misinformation, manipulation, and the quality of public debate. The online environment exposes young people to a huge volume of information, not all of which is accurate, transparent, or trustworthy. False information, conspiracy narratives, emotional manipulation, bots, deepfakes, polarising content, and targeted disinformation campaigns can distort democratic discussion and influence opinions. Young people may be confident users of digital media, but this does not automatically mean that they have the critical skills to evaluate information or recognise manipulation.



Therefore, media and information literacy must be an essential part of any e-democracy approach. Participants should learn how to check sources, distinguish facts from opinions, identify biased content, understand algorithms, and reflect before sharing information. A democratic digital space must encourage critical thinking, respectful dialogue, and evidence-based discussion. Without these elements, digital participation can become vulnerable to noise, distrust, and manipulation rather than empowerment.

Privacy, ethics, and cybersecurity are also central concerns in digital democracy. Any platform that collects personal data, enables voting, hosts discussions, or connects young people must be designed with strong safeguards. Participants need to know what data is collected, why it is collected, how it is stored, who can access it, and how long it will be kept. They should also understand their rights as users and citizens. The EU's approach to digital rights emphasises a human-centric, secure and sustainable vision for digital transformation, reflecting European values and fundamental rights. In the case of youth participation, ethical responsibility is even more important because digital tools may involve young people with different levels of digital awareness and vulnerability. Cybersecurity is not only a technical issue; it is also a matter of democratic trust. If users fear that their data, votes, or opinions may be exposed, manipulated, or misused, they will be less likely to participate. For this reason, digital participation spaces must communicate clearly, protect users effectively, and create a safe environment for engagement.

Another risk of digital participation is unequal access. Although young people are often described as “digital natives”, this term can be misleading. Not all young people have the same access to devices, stable internet connection, digital skills, safe online spaces, or supportive learning environments. Some may use digital tools daily for communication or entertainment, but still lack the skills needed for civic participation, critical information assessment, online safety, or data protection. Others may face language barriers, disabilities, social exclusion, or limited confidence. Therefore, digital participation must not assume that all young people start from the same position. Inclusive design requires attention to accessibility, simplicity, multilingual support where possible, and additional guidance for those who need it.

Ethical digital participation also requires respectful communication and protection from harmful behaviour. Online spaces can sometimes encourage aggressive language, hate speech, exclusion, harassment, or polarisation, especially when users feel anonymous or disconnected from the real impact of their words. A youth-focused e-democracy platform should therefore include clear community guidelines, moderation mechanisms, and educational activities around respectful dialogue. Young people should be encouraged to disagree without attacking, to listen before responding, and to understand that democratic debate requires both freedom of expression and responsibility. Creating a safe digital environment does not mean avoiding difficult topics. On the contrary, democracy requires open discussion of complex and sometimes controversial issues. However, these discussions must be facilitated in a way that protects dignity, inclusion, and mutual respect.

Overall, e-democracy offers a powerful opportunity to renew youth participation in Europe, but it must be approached with care, responsibility, and democratic purpose. Digital tools can help young people connect with institutions, express their views, debate common challenges, vote on priorities, and develop a stronger sense of civic agency.

# Empowerment Through Digital Civic Engagement

## Active Citizenship in the Digital Era

Active citizenship refers to the participation of individuals in the social, political, cultural, and civic life of their communities. It is based on the idea that democracy is not limited to voting in elections or following decisions made by institutions. Democracy also depends on citizens who are informed, responsible, engaged, and willing to contribute to the common good. Active citizenship can take many forms: volunteering, participating in public consultations, joining youth organisations, attending community meetings, advocating for human rights, supporting environmental actions, helping vulnerable groups, creating awareness campaigns, or taking part in democratic debates. For young people, active citizenship is especially important because it helps them understand that they are not passive recipients of policies, but people who can influence their communities and shape the future.

In the digital era, active citizenship has expanded into online spaces. Young people can now follow public debates, access information, contact institutions, support campaigns, sign petitions, participate in consultations, create educational content, and connect with others across borders using digital tools. This has made civic participation more immediate and visible. A young person can raise awareness about a local issue through social media, join an online campaign for climate justice, participate in a European youth consultation, or use a digital platform to vote on community priorities. These forms of participation can be especially powerful because they allow young people to act quickly, collaborate widely, and reach audiences that would be difficult to reach through traditional methods. Digital spaces have therefore become an important extension of democratic life.

However, active citizenship online also requires responsibility. The internet is not only a space of freedom and expression; it is also a space where words, images, and actions can have real consequences. Civic responsibility in online spaces means communicating respectfully, sharing information carefully, protecting personal data, recognising the dignity of others, and avoiding harmful behaviour such as hate speech, harassment, misinformation, or public shaming. It also means understanding that digital participation should contribute to constructive dialogue rather than simply creating conflict or visibility. Young people need to be encouraged to ask themselves whether their online actions support democratic values, inclusion, and mutual respect. Responsible digital citizenship does not mean avoiding strong opinions. It means expressing them in ways that are ethical, informed, and respectful of others.

Young people today have significant potential to act as changemakers. They are often among the first to identify emerging social issues, challenge injustice, experiment with new forms of communication, and mobilise their peers. Across Europe and beyond, youth-led initiatives have played important roles in climate activism, anti-discrimination movements, mental health awareness, gender equality, digital rights, and community solidarity.

Digital tools have strengthened this role by giving young people platforms to tell stories, organise actions, and build networks. A young person with a phone and an internet connection can now produce content, launch a campaign, invite others to participate, and bring attention to an issue that might otherwise remain invisible. This does not mean that digital activism is always enough, but it shows that young people can influence public conversations in powerful ways.

At the same time, the idea of youth as changemakers should not place unrealistic pressure on young people. Empowerment does not mean expecting young people to solve complex social problems alone. Instead, it means recognising their agency while also providing support, mentorship, resources, and safe spaces for participation.

Young people need adults, institutions, youth workers, educators, and organisations that take their views seriously and create conditions for meaningful involvement. Digital civic engagement becomes empowering when young people are not only invited to react, but also supported to understand issues, design solutions, cooperate with others, and participate in decision-making processes. In this sense, youth empowerment is both individual and collective. It strengthens the confidence of young people, but it also requires systems that are open to their participation.



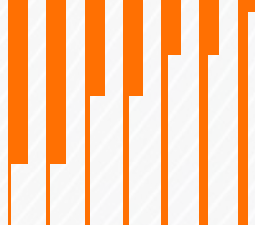


### **Developing Critical Thinking and Media Literacy**

Critical thinking is one of the most important skills for digital civic engagement. It allows young people to analyse information, question assumptions, compare perspectives, identify bias, and make informed decisions. In online environments, where information spreads quickly and emotionally, critical thinking becomes essential for democratic participation. Young people are exposed to news, opinions, advertisements, memes, videos, political messages, influencers, algorithms, and user-generated content every day. Some of this content is accurate and useful, but some of it may be misleading, manipulative, incomplete, or false. Without critical thinking, young people may find it difficult to distinguish between evidence-based information and content designed to provoke anger, fear, or confusion. A democratic digital culture therefore depends on citizens who can pause, reflect, verify, and evaluate before reacting or sharing.

Media literacy is closely connected to critical thinking. It refers to the ability to access, understand, evaluate, create, and communicate information through different media channels. In the digital age, media literacy includes understanding how online platforms work, how algorithms influence visibility, how images and videos can be edited, how headlines can be misleading, and how emotional language can shape public opinion. It also includes the ability to recognise the difference between journalism, opinion, advertising, propaganda, satire, and personal content. For young people, media literacy is not only a school skill; it is a civic competence. It helps them participate more safely and responsibly in public debate. It also protects democratic processes from manipulation, because informed citizens are less vulnerable to disinformation and polarising narratives.

Fake news and disinformation are major challenges for digital democracy. Fake news is often used as a general term to describe false or misleading information presented as news. Disinformation is more specific: it refers to false or misleading information that is created or shared intentionally to deceive people. Misinformation, on the other hand, may be false but shared without harmful intention.



This distinction matters because not all people who share false information are trying to manipulate others. Sometimes they may simply trust the wrong source or react emotionally before checking. Young people need to understand these differences so that they can respond appropriately. Instead of blaming or shaming others, media literacy education should encourage verification, dialogue, and careful correction. The goal is not only to identify false content, but also to build healthier information habits.

Recognising fake news and disinformation requires attention to several warning signs. Content may be suspicious if it uses extremely emotional language, presents shocking claims without evidence, relies on anonymous sources, uses manipulated images, imitates legitimate news websites, or asks users to share quickly before checking. Headlines that are designed to create outrage or fear should also be approached carefully. Another warning sign is when content presents complex issues in an overly simple way, blaming one group or person for everything. Young people should be encouraged to ask basic questions: Who created this content? What is the source? Is there evidence? Are other reliable sources reporting the same information? When was it published? Is the image or video authentic? What emotion is this content trying to create? These questions can help slow down impulsive reactions and support more responsible engagement.

Fact-checking strategies are practical tools that young people can use in everyday digital life. A first step is to check the source: whether the website, account, or author is known, credible, transparent, and accountable. A second step is to compare the information with other reliable sources, especially established media, official institutions, academic sources, or recognised fact-checking organisations. A third step is to check the date, because old information can be shared as if it were current. A fourth step is to examine images and videos carefully, as visual content can be taken out of context or digitally manipulated. Reverse image search tools can help identify where an image originally appeared. A fifth step is to reflect on emotional reaction: if content makes someone feel immediate anger, fear, or superiority, it is worth pausing before sharing. Fact-checking should become a habit, not an occasional activity.

Responsible online behaviour is another core part of media literacy. It includes thinking before posting, respecting privacy, avoiding the spread of unverified information, giving credit to sources, and recognising the impact of one's words on others. In civic engagement, responsible online behaviour is especially important because public discussions can easily become polarised or aggressive. Young people should be supported to express disagreement without personal attacks, to ask questions instead of making assumptions, and to recognise when a conversation is becoming harmful. They should also understand that deleting a post does not always remove its impact, as screenshots and shares can continue circulating. Digital responsibility means being aware that online actions are part of one's civic identity. The way young people communicate online can either strengthen or weaken democratic culture.

Critical thinking and media literacy should not be taught only through theory. They are best developed through practical exercises and real examples. Youth workers and educators can use activities such as comparing headlines, analysing social media posts, identifying bias in articles, checking images, discussing conspiracy narratives, or creating responsible digital campaigns.



Young people can also be invited to reflect on their own online habits: what types of content they trust, how they decide what to share, which platforms influence them most, and how algorithms shape what they see. These activities help make media literacy personal and relevant. They also show that everyone, regardless of age or education level, can be vulnerable to manipulation. The aim is not to make young people suspicious of everything, but to help them become careful, confident, and responsible digital citizens.

### **Communication and Advocacy Skills**

Communication is at the heart of civic engagement. Young people who want to participate in democratic life need to be able to express ideas clearly, listen actively, ask questions, present arguments, and engage in dialogue with people who may have different views. Communication is not only about speaking well; it is also about creating understanding. In democratic contexts, communication helps individuals explain problems, propose solutions, build support, and influence decision-making. In digital civic engagement, communication becomes even more important because messages often need to be clear, short, visual, and adapted to different platforms. A young person may need to present an idea in a debate, write a campaign post, create a video message, participate in an online consultation, or speak in a webinar. Each context requires different communication skills.

Public speaking is an important skill for youth empowerment because it helps young people gain confidence and make their voices heard. Many young people have ideas and opinions but hesitate to express them in front of others because they fear judgement, making mistakes, or not being taken seriously. Public speaking training can help reduce this fear by giving young people simple tools: structuring a message, speaking at a clear pace, using examples, maintaining eye contact, managing body language, and preparing key points. In youth work and non-formal education, public speaking should be practised in supportive environments where participants feel safe to try, receive feedback, and improve gradually. The goal is not to make everyone a perfect speaker, but to help young people feel capable of expressing themselves in democratic spaces.





Debate techniques are also valuable for democratic participation. Debate teaches young people how to build arguments, use evidence, respond to opposing views, and think critically about complex issues. However, debate should not be understood only as competition. In civic education, debate should also promote listening, respect, and openness to changing one's mind. Young people should learn that disagreement is a normal part of democracy and that different views can be discussed without hostility. A useful debate structure includes a clear topic, preparation time, argument presentation, response, reflection, and final conclusions. Participants can be encouraged to support their points with evidence, avoid personal attacks, and recognise valid points made by others. In this way, debate becomes not only a communication exercise, but also a practice of democratic culture.

Advocacy refers to the process of supporting a cause, promoting an idea, or influencing decisions in favour of a specific change. For young people, advocacy can be a powerful way to participate in society. It can focus on issues such as environmental protection, mental health, equality, education, youth employment, inclusion, digital rights, or local community needs. Advocacy requires several skills: identifying a problem, understanding who has the power to address it, developing a clear message, gathering evidence, building alliances, communicating with target audiences, and proposing realistic solutions. Digital tools can support advocacy by helping young people reach wider audiences, collect support, share stories, and connect with organisations or decision-makers. However, effective advocacy requires strategy. Posting online is not enough if the message is unclear, the audience is not identified, or there is no concrete call to action.

Digital campaigning is one of the most common forms of online advocacy. A digital campaign uses online tools to raise awareness, mobilise people, and promote a message or action. It may include social media posts, videos, hashtags, online events, petitions, newsletters, infographics, storytelling, or collaborations with influencers and organisations. For young people, digital campaigning can be accessible and creative. It allows them to combine civic engagement with visual communication, personal expression, and peer-to-peer mobilisation. A strong digital campaign usually has a clear objective, a defined audience, a simple message, reliable information, consistent visual identity, and a specific action that people can take. For example, a campaign may invite young people to vote in a consultation, attend an event, share a story, sign a petition, or contact a local authority. Without a clear objective, digital campaigns risk becoming visible but not impactful.

Online advocacy strategies should be ethical, inclusive, and evidence-based. Young people should be encouraged to avoid exaggeration, manipulation, or the use of false information even when supporting a good cause. Democratic advocacy should respect the dignity of others and avoid creating hostility against individuals or groups. It should also be inclusive, meaning that messages should be accessible to different audiences and not only to those who already agree. This may involve using clear language, subtitles in videos, accessible formats, multilingual content where possible, and examples that reflect diverse experiences. Online advocacy should also include reflection on safety. Young people involved in public campaigns may face criticism, negative comments, or online harassment. Therefore, they need guidance on how to protect personal data, set boundaries, moderate discussions, and seek support when needed.

Storytelling is a particularly powerful communication tool for digital civic engagement. Facts and statistics are important, but stories help people understand why an issue matters. Young people can use storytelling to connect personal experiences with broader social challenges. For example, a story about difficulties accessing education, feeling excluded from decision-making, experiencing discrimination, or participating in a youth initiative can make abstract issues more human and relatable. Digital storytelling can take many forms: short videos, photo essays, podcasts, blog posts, social media threads, or visual campaigns. However, ethical storytelling requires consent, respect, and care. Personal stories should not be used in ways that expose, exploit, or stereotype people. When done responsibly, storytelling can build empathy, raise awareness, and encourage others to participate.

### **Leadership and Participation Skills**

Youth leadership is an important dimension of empowerment. Leadership does not only mean holding a formal position, speaking the most, or making decisions for others. In democratic youth work, leadership is better understood as the ability to take initiative, support others, encourage participation, and contribute to collective goals. A young leader can be someone who facilitates a discussion, motivates peers, identifies a problem, proposes an idea, organises an activity, or helps a group work together. This broader understanding of leadership is important because it makes leadership more inclusive. Not all young people are comfortable with traditional leadership roles, but many can lead in different ways: through creativity, empathy, organisation, problem-solving, digital skills, or community knowledge.

Youth leadership development requires opportunities for practice. Young people develop leadership skills when they are trusted with responsibilities, allowed to make decisions, and supported to learn from mistakes. Non-formal education is particularly effective because it creates participatory spaces where leadership can rotate among participants. For example, young people can take turns facilitating group work, presenting results, moderating online discussions, managing campaign tasks, or representing group ideas in a consultation. These experiences help them build confidence and understand the responsibilities that come with leadership. Good youth leadership is not about control, but about enabling participation. A strong young leader creates space for others, listens actively, and helps the group move towards shared outcomes.

Decision-making is another key skill for democratic participation. Young people often participate in activities where they are asked to share opinions, but they may have fewer opportunities to practise real decision-making. Democratic decision-making requires understanding the issue, identifying options, considering consequences, listening to different perspectives, and making choices that are fair and transparent. In digital civic engagement, decision-making can take place through online voting, collaborative documents, group chats, virtual meetings, or participatory platforms.





However, the method used should match the purpose of the decision. Some decisions may require majority voting, while others may require consensus, negotiation, or consultation. Young people should learn that democratic decision-making is not only about winning, but also about legitimacy, fairness, and accountability.

Negotiation is closely connected to decision-making. It is the process of discussing different needs, interests, or positions in order to reach an agreement or a workable solution. In democratic life, negotiation is essential because communities are diverse and people do not always agree. Young people can develop negotiation skills by learning how to identify common ground, separate people from problems, listen to underlying concerns, propose alternatives, and make compromises without abandoning core values. Negotiation does not mean avoiding conflict. It means managing disagreement constructively. Digital environments can make negotiation more difficult because messages may be misunderstood, tone may be unclear, and discussions can become reactive. For this reason, online negotiation requires patience, clarity, respectful language, and sometimes facilitation.

Collaborative problem-solving is one of the most valuable skills for youth empowerment. Many social challenges are too complex to be solved by one person or one organisation. They require cooperation between young people, communities, institutions, schools, civil society, and decision-makers. Collaborative problem-solving involves identifying a shared problem, analysing its causes, listening to different experiences, generating ideas, testing solutions, and evaluating results.

Digital tools can support this process by allowing groups to brainstorm online, map community needs, collect feedback, share resources, and coordinate action. However, collaboration also requires trust and clear roles. Without communication and structure, group work can become confusing or unequal. Young people should therefore learn how to divide tasks, respect deadlines, include quieter voices, and make collective decisions. Participation skills also include the ability to facilitate dialogue.



Facilitation is different from leadership because the facilitator's role is not to dominate the discussion, but to help others participate. Young people can be trained to facilitate peer discussions, online forums, workshops, or consultation sessions. Facilitation skills include asking open questions, summarising ideas, managing time, encouraging quieter participants, addressing conflict, and keeping the discussion focused. In digital spaces, facilitation may also involve setting rules for online dialogue, moderating comments, organising breakout rooms, or using interactive tools such as polls and collaborative boards. Peer facilitation can be particularly empowering because young people may feel more comfortable discussing certain issues with other young people. It also shows that democratic participation can be shared and co-created.

Leadership and participation skills should be developed in ways that are inclusive and reflective. Not every young person will participate in the same way. Some may enjoy speaking publicly, while others may prefer writing, designing, researching, organising, or supporting others behind the scenes. A good empowerment approach recognises different forms of contribution. It also includes reflection after activities: What worked well? Who participated most? Who was left out? How were decisions made? What could be improved next time? Reflection helps young people understand participation not only as an activity, but as a learning process. It also supports democratic self-awareness, because participants begin to recognise how power, voice, inclusion, and responsibility operate within groups.

### **Inclusion and Equal Participation**

Inclusion is a fundamental principle of youth empowerment and digital civic engagement. Participation cannot be considered democratic if it is accessible only to young people who already have confidence, resources, education, free time, digital skills, or social support. Many young people face barriers that limit their ability to participate. These may include poverty, unemployment, disability, discrimination, migration background, rural isolation, language barriers, caring responsibilities, lack of internet access, low trust in institutions, or previous negative experiences. Inclusion means identifying these barriers and actively working to reduce them. It also means recognising that equal participation does not always mean giving everyone the same support. Some young people may need additional guidance, adapted formats, translation, mentoring, financial support, or safe spaces in order to participate meaningfully.

Engaging young people with fewer opportunities requires intentional outreach. Information often circulates through networks that already include active and privileged young people. To reach those who are less connected, communication needs to be accessible, targeted, and trust-based. This may involve cooperation with schools, youth centres, community organisations, social services, local authorities, migrant associations, disability organisations, or informal youth groups. The language used to invite young people also matters. Messages should be clear, welcoming, and realistic. Young people should understand what the activity is about, why their voice matters, whether participation is free, what support is available, and how the process will be safe and respectful.



Geographical barriers are particularly important in European youth participation. Young people living in rural areas, islands, remote regions, or smaller towns may have fewer opportunities to attend events, meet decision-makers, access youth organisations, or participate in international activities. Digital civic engagement can help reduce these barriers by offering online participation options, virtual consultations, webinars, and digital platforms. However, digital tools should not be seen as a complete solution. Some rural or remote areas may also face weak internet infrastructure, limited transport, fewer youth services, or lower access to devices. A blended approach can be more inclusive, combining online tools with local outreach, community-based activities, and support from local facilitators. The aim should be to bring participation closer to young people, rather than expecting young people to overcome all barriers alone.

Economic barriers can also limit participation. Even when an activity is free, young people may face hidden costs such as transport, meals, internet data, equipment, childcare, or time away from paid work. Digital participation may reduce some costs, but it can create others if young people need a stable device, private space, or reliable connection. Economic inclusion therefore requires practical planning. Organisations can support participation by covering expenses, providing equipment when possible, scheduling activities at accessible times, avoiding unnecessary costs, and communicating clearly about what is provided. In digital activities, low-bandwidth options, mobile-friendly platforms, and asynchronous participation can help include young people who cannot always join live sessions. Inclusion should be planned from the beginning, not added after barriers appear.

Gender equality is another essential dimension of inclusive participation. Young people of different genders may experience participation spaces differently. Girls and young women may face stereotypes, lower confidence due to social expectations, online harassment, or underrepresentation in leadership and technology-related spaces. Young men may also face restrictive expectations around emotional expression, vulnerability, or help-seeking. Non-binary and LGBTQI+ young people may face exclusion, discrimination, or lack of recognition in both offline and online environments. Inclusive participation requires attention to these dynamics.

Facilitators should ensure balanced speaking opportunities, challenge stereotypes, create respectful communication rules, and protect participants from gender-based harassment or discrimination. Digital platforms and campaigns should also use inclusive language and imagery that reflects diverse identities and experiences.

Inclusive participation also requires accessibility for young people with disabilities. Digital tools can create opportunities for participation, but only if accessibility is considered in design and facilitation. This may include compatibility with screen readers, captions for videos, clear layout, readable fonts, alternative text for images, simple navigation, keyboard accessibility, and avoiding overly complex interfaces. In online meetings, accessibility can involve providing agendas in advance, using captions, allowing written contributions, giving breaks, and ensuring that materials are easy to understand. Accessibility benefits everyone, not only people with disabilities. Clear language, good structure, and flexible participation formats make activities more inclusive for all young people. A democratic digital environment should be designed with the assumption that participants have diverse needs.

Equal participation also depends on the culture of the group. Even when access is open, some young people may dominate discussions while others remain silent. This can happen because of confidence, language ability, social status, education level, personality, or previous experience. Small group discussions, anonymous polls, written reflections, rotating roles, pair work, and digital boards can help include participants who do not feel comfortable speaking in large groups. It is also important to create a respectful atmosphere where mistakes are allowed and different opinions can be expressed safely. Equal participation is not only about who is present; it is about who is heard, respected, and able to influence the process.

Inclusion should be understood as an ongoing commitment rather than a checklist. It requires continuous reflection, feedback, and adaptation. After each activity, facilitators can ask: Who participated? Who did not participate? Why? Were the tools accessible? Was the language understandable? Did everyone feel safe? Were some voices stronger than others? What barriers appeared, and how can they be reduced next time? Young people themselves should be involved in answering these questions. Their feedback can help improve future activities and make participation more responsive to real needs. Inclusive digital civic engagement is not achieved once and for all; it is built through repeated efforts to make democratic spaces more open, fair, and welcoming.



# Digital Democracy in Practice

## Youth Participation Models Across Europe

Youth participation across Europe takes many forms, depending on the local context, institutional framework, available resources, and level of youth involvement. Some models are formal and connected to public institutions, such as youth councils, municipal youth boards, school councils, youth parliaments, advisory groups, and structured consultations. Others are more informal and community-based, such as youth-led campaigns, grassroots initiatives, volunteer groups, digital communities, peer networks, and social movements. Both types of participation are valuable. Formal participation can create direct links with decision-makers and public authorities, while informal participation can be more flexible, creative, and accessible to young people who may not feel represented by traditional structures. A strong youth participation ecosystem should recognise different forms of engagement and create bridges between them.

Participatory youth initiatives often work best when young people are involved not only as participants, but also as co-creators. This means that young people should have a role in identifying topics, designing activities, choosing communication methods, facilitating discussions, and evaluating results. Co-creation helps avoid tokenism because it treats young people as partners rather than passive beneficiaries. For example, a youth forum can be more meaningful when young people help define the agenda. An online consultation can be more relevant when young people help formulate the questions. A digital campaign can be more effective when it uses language, visuals, and platforms that young people recognise as authentic. Co-creation also strengthens ownership. When young people feel that they helped shape a process, they are more likely to trust it, participate actively, and encourage others to join.

Local best practices in youth participation often start from issues that young people experience directly in their communities. These may include public transport, education, mental health services, environmental protection, cultural spaces, safety, housing, inclusion, employment, or digital access. Local participation is important because it allows young people to see the connection between civic engagement and everyday life. A municipal youth consultation, for example, can invite young people to propose improvements for public spaces. A school-based participatory process can allow students to vote on priorities for wellbeing or sustainability. A youth centre can organise a digital mapping exercise where participants identify barriers and opportunities in their neighbourhood. These local practices can build confidence and show young people that participation can produce visible results.

At European level, youth participation is often supported through dialogue, mobility, volunteering, and transnational cooperation. The EU Youth Dialogue is one example of a structured mechanism that connects young people with decision-makers in the framework of the EU Youth Strategy. It aims to involve young people and youth organisations in policy dialogue and gives particular attention to young people with fewer opportunities. Other European-level opportunities include consultations, youth events, European youth programmes, and cross-border projects that bring together participants from different countries. These models are important because they help young people understand that many challenges are shared across Europe, even when they are experienced differently in each country.



They also strengthen intercultural learning, solidarity, and a sense of European belonging. Successful digital participation platforms usually combine three elements: **information, deliberation, and action**. Information means that participants can access clear, balanced, and understandable content about the issue being discussed. Deliberation means that participants have space to exchange views, ask questions, compare perspectives, and develop ideas together.

Action means that participation leads to a visible outcome, such as a vote, recommendation, proposal, campaign, report, or follow-up meeting. Platforms that only collect opinions without feedback may create frustration. Platforms that only provide information without interaction may feel passive. Platforms that allow voting without discussion may produce quick results but limited learning. A strong digital participation platform should therefore support the full democratic cycle: understanding, discussing, deciding, acting, and receiving feedback.

European digital participation practices show that online tools can increase access, but they must be connected to transparent processes. The European Citizens' Initiative, for example, allows EU citizens to invite the European Commission to propose legal action when an initiative reaches the required level of support. It is not a youth-specific tool, but it is a useful example of how digital participation can connect citizen mobilisation with institutional processes. Similarly, the European Commission's Citizens' Engagement Platform allows citizens to create, comment on, and vote on contributions, with participation linked to deliberation, follow-up, and feedback phases. These examples show that digital democracy is strongest when online participation is not isolated, but connected to broader decision-making and communication structures.

Best practices in digital youth participation also highlight the importance of accessibility and trust. A platform may be technically advanced, but it will not be successful if young people do not understand how to use it, do not trust the organisers, or do not believe that their input matters. Accessibility includes simple registration, mobile-friendly design, clear instructions, inclusive language, and support for participants with different needs. Trust includes transparency about the purpose of participation, the use of data, the rules of moderation, and the follow-up process. Young people are more likely to participate when they know why they are being asked to contribute, how their views will be used, and who will be responsible for responding to the results. Trust is not created only by technology; it is created by honest and accountable participation design.

### **Organising Digital Democracy Activities**

Organising digital democracy activities requires careful planning. A successful activity does not begin with choosing a platform or tool; it begins with defining the purpose.





Facilitators should first ask: What do we want young people to learn, discuss, decide, or create? Is the activity designed to collect opinions, build knowledge, support dialogue, develop proposals, practise voting, or create a campaign? Once the purpose is clear, the format can be selected. A youth forum may be suitable for open dialogue. A workshop may be useful for developing skills. A debate may help participants explore different arguments. An online consultation may collect structured input. A simulation may help young people understand decision-making. Clear objectives help avoid activities that are engaging on the surface but unclear in their democratic value.

Planning youth forums and dialogues requires attention to both content and process. The content should be relevant to young people's lives and connected to issues they care about. Topics such as digital rights, climate action, inclusion, education, employment, mental health, European identity, or local community needs can encourage meaningful discussion. The process should be participatory, inclusive, and well-structured. Participants need to understand the agenda, the rules of dialogue, the expected outputs, and how their contributions will be used. A youth forum can include short inputs, small group discussions, digital polls, open debate, proposal development, and final voting. Online forums should also include breaks, interactive tools, and clear facilitation, because long digital meetings can easily become tiring or passive.

Structuring workshops for digital democracy should balance learning, interaction, and action. A useful structure may include an opening activity to build trust, a short introduction to the topic, group work to explore different perspectives, practical tasks to develop ideas, and a closing reflection. For example, a workshop on digital citizenship could begin with a discussion of participants' online habits, continue with an activity on misinformation, and end with participants designing guidelines for respectful online engagement. A workshop on e-voting could include an explanation of democratic decision-making, a simulation of proposal development, and a digital vote followed by reflection. The most effective workshops are not lectures. They allow young people to participate actively, connect content to their own experiences, and produce something concrete.



Debates are another useful format for digital democracy activities. They help young people practise argumentation, listening, evidence-based reasoning, and respectful disagreement. However, debates should be carefully facilitated to avoid becoming aggressive or overly competitive. A good debate structure includes clear rules, balanced preparation, speaking time limits, evidence requirements, and reflection after the discussion. Facilitators can use formats such as Oxford-style debates, fishbowl discussions, role-based debates, or moderated online panels. Digital tools can support debates through polls, shared documents, chat questions, or breakout rooms. After the debate, participants should reflect not only on which arguments were strongest, but also on how the discussion was conducted. Did everyone have a chance to speak? Were different views respected? Did participants use evidence? Did anyone change or reconsider their opinion?

Facilitating participatory discussions requires more than managing time. It involves creating a safe and inclusive environment where participants feel able to express themselves honestly. Facilitators should use open questions, encourage active listening, summarise key points, and make space for quieter participants. They should also manage dominant voices and address disrespectful behaviour quickly but calmly. In digital discussions, facilitation can be more challenging because body language is limited, participants may be distracted, and misunderstandings can happen more easily. For this reason, online discussions should include clear communication rules, simple instructions, and varied participation methods. Not everyone needs to speak verbally. Participants can contribute through chat, polls, collaborative boards, anonymous questions, or written reflections. Multiple channels of participation make discussions more inclusive.

A key element of organising digital democracy activities is designing the participation journey. Young people should not be asked to jump directly into complex debates or decisions without preparation. A strong participation journey may begin with awareness-raising, continue with learning and discussion, move into proposal development or voting, and end with feedback and reflection. For example, before an online vote, participants may first explore the topic through a workshop, discuss arguments in small groups, review proposals, ask questions, and then vote. After the vote, they should receive information about the results and next steps. This journey helps transform digital participation from a one-click action into a democratic learning process. It also supports trust because participants can see the logic and purpose behind each step.

Evaluation should be included in every digital democracy activity. Evaluation helps organisers understand whether the activity was inclusive, meaningful, and effective. It can include short feedback forms, group reflections, digital polls, facilitator notes, or follow-up interviews. Useful evaluation questions include: Did participants understand the purpose of the activity? Did they feel safe to express their views? Were the tools easy to use? Did the activity include different voices? Did participants learn something new? Did they feel that their contributions mattered? Evaluation should not be treated as a formality. It is part of democratic accountability. When young people are asked for feedback, organisers should use it to improve future activities and, where possible, communicate what changes were made as a result.



## **E-Democracy Simulations and Role-Plays**

Simulations and role-plays are powerful methods for helping young people understand democratic processes. Many political and institutional procedures can feel distant or complicated when explained only through theory. Simulations allow participants to experience these processes in an interactive and practical way. They can take on roles, debate issues, negotiate proposals, vote on decisions, and reflect on the challenges of democratic participation. In youth work and civic education, simulations are particularly useful because they create a safe learning environment. Participants can experiment with different positions, make decisions, face disagreements, and understand the complexity of policymaking without the pressure of real political consequences. When designed well, simulations help young people move from passive learning to active democratic practice.

EU policymaking simulations can help young people understand how European decisions are developed, negotiated, and influenced by different actors. A simulation may assign participants roles such as Members of the European Parliament, representatives of Member States, European Commission officials, civil society organisations, journalists, youth delegates, or lobby groups. Participants can work on a fictional policy issue, such as digital rights, climate action, youth employment, online safety, or inclusive education. They may need to analyse information, represent different interests, form alliances, negotiate amendments, and vote on a final proposal. The objective is not to reproduce EU procedures perfectly, but to help young people understand that policymaking involves dialogue, compromise, evidence, values, and power relations. Such activities can also show why active citizenship matters at European level.

Digital diplomacy exercises are another valuable format. Diplomacy is often associated with relations between states, but its skills are relevant to many forms of civic engagement. Digital diplomacy exercises can teach young people how to communicate across cultures, manage disagreement, build trust, and negotiate shared outcomes in online environments. Participants can represent different countries, youth organisations, institutions, or community groups and work together on a shared challenge.





For example, they may need to agree on a European youth declaration, respond to a disinformation crisis, design a cross-border climate campaign, or develop recommendations for digital inclusion. Because the exercise takes place partly or fully online, participants also practise digital communication skills such as clarity, tone, respectful messaging, and collaborative writing. Civic engagement scenarios are practical role-play activities based on real-life community challenges. These scenarios can help young people connect democratic participation with everyday problems. A scenario might involve a municipality planning to redesign a public square, a school discussing mental health support, a local community facing misinformation about migrants, or a youth organisation deciding how to allocate funding for activities. Participants can take on different roles, such as young residents, local authorities, teachers, parents, activists, journalists, business owners, or vulnerable groups. Through the scenario, they discuss interests, identify conflicts, propose solutions, and decide on next steps. This method helps participants understand that democracy is not only about institutions, but also about community problem-solving and shared responsibility.

E-democracy simulations can include digital voting as part of the learning process. For example, participants may develop proposals in groups, present them online, discuss strengths and weaknesses, and then vote through a digital tool. After the vote, the facilitator can lead a reflection on the process. Was the voting system easy to use? Did participants feel informed before voting? Were the options clear? Did the result reflect the quality of the proposals? Did minority opinions feel respected? This reflection is essential because it helps young people understand that voting is only one part of democracy. The quality of information, discussion, inclusion, and trust before the vote is just as important as the result itself. Digital voting should therefore be used not only as a decision-making tool, but also as an opportunity to learn about democratic legitimacy.

Role-plays can also help young people explore ethical dilemmas in digital democracy. For example, participants can be asked to respond to a situation where a campaign uses misleading information to gain support, where online comments become hateful, where a platform collects too much personal data, or where a digital vote excludes people without internet access. Each group can represent a different actor and propose a response. These dilemmas encourage critical thinking because they show that digital participation is not always simple or neutral. Young people learn that democratic choices often involve competing values, such as freedom of expression and protection from harm, accessibility and security, speed and deliberation, visibility and privacy. Discussing these tensions helps build more mature digital citizenship.

The facilitator's role is crucial in simulations and role-plays. Participants need clear instructions, realistic but understandable roles, enough time to prepare, and a safe environment for interaction. The facilitator should explain that participants are acting within roles and that the views expressed in the simulation do not necessarily represent their personal beliefs. This is especially important when dealing with sensitive topics. After the activity, debriefing is essential. Debriefing allows participants to step out of their roles, reflect on what happened, connect the experience to real democratic processes, and identify what they learned. Useful debriefing questions include: What was difficult about your role? How were decisions made? Who had more influence and why? What helped or blocked cooperation? How did digital tools affect the process? What would you do differently in real life?

## **Online Participation and Safe Digital Spaces**

Safe digital spaces are essential for meaningful online participation. Young people are more likely to express their views, ask questions, and engage in debate when they feel respected and protected. A safe digital space does not mean a space where everyone agrees or where difficult topics are avoided. Democracy requires disagreement, debate, and critical discussion. However, safety means that participants can disagree without being attacked, humiliated, discriminated against, or exposed to harm. In online environments, safety requires clear rules, active facilitation, accessible reporting mechanisms, and a shared understanding of respectful communication. Without safety, digital participation can become exclusionary, especially for young people who already face discrimination or lack confidence.

Digital safety includes both technical and social dimensions. Technical safety involves protecting personal data, using secure platforms, managing access, setting privacy controls, and preventing unauthorised use of information. Social safety involves protecting participants from harassment, hate speech, bullying, manipulation, and exclusion. Both dimensions matter. A platform may be technically secure but socially harmful if discussions are not moderated. Similarly, a respectful group may still create risks if personal information is shared carelessly. Young people should be encouraged to understand basic digital safety practices, such as using strong passwords, avoiding oversharing, checking privacy settings, being careful with links, and understanding what information is public. Digital safety should be presented as an empowering skill, not as a reason to fear participation.

Online ethics refers to the values and responsibilities that guide behaviour in digital spaces. Ethical online participation means respecting other people's dignity, avoiding manipulation, being honest about information, giving credit to sources, protecting privacy, and recognising the possible impact of one's words and actions. In civic engagement, online ethics is especially important because digital communication can influence public opinion, mobilise people, and affect reputations. Young people should be encouraged to think about the ethical dimension of posting, sharing, commenting, campaigning, and voting online. Questions such as "Is this information accurate?", "Could this harm someone?", "Do I have permission to share this?", and "Am I contributing to constructive dialogue?" can help develop responsible habits.

Respectful communication online requires clear norms and practical skills. Many online conflicts escalate because messages are short, tone is unclear, and users respond quickly without reflection. Young people can be supported to communicate more respectfully by using "I" statements, asking clarifying questions, avoiding insults, distinguishing between criticism of ideas and attacks on people, and taking time before responding to emotional content. Facilitators can introduce simple dialogue rules, such as listening actively, disagreeing respectfully, avoiding stereotypes, not interrupting, and supporting claims with evidence. In online activities, these rules should be visible and repeated when needed. Respectful communication does not weaken debate; it improves it by making it possible for more people to participate.





### **Building Sustainable Youth Networks**

Digital democracy becomes stronger when participation does not end after one activity. Sustainable youth networks help maintain engagement over time and create communities of practice, learning, and action. A youth network can connect participants who share interests, values, or civic goals. It can support peer learning, collaboration, campaigns, consultations, advocacy, and continued dialogue with stakeholders. In the digital era, networks can exist across local, national, and European levels through online platforms, messaging groups, webinars, collaborative documents, and social media communities. However, a sustainable network requires more than a communication channel. It needs purpose, coordination, trust, shared values, and opportunities for members to contribute meaningfully.

Cross-border youth collaboration is particularly valuable in Europe because many civic challenges are transnational. Issues such as climate change, digital rights, migration, disinformation, social inclusion, and youth unemployment cannot be fully understood from one national perspective alone. Cross-border collaboration allows young people to compare realities, exchange practices, challenge stereotypes, and develop shared solutions. It also strengthens intercultural competences and European solidarity. Digital tools make this collaboration easier by reducing travel barriers and allowing regular contact between young people from different countries. Online meetings, shared workspaces, digital campaigns, and multilingual resources can help maintain cooperation between physical mobility activities or local events.

Networking with policymakers and NGOs can help young people connect civic engagement with real decision-making and social action. Policymakers can provide information about institutional processes, listen to youth perspectives, and explain how proposals can be taken forward. NGOs can offer expertise, advocacy experience, community links, and opportunities for volunteering or campaigning. For young people, these connections can make participation feel more concrete and impactful.



However, networking should be based on mutual respect. Young people should not be invited only to create visibility for an event; they should be given meaningful space to ask questions, present ideas, and receive feedback. Similarly, policymakers and organisations should communicate clearly about what is possible, what is not possible, and what steps can follow.

Creating long-term civic communities requires attention to motivation. Young people may join a network because of an event, campaign, or opportunity, but they remain engaged when they feel connected, useful, and respected. Motivation can be strengthened through regular communication, shared projects, recognition of contributions, leadership opportunities, and visible outcomes. Networks should avoid becoming inactive after initial enthusiasm. This can be addressed by creating small working groups, rotating responsibilities, setting realistic goals, and celebrating achievements. Digital tools can help maintain momentum, but human relationships remain central. A network becomes sustainable when members feel that they belong to a community, not only to a mailing list or online group.

Youth networks should also be inclusive and accessible. If networks rely only on informal friendships, advanced language skills, travel opportunities, or constant online availability, they may exclude many young people. Sustainable networks need clear entry points for new members, accessible communication, flexible participation options, and attention to diversity. This may include offering online and offline participation, using plain language, providing summaries for those who miss meetings, rotating meeting times, and supporting members with fewer opportunities. Inclusion also means creating a culture where different levels of involvement are respected. Not every young person can participate with the same intensity. Some may lead projects, while others may contribute occasionally. Both forms of participation can be valuable.

Long-term civic communities benefit from shared learning and documentation. Networks should keep track of ideas, decisions, activities, lessons learned, and outcomes. This can be done through shared folders, reports, digital boards, newsletters, or short videos. Documentation helps new members understand the history of the network and prevents knowledge from being lost when people leave. It also supports accountability because members can see what has been promised and what has been achieved. In youth participation, documentation should be clear and accessible, not overly bureaucratic. It should help the network learn, communicate, and grow. Over time, a well-documented network can become a resource for other young people and organisations.

Sustainability also depends on the relationship between youth-led energy and structural support. Young people bring creativity, urgency, and lived experience, but they may need resources, mentoring, spaces, funding, and institutional recognition to sustain their work. Organisations, youth workers, educators, and local authorities can support networks without controlling them. The aim should be to create enabling conditions: access to meeting spaces, digital tools, small grants, training, contacts, and opportunities to present ideas.



At the same time, young people should maintain ownership of their priorities and methods. Sustainable youth networks work best when support and autonomy are balanced. Too little support can lead to burnout; too much control can reduce empowerment.

Building sustainable youth networks is ultimately about creating continuity in democratic participation. One-off activities can inspire young people, but long-term communities help transform inspiration into action. Networks allow young people to continue learning, support each other, develop initiatives, and stay connected to civic life. They also help create a culture where participation becomes normal rather than exceptional. In digital democracy, this continuity is essential. Digital tools can open doors, but networks keep people connected after the first moment of engagement. When young people build lasting civic communities, they contribute not only to individual empowerment, but also to stronger democratic societies.

# Non-Formal Education Methods for Youth Participation

## Introduction to Non-Formal Education

Non-formal education refers to organised learning that takes place outside, or alongside, formal education systems. It is usually voluntary, flexible, participatory, and adapted to the needs of learners. According to the Council of Europe's approach to human rights education, non-formal education is typically learner-centred, participatory, based on experience and action, connected to life skills, and organised around the needs of participants. This makes it particularly suitable for youth work, civic education, intercultural learning, and democratic participation. Non-formal education does not reject structure; rather, it uses structure in a flexible way. Activities are planned with educational objectives, but they leave space for participants' experiences, questions, creativity, and active contribution. This balance between structure and flexibility is one of the reasons why non-formal education is so valuable in youth participation.

One of the main principles of non-formal learning is learner-centredness. This means that participants are not treated as passive receivers of information, but as active contributors to the learning process. Their experiences, interests, questions, and needs are taken seriously. In a youth participation context, this is essential because young people must feel that their voices matter. A learner-centred approach asks facilitators to adapt methods to the group, rather than forcing the group into a fixed format. For example, if participants have limited knowledge of democratic institutions, the facilitator may begin with basic concepts and practical examples. If the group already has experience in activism or volunteering, the activity may focus more on strategy, reflection, and advanced participation skills. Learner-centredness therefore requires attention, flexibility, and respect for the diversity of the group.

Participation is another core principle of non-formal education. Participants are encouraged to engage actively, ask questions, share perspectives, cooperate with others, and contribute to the outcomes of the activity.





In democratic learning, participation is both a method and a goal. Young people learn about participation by participating. For example, a workshop on youth democracy should not be delivered only through a lecture. It should include discussion, group work, debate, simulation, reflection, and decision-making. When young people experience participatory methods, they can better understand what inclusive democratic spaces should feel like. They also develop practical skills such as listening, speaking, negotiating, facilitating, and working with others. In this sense, non-formal education is not only about transferring knowledge; it is about creating democratic experiences.

Experiential learning is central to non-formal education. It is based on the idea that people learn more deeply when they are actively involved in an experience and then reflect on it. A youth participation activity might therefore begin with a simulation, role-play, group challenge, digital campaign exercise, or community mapping task. After the activity, participants reflect on what happened, what they felt, what they learned, and how the experience connects to real life. This reflection phase is essential. Without reflection, an activity may be enjoyable but not necessarily educational. With reflection, participants can identify learning outcomes, understand group dynamics, recognise democratic values, and apply insights to future situations. Experiential learning is especially powerful for civic engagement because it helps young people connect abstract concepts such as democracy, inclusion, rights, and responsibility with concrete actions.

Learning through practice is particularly important for youth participation because many civic competences cannot be developed only through theoretical instruction. Young people need to practise how to formulate an opinion, present an argument, disagree respectfully, analyse information, cooperate in a group, make decisions, and evaluate results. These skills are developed gradually through repeated experience. Non-formal education creates low-risk environments where young people can try, make mistakes, receive feedback, and improve. For example, a participant who is afraid of public speaking may first share ideas in pairs, then in a small group, and later in front of a larger audience. A young person who has never facilitated a discussion may first observe, then co-facilitate, and eventually lead a session. Practice builds confidence and transforms participation from an abstract right into a lived ability.

Non-formal education is also holistic. It does not focus only on knowledge, but also on skills, attitudes, values, emotions, and behaviour. This is important because democratic participation requires more than knowing how institutions work. It requires empathy, responsibility, confidence, openness to diversity, critical thinking, cooperation, and respect for human rights. A young person may understand democracy in theory, but still need support to participate respectfully in a heated debate, recognise misinformation, include quieter voices, or negotiate a shared decision. Non-formal education addresses these dimensions through interactive methods that involve the whole person. It creates space for participants to think, feel, act, and reflect. This holistic approach is one of the reasons why non-formal education is widely used in youth work and citizenship education.

In digital civic engagement, non-formal education can help bridge the gap between technology and democratic culture. Digital tools can provide access to information, voting, communication, and collaboration, but they do not automatically create meaningful participation.

Young people need to understand how to use these tools responsibly, critically, and inclusively. Non-formal methods can support this by combining digital activities with dialogue, reflection, and group learning. For example, participants may use an online poll, but then discuss how the results were shaped by the wording of the question. They may create a digital campaign, but then reflect on ethics, target audiences, and misinformation. They may take part in an online debate, but then evaluate whether the discussion was inclusive and respectful. In this way, non-formal education adds democratic depth to digital participation.

### **Facilitation Techniques and Group Dynamics**

Facilitation is a key element of non-formal education. A facilitator is not simply a teacher, speaker, or organiser. The facilitator's role is to guide the learning process, create a safe environment, support participation, manage group dynamics, and help participants reflect on their experiences. Good facilitation is especially important in youth participation activities because discussions may involve different opinions, identities, experiences, and levels of confidence. The facilitator should not dominate the group or provide all the answers. Instead, they should create conditions where participants can learn from each other, express themselves, cooperate, and take ownership of the process. Facilitation is therefore both a practical skill and a democratic responsibility.

Icebreakers are useful at the beginning of non-formal learning activities because they help participants feel more comfortable, learn names, reduce tension, and begin interacting with others. They are especially important when participants do not know each other, come from different countries or backgrounds, or are about to discuss complex topics. A good icebreaker should be simple, inclusive, and connected to the group's needs. It should not embarrass participants or force them to share personal information before trust has been built. For example, participants can introduce themselves through an object, a word, a digital avatar, a short question, or a common-interest activity. In online settings, icebreakers may include chat questions, polls, reaction icons, virtual backgrounds, or small breakout conversations. The aim is not entertainment alone, but creating the first step towards participation.

Energizers are short activities used to raise energy, restore attention, and support group connection. They are useful after long discussions, during online sessions, or when participants appear tired. Energizers can involve movement, creativity, quick games, rhythm, humour, or teamwork. However, facilitators should choose energizers carefully. Some activities may feel uncomfortable for participants with disabilities, social anxiety, cultural differences, or different personal boundaries. Inclusive energizers should offer alternatives and avoid pressuring participants. In digital activities, energizers can be adapted through simple gestures, online quizzes, visual prompts, collaborative drawings, or short reflection challenges. Energizers should support the learning process, not interrupt it. When used well, they help maintain attention, improve mood, and strengthen group cohesion.

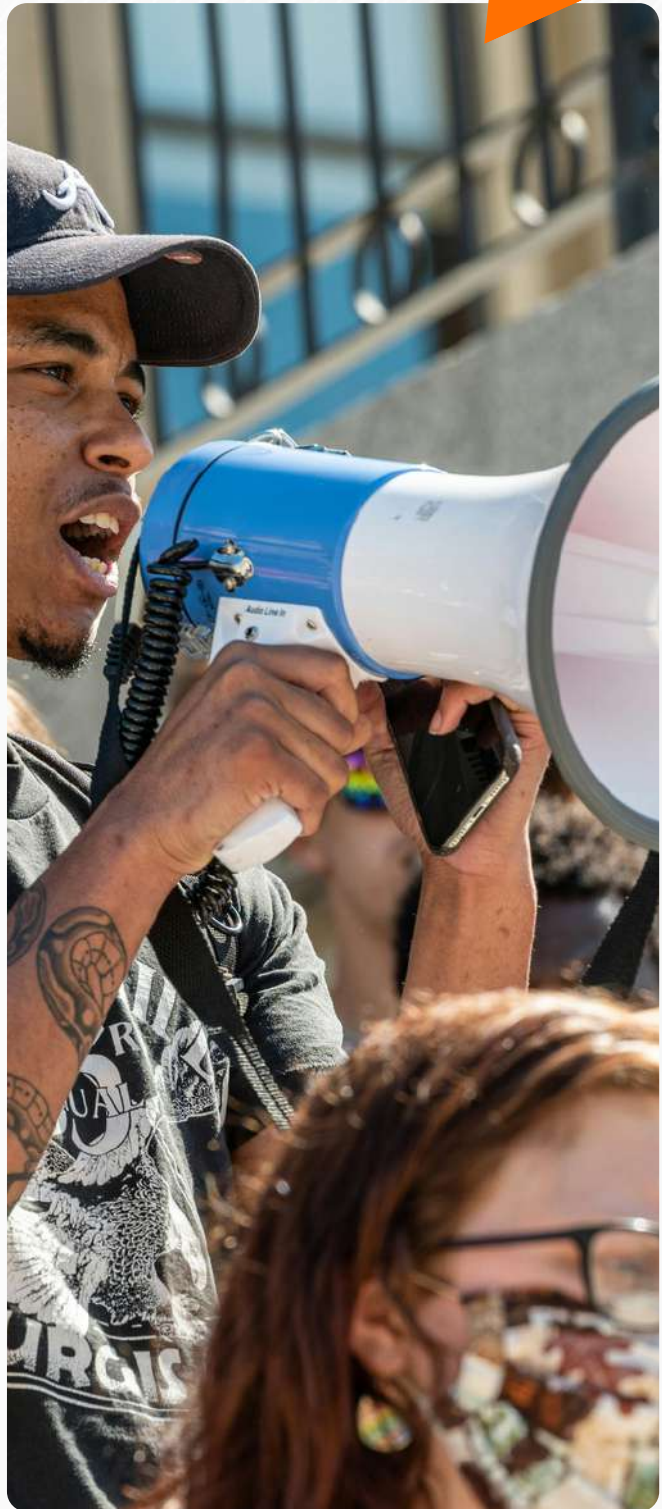
Group dynamics refer to the way participants interact, communicate, influence each other, and form relationships within a group. Every group has dynamics, even when they are not immediately visible. Some participants may speak often, while others remain quiet. Some may take leadership roles, while others observe. There may be subgroups, tensions, alliances, misunderstandings, or cultural differences.

Facilitators need to observe these dynamics and respond appropriately. In youth participation, group dynamics matter because they affect who feels heard and who has influence. If a few voices dominate, the process may appear participatory but still be unequal. Facilitators can support healthier dynamics by using small groups, rotating roles, structured speaking turns, anonymous input tools, and reflection exercises. The goal is to create a group culture where participation is shared more fairly.

Managing intercultural groups requires sensitivity, patience, and awareness of diversity. Intercultural groups can be very enriching because participants bring different languages, traditions, communication styles, values, and experiences. At the same time, misunderstandings may arise. Some participants may be more direct, while others may avoid open disagreement. Some may feel confident speaking in a foreign language, while others may need more time.

Cultural assumptions can influence humour, body language, punctuality, leadership, gender roles, or approaches to debate. Facilitators should avoid stereotyping, but they should recognise that cultural differences can affect participation. Clear instructions, inclusive language, visual support, mixed group work, and time for clarification can help. Intercultural learning is not only about celebrating diversity; it is also about learning how to communicate respectfully across difference.

Encouraging participation requires intentional methods.





It is not enough to ask, “Does anyone want to speak?” because usually the most confident participants will respond first. Facilitators can use different techniques to include more voices. Pair discussions allow participants to test ideas before speaking in a larger group. Small groups create safer spaces for expression. Written reflections give time to those who need to think before answering. Anonymous digital tools can help participants share honest opinions. Round-table methods ensure that everyone has an opportunity to contribute, while still allowing the right to pass. Visual methods, such as sticky notes, digital boards, or mapping exercises, support participants who express themselves better through writing or images. Participation should be designed, not left to chance.

Facilitating dialogue is different from facilitating debate. Debate often focuses on presenting arguments and responding to opposing views, while dialogue focuses on understanding, listening, and exploring meaning. Both methods are useful, but they serve different purposes. Dialogue is especially valuable when dealing with sensitive topics, diverse experiences, or community challenges. In dialogue, participants are encouraged to speak from their own perspective, listen actively, ask questions, and avoid trying to “win”. The facilitator can support dialogue by setting ground rules, slowing down the conversation, summarising key points, and inviting reflection. Digital dialogue may require extra care because online communication can feel less personal and more easily misunderstood. Clear norms and thoughtful moderation help maintain respectful interaction.

Conflict can appear in participatory activities, especially when topics are important or emotional. Conflict is not always negative. It can show that participants care and that different perspectives are present. However, unmanaged conflict can harm trust, silence some participants, or create exclusion. Facilitators should distinguish between constructive disagreement and harmful behaviour. Constructive disagreement focuses on ideas, evidence, and values. Harmful behaviour includes personal attacks, discrimination, intimidation, or humiliation.



When conflict arises, facilitators can restate the rules, acknowledge emotions, clarify misunderstandings, invite evidence, and give participants time to pause. In some cases, it may be necessary to stop the discussion and address the situation directly. A safe learning space does not avoid disagreement, but it protects dignity and respect.

### **Interactive Learning Activities**

Interactive learning activities are at the heart of non-formal education. They transform participants from listeners into active learners. In youth participation, interactive activities help young people explore issues, develop opinions, practise democratic skills, and work collectively. They can include debates, simulations, world café discussions, digital storytelling, design thinking workshops, mapping exercises, role-plays, campaigns, and collaborative problem-solving tasks. The choice of activity should depend on the learning objectives, group size, available time, participant needs, and topic. An activity should never be chosen only because it is entertaining or popular. It should serve a clear educational purpose and be followed by reflection. Interaction becomes learning when participants understand what the experience means and how it connects to real civic life.

Debates are useful for developing argumentation, public speaking, active listening, and critical thinking. They allow young people to explore different sides of a topic and practise using evidence to support their views. In youth participation contexts, debates can address issues such as online voting, climate action, social media regulation, youth employment, gender equality, digital rights, or inclusion. To make debates educational rather than confrontational, facilitators should provide clear rules and encourage respect. Participants should be reminded that the aim is not to attack others, but to examine ideas. Debates can also be adapted so that participants argue a position they do not personally hold. This helps them understand different perspectives and develop empathy. After the debate, reflection is essential: participants can discuss what arguments were persuasive, how evidence was used, and how disagreement was managed.

The world café method is a participatory discussion format that allows participants to explore questions in small groups and build on each other's ideas. Usually, participants sit at different tables or breakout rooms, each focused on a specific question. After a set time, participants rotate to another table, while one person may remain as a "host" to summarise the previous discussion. This method works well for youth participation because it encourages movement, exchange, and collective thinking. It can be used to discuss questions such as: What barriers prevent young people from participating? How can digital tools support democracy? What makes online spaces safe? What should decision-makers hear from young people? In online settings, the method can be adapted using breakout rooms and shared digital boards. The final step should include harvesting key ideas and identifying common priorities.

Digital storytelling is a powerful method for connecting personal experience with civic issues. It allows young people to express themselves through videos, photos, audio, text, social media posts, or digital presentations.



Through storytelling, participants can explore themes such as identity, belonging, discrimination, participation, community challenges, or visions for the future. Digital storytelling is particularly valuable because it combines creativity, reflection, and communication. It can make abstract issues more human and relatable. However, facilitators must approach storytelling ethically. Participants should never be pressured to share personal experiences. Consent, privacy, and emotional safety are essential. When stories involve other people, their dignity and privacy must also be respected. Digital storytelling should empower young people to control their own narratives, not expose them.

Design thinking workshops are useful for helping young people develop practical solutions to social or civic challenges. Design thinking usually involves understanding a problem, exploring users' needs, generating ideas, creating prototypes, and testing solutions. In youth participation, this method can be used to design digital campaigns, improve participation platforms, create community initiatives, or develop recommendations for decision-makers. The process encourages creativity, empathy, and experimentation. It also helps young people move from identifying problems to proposing solutions. For example, participants may begin by interviewing peers about barriers to participation, then define the main challenge, brainstorm solutions, design a simple prototype, and present it for feedback. Design thinking is effective because it shows that young people can be creators of solutions, not only commentators on problems.

Interactive methods should include both individual and collective learning. Some participants may need time to reflect alone before joining group work. Others may learn best through discussion or action. A balanced activity design can include individual reflection, pair exchange, small group work, plenary sharing, and final evaluation. This structure helps include different learning styles and confidence levels. Digital tools can support this balance through polls, shared documents, anonymous questions, collaborative boards, quizzes, or multimedia content. However, digital tools should be used intentionally. Too many tools can confuse participants or distract from the learning objective. The best tools are those that make participation easier, clearer, and more inclusive.





Debriefing is one of the most important parts of any interactive activity. After a debate, simulation, storytelling exercise, or design thinking workshop, participants need time to process the experience. A debriefing can explore what happened, how participants felt, what they learned, and how the learning can be applied. Facilitators can use questions such as: What did you notice during the activity? What was easy or difficult? Whose voices were heard? What surprised you? What does this activity show about participation? How can this learning be used in real life? Debriefing helps transform activity into learning. Without it, participants may enjoy the exercise but miss its deeper meaning. In non-formal education, the debriefing is not an optional extra; it is where much of the learning becomes visible.

Interactive learning activities can also support inclusion when designed carefully. Activities should not assume that all participants have the same language skills, confidence, mobility, digital access, or previous knowledge. Facilitators can adapt methods by offering different ways to contribute, using clear language, providing visual support, allowing enough time, and creating smaller groups. In digital activities, accessibility features such as captions, readable materials, mobile-friendly tools, and low-bandwidth options should be considered. Inclusive activity design also means avoiding methods that may embarrass participants, expose personal experiences, or create competition that discourages less confident young people. Participation should challenge young people in a supportive way, not place them under unnecessary pressure.

### **Reflection and Learning Recognition**

Reflection is a central element of non-formal education because it helps participants understand what they have learned and how they have developed. Learning does not always become visible automatically. A young person may gain confidence, improve communication, understand inclusion better, or practise leadership without immediately recognising these changes. Reflection helps make learning explicit. It gives participants time to connect experiences with competences, emotions, values, and future actions. Reflection can happen individually, in pairs, in small groups, or in plenary. It can be written, spoken, visual, creative, or digital. The most important point is that reflection should be intentional and regular, not only added at the end of an activity.

Self-reflection methods can be simple but powerful. Participants can keep a learning diary, answer guiding questions, draw a learning map, create a personal timeline, record short audio reflections, or complete a competence self-assessment. Useful questions include: What did I learn today? What challenged me? What did I contribute to the group? What skill did I practise? What would I like to improve? How can I use this learning in my community? In digital settings, self-reflection can be supported through online forms, digital journals, collaborative boards, or private notes. Facilitators should explain that reflection is not an exam. There are no perfect answers. Its purpose is to help participants understand their own learning journey and take ownership of their development.

Group reflection is also important because learning happens through interaction. Participants can learn from hearing how others experienced the same activity differently.

Group reflection can reveal hidden dynamics, such as who felt included, who struggled, what helped cooperation, or what created misunderstanding. Methods such as reflection circles, talking objects, “one word check-out”, visual mood scales, group timelines, or collective mind maps can support this process. In intercultural groups, reflection helps participants understand how culture, language, expectations, and communication styles influenced the activity. In youth participation activities, group reflection can also explore democratic questions: How were decisions made? Did everyone have a voice? Were disagreements managed respectfully? What could make the process more inclusive next time?

Learning recognition is a key issue in youth work and non-formal education. Many competences developed through youth participation are highly valuable, but they are not always formally recognised. Young people may develop communication, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, intercultural, digital, and civic competences through workshops, volunteering, campaigns, exchanges, or community initiatives. Recognition helps young people understand and communicate this learning to others, including educators, employers, organisations, or institutions. It also strengthens the value of non-formal education by showing that learning outside formal classrooms can be meaningful and substantial. Recognition does not need to reduce learning to certificates, but certificates and structured reflection tools can help make learning more visible.

Youthpass is one of the most important European tools for recognising non-formal and informal learning in youth projects under Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps. The official Youthpass platform describes it as a recognition tool for non-formal and informal learning in youth projects. Youthpass is not only a certificate; it is also a process that supports participants in reflecting on their learning and identifying competences they have developed. It is connected to the European key competences framework, including competences such as multilingual competence, personal, social and learning to learn competence, citizenship competence, entrepreneurship competence, cultural awareness and expression competence, digital competence, mathematical and STEM competence, and literacy competence. In youth participation activities, Youthpass can help participants recognise learning related to active citizenship, digital engagement, communication, collaboration, and intercultural understanding.

Competence recognition should be integrated throughout the learning process, not left until the final day. Participants can be invited to set learning goals at the beginning, reflect during the activity, collect examples of learning, and review their development at the end. For example, a participant may identify that they want to improve public speaking. During the activity, they may practise presenting group results, receive peer feedback, and later reflect on their progress. Another participant may focus on digital competence, such as using online collaboration tools or creating a campaign. Recognition becomes more meaningful when participants can connect competences to concrete experiences. Instead of saying “I improved my leadership skills”, they can explain when and how they supported a group, facilitated a task, or helped solve a problem.





Evaluating learning outcomes is different from evaluating satisfaction. Satisfaction asks whether participants liked the activity. Learning outcomes ask what participants learned, practised, understood, or changed. Both are useful, but they serve different purposes. Learning outcomes can be evaluated through self-assessment, peer feedback, facilitator observation, portfolios, presentations, reflection forms, or group discussions. In non-formal education, evaluation should be supportive rather than judgmental. It should help participants become aware of their development and help facilitators improve the learning process. For youth participation, possible learning outcomes may include increased understanding of democratic processes, improved confidence in expressing opinions, stronger media literacy, better teamwork, or greater motivation to engage in civic action.

Reflection and recognition also support motivation. When young people see that they have learned something valuable, they are more likely to continue participating. They may also become more confident in applying their skills in other contexts, such as school, work, volunteering, advocacy, or community life. Recognition can be especially important for young people with fewer opportunities, who may not always receive positive feedback or formal validation of their abilities. A well-facilitated reflection process can help participants see themselves as capable learners and active citizens. This contributes to empowerment because it helps young people understand not only what they did, but also what they are able to do in the future.

#### **4.5 Monitoring, Evaluation, and Feedback**

Monitoring, evaluation, and feedback are essential for improving the quality of youth participation activities. Monitoring refers to the ongoing observation of how an activity or process is progressing. Evaluation refers to the assessment of results, learning, engagement, and impact. Feedback refers to the information collected from participants, facilitators, partners, or stakeholders about their experience and suggestions. How to address it.



Together, these processes help ensure that activities are not only implemented, but also understood and improved. In non-formal education, monitoring and evaluation should be participatory whenever possible. Young people should not only be evaluated; they should also have opportunities to evaluate the process and contribute to its improvement.

Measuring participant engagement requires more than counting attendance. Attendance shows how many people were present, but it does not show whether they were actively involved, felt included, learned something, or found the activity meaningful. Engagement can be measured through different indicators, such as participation in discussions, contributions to group work, completion of tasks, interaction in digital tools, quality of questions, willingness to collaborate, and continued involvement after the activity. In digital settings, engagement data may include poll responses, chat participation, platform activity, voting rates, or completion of online tasks. However, quantitative data should be interpreted carefully. A participant may be quiet but deeply engaged, while another may be active in the chat without meaningful reflection. For this reason, numbers should be combined with qualitative observation and participant feedback.

Quantitative feedback provides measurable information that can be compared and summarised. It can be collected through rating scales, multiple-choice questions, attendance records, voting statistics, engagement analytics, or pre- and post-activity questionnaires. For example, participants can rate how much they learned about digital citizenship, how confident they feel expressing opinions, or how accessible they found the activity. Quantitative feedback is useful because it provides a quick overview and can help identify trends. However, it may not explain why participants felt a certain way. A low score on “I felt included” is important, but organisers need qualitative feedback to understand what created exclusion and how to address it.

Qualitative feedback provides deeper insight into participants’ experiences. It can be collected through open questions, interviews, focus groups, reflection circles, observation notes, storytelling, or written comments. Qualitative feedback allows participants to explain what worked, what was difficult, what they learned, and what should change. It is especially important in youth participation because feelings of trust, inclusion, empowerment, and safety cannot be fully captured through numbers alone. For example, a participant may explain that they appreciated small group discussions because they felt more confident speaking there. Another may say that the digital platform was difficult to use on a phone. Such feedback gives organisers concrete information for improvement. It also shows participants that their experience matters.

Feedback collection should be ethical and accessible. Participants should know why feedback is being collected, how it will be used, and whether it is anonymous. Questions should be clear, relevant, and not too long. Facilitators should avoid collecting excessive data that will not be used. In digital activities, feedback forms should be mobile-friendly and easy to complete. Participants should also be able to provide feedback in different ways, such as written comments, verbal reflection, anonymous forms, or creative methods. For young people with fewer opportunities, accessibility may require simple language, translation, or support in completing forms. Ethical feedback collection respects participants’ time, privacy, and dignity.



Continuous improvement means using monitoring and feedback to adapt future activities. Evaluation should not remain in a report that nobody reads. It should influence planning, facilitation, communication, accessibility, and learning design. For example, if participants report that online sessions are too long, future sessions can include more breaks or shorter formats. If young people say they need more background information before voting, future activities can include preparatory materials.

If some participants feel excluded, facilitation methods can be changed to include more small group work or anonymous input. Continuous improvement requires openness. Facilitators and organisations should be willing to recognise weaknesses and make changes. This attitude reflects democratic values because it treats participants as partners in improving the process.

Evaluation should also consider impact over time. Some learning outcomes appear immediately, while others become visible later. A participant may not take civic action during the activity itself, but may later join a youth organisation, start a campaign, speak at a local meeting, or become more active in online discussions. Follow-up evaluation can help understand longer-term effects. This can be done through short follow-up surveys, alumni meetings, online check-ins, or collection of participant stories. Long-term evaluation does not need to be complex, but it should ask meaningful questions: Did participants use what they learned? Did they continue engaging? Did they feel more confident? Did they share knowledge with others? These questions help assess whether youth participation activities create lasting value.

Monitoring and evaluation should also reflect the principles of inclusion and participation. This means asking not only whether an activity was successful, but for whom it was successful. Did young people with fewer opportunities participate? Did different genders feel equally included? Were digital tools accessible? Did language barriers affect participation? Were quieter participants heard? Did the activity create safe space for disagreement? These questions help prevent evaluation from focusing only on general satisfaction while missing inequalities. A high overall satisfaction rate may hide the fact that some participants felt excluded. Inclusive evaluation looks for these differences and uses them to improve future practice.



Feedback should be communicated back to participants whenever possible. If young people take time to provide feedback, they should know that it was read and used. This can be done through a short message, visual summary, report, or follow-up meeting explaining the main findings and planned improvements. Closing the feedback loop builds trust and accountability. It shows that participation continues beyond the activity and that young people's voices influence the process. In democratic youth work, feedback is not only a quality assurance tool; it is part of participation itself. It teaches young people that evaluation, reflection, and improvement are essential parts of democratic practice.



# Building the Future of European Youth E-Democracy

## Youth Voices and Policy Influence

Youth participation becomes more meaningful when young people can see a connection between their voices and real decisions. Many young people are willing to share ideas, participate in discussions, or join consultations, but they may become discouraged if they feel that their input has no impact. For this reason, connecting youth voices with policy influence is one of the most important challenges in democratic participation. Policy influence does not always mean that every youth proposal becomes law or that every recommendation is immediately implemented. It means that young people's views are listened to seriously, considered in decision-making, reflected in public dialogue, and responded to transparently. Even when a proposal cannot be adopted, young people should understand why and what alternatives may exist. This feedback is essential for democratic trust.

Connecting young people with decision-makers requires structured opportunities for dialogue. Informal meetings, youth forums, consultations, local assemblies, digital platforms, roundtables, youth councils, and policy labs can all create spaces where young people and decision-makers interact. However, these spaces must be carefully designed to avoid tokenism. Young people should not be invited only to “represent youth” symbolically or to add visibility to institutional events. They should have access to clear information, enough time to prepare, opportunities to speak, and mechanisms for follow-up. Decision-makers, in turn, should enter these spaces with openness, honesty, and a willingness to explain what is possible within their responsibilities. Meaningful dialogue requires mutual respect and clear expectations from both sides.

Digital tools can make youth-policy dialogue more accessible. Online consultations, digital surveys, e-voting platforms, participatory mapping tools, webinars, and virtual town halls can allow more young people to contribute, especially those who cannot attend physical meetings. Digital spaces can also make it easier to gather input from different regions, countries, or communities. However, digital dialogue must be more than data collection. If young people are asked to complete a survey or vote online, they should also receive information about the results and next steps. Digital participation should be embedded in a wider policy process that includes preparation, discussion, analysis, response, and communication. Without this connection, online tools risk becoming symbolic exercises rather than pathways to influence.

Policy recommendations from young people are most effective when they are clear, evidence-based, and connected to real needs. Young people often bring lived experience, creativity, urgency, and new perspectives to policy discussions. To transform these perspectives into recommendations, they may need support in identifying problems, analysing causes, collecting examples, formulating proposals, and presenting arguments. A strong youth policy recommendation usually explains the issue, identifies who is affected, proposes a concrete action, explains why it matters, and suggests who should be responsible for implementation. Recommendations can be developed through workshops, youth assemblies, digital consultations, focus groups, simulations, or participatory research.

This process helps young people move from expressing concerns to shaping possible solutions. It is important to recognise that young people are not a homogeneous group. Youth voices are diverse and sometimes conflicting. Young people differ in terms of age, gender, education, social background, disability, migration experience, rural or urban location, economic situation, digital access, and political views. Therefore, policy influence should not rely only on a small number of highly active or confident young people. Participatory processes should actively include young people with fewer opportunities and those who are usually less represented in public dialogue. This may require targeted outreach, accessible formats, financial support, language support, local partnerships, and safe spaces. Democratic legitimacy increases when participation reflects the diversity of youth experiences.

Participatory governance models can help institutionalise youth participation. Participatory governance means that citizens, including young people, are involved not only in consultation, but also in shaping decisions, monitoring implementation, and evaluating outcomes. Examples of participatory governance include youth councils with advisory roles, participatory budgeting, co-management structures, citizens' assemblies, youth advisory boards, and digital participatory platforms. These models can strengthen democratic accountability because they create regular channels for input and dialogue. For young people, participatory governance can also build civic skills and a sense of ownership. However, such models need clear mandates, resources, transparency, and commitment from institutions. Participation without influence can create frustration; participation with clear roles and follow-up can build trust.

Youth influence on policy should also be understood as a learning process. Young people may need to learn how institutions work, how decisions are made, how to identify the right decision-makers, and how to communicate proposals effectively. At the same time, institutions need to learn how to listen to young people, communicate accessibly, and adapt participation processes to youth realities. This two-way learning is essential. Democratic innovation does not come only from young people adapting to existing systems; it also requires systems to become more open, understandable, and responsive. When youth participation is treated as a shared learning process, it can strengthen both civic competences and institutional quality.

### **Sustainability of Youth Participation Initiatives**

Sustainability is one of the main challenges for youth participation initiatives. Many activities create enthusiasm during implementation, but engagement may decrease once an event, programme, or campaign ends. Young people may return to their daily routines, communication channels may become inactive, and the ideas developed may not be followed up. This can create disappointment and weaken trust in participation processes. Sustainable youth participation requires planning beyond the immediate activity. Organisers should ask from the beginning: What happens after the workshop, consultation, forum, or campaign? How will participants stay connected? Who will follow up on recommendations? How can young people continue contributing? Sustainability should not be treated as an afterthought; it should be built into the design of participation.

Maintaining engagement after activities end requires continuity, communication, and shared ownership. Participants are more likely to stay involved when they receive updates, understand next steps, and have opportunities to contribute again.





A simple follow-up message, summary of results, invitation to a next meeting, or update on policy influence can help maintain motivation. However, communication alone is not enough. Young people should also be able to take on roles, lead small actions, join working groups, or contribute to future activities. Shared ownership helps transform participants into active members of a community. When young people feel that they are part of something ongoing, their engagement is more likely to continue.

Sustainable digital communities require purpose. An online group, platform, or mailing list will not remain active only because it exists. Young people need a reason to return and participate. This reason may be a shared campaign, regular discussions, learning opportunities, collaboration on proposals, access to resources, peer support, or connection with decision-makers. Digital communities should have clear goals, communication norms, and coordination. They should also avoid overloading members with too many messages or unclear requests. A sustainable digital community is one where members understand what the space is for, how they can contribute, and what value it brings to them and others. Purpose creates direction; interaction creates life.

Digital communities also need trust and safety. Young people will not remain active in spaces where they feel ignored, judged, unsafe, or exposed to harmful behaviour. Clear community guidelines, respectful moderation, privacy protection, and inclusive communication are essential. Trust also depends on consistency. If a digital community promises opportunities, updates, or follow-up but does not deliver them, members may disengage. Facilitators or coordinators should be realistic about what can be maintained. It is better to have a smaller but active community with clear communication than a large digital space that becomes inactive or chaotic. Sustainable participation depends on quality of engagement, not only quantity of members.

Long-term civic impact is created when participation leads to learning, relationships, action, and institutional memory. Even when a specific recommendation is not immediately adopted, participation can still have impact if young people develop skills, build networks, become more confident, and continue engaging in their communities. Impact can also be seen when organisations improve their methods, institutions become more open to youth input, or digital tools are reused for future participation. For this reason, sustainability should be measured not only by whether an activity continues in the same form, but also by whether it leaves behind capacities, resources, partnerships, and motivation. A youth participation initiative is sustainable when it strengthens the ability of young people and organisations to participate again in the future.

Leadership transition is another important aspect of sustainability. Youth initiatives often depend on a small number of motivated individuals. When these people leave, become busy, or move on, the initiative may weaken. Sustainable participation requires shared leadership and knowledge transfer. This can be supported through mentoring, documentation, rotating roles, peer training, and involving new participants gradually.





Young people should have opportunities to learn how to coordinate activities, facilitate meetings, manage digital tools, communicate with stakeholders, and support others. Leadership should not remain concentrated in one person or group. A sustainable civic community creates pathways for new young people to join, learn, lead, and continue the work.

Resources also affect sustainability. Time, funding, digital infrastructure, meeting spaces, staff support, training, and partnerships all influence whether participation can continue. Many youth initiatives are built on volunteer energy, but long-term engagement can become difficult if young people and youth workers are expected to maintain everything without support. Sustainability therefore requires realistic planning and resource mobilisation.

This may include small grants, partnerships with local authorities, cooperation with schools or NGOs, access to digital platforms, or integration into existing youth structures. Supporting youth participation should not rely only on enthusiasm. Democratic participation needs investment, even when the methods are simple and community-based.

### **Dissemination and Digital Visibility**

Dissemination is an essential part of youth e-democracy because democratic participation depends on visibility, communication, and outreach. If opportunities for participation are not communicated clearly, many young people will never know they exist. Dissemination is not only about promoting activities; it is about making democratic participation understandable, attractive, and accessible. Good dissemination explains what the opportunity is, why it matters, who can participate, how to join, and what impact participation can have. In digital environments, dissemination can happen through social media, websites, newsletters, videos, podcasts, online events, digital toolkits, youth networks, and partner organisations. The aim is not simply to reach many people, but to reach the right people with a message that motivates them to engage.

Social media dissemination strategies should be planned carefully. Posting randomly is rarely effective. A strategy should define the target audience, main message, platforms, visual identity, content formats, posting rhythm, and call to action. Different platforms serve different purposes. Short videos may be useful for awareness-raising, carousel posts for explaining steps, stories for reminders, live sessions for interaction, and longer posts for reflection or storytelling. Youth organisations should use language that is clear, direct, and authentic. Overly institutional language may distance young people, while oversimplified or artificial youth language may feel inauthentic. The best communication respects young people's intelligence while making participation easy to understand.

Creating impactful digital campaigns requires a strong message. A campaign should answer three basic questions: **What is the issue? Why should people care? What can they do?** Without a clear call to action, digital visibility may not lead to participation. A campaign may invite young people to vote, join a forum, share an experience, complete a consultation, attend a workshop, or support a recommendation. The message should be repeated consistently in different formats so that people remember it. Visual design is also important. Images, colours, typography, and layout can make content more recognisable and easier to understand. However, visual appeal should not replace substance. A democratic campaign must be accurate, ethical, inclusive, and connected to real participation opportunities.

Storytelling can also strengthen dissemination by making youth participation more visible, relatable, and human. Instead of communicating only through formal reports, institutional announcements, or statistical results, organisations can share short stories, testimonials, interviews, videos, or visual posts that show how young people experience participation and why it matters. In this context, storytelling is not introduced as a separate educational method, but as a communication strategy that helps audiences understand the value and impact of democratic engagement. It can show concrete examples of young people raising their voices, developing ideas, collaborating with others, or contributing to community dialogue. When used responsibly, storytelling can make dissemination more authentic and encourage other young people to see participation as something accessible and relevant to their own lives.

Impact communication should also show what participation produced. Young people and wider audiences are more likely to trust democratic processes when they can see concrete outcomes, even small ones. This may include a recommendation shared with decision-makers, a youth-led campaign, a new partnership, a public discussion, a set of proposals, or a change in the way an organisation works with young people. Dissemination should therefore not focus only on what happened during an activity, but also on what changed, what was learned, and what can happen next.

Communicating impact clearly helps close the participation loop. It shows that youth engagement is not only symbolic, but part of an ongoing democratic process.

Dissemination should also be inclusive. Digital visibility often reaches those who are already connected, digitally active, or familiar with youth opportunities. To reach wider groups, dissemination should use multiple channels and accessible formats. This may include cooperation with schools, youth centres, local NGOs, municipalities, community groups, and informal networks.



Messages should be available in simple language and, where relevant, in different languages. Videos should include captions. Visual materials should be readable and accessible. Information should be clear about costs, support, eligibility, and participation steps. Inclusive dissemination recognises that access to information is itself a condition of participation. If young people do not receive understandable information, they cannot engage meaningfully.

Digital visibility should be connected to credibility. In online spaces, many messages compete for attention, and young people may be sceptical of institutional communication. Credibility can be strengthened by using transparent information, real examples, youth voices, partner networks, and consistent communication. It is also important to avoid exaggerating impact. Promising that every participant will directly change policy may create unrealistic expectations. A more honest message explains that participation can contribute to dialogue, recommendations, awareness, learning, and possible influence. Credible dissemination builds trust because it respects young people and avoids treating communication as marketing alone. Democratic visibility should inform, invite, and empower.

Dissemination should continue after activities, not only before them. Sharing outcomes is part of accountability. Young people and stakeholders should know what happened, what was discussed, what ideas emerged, what decisions were made, and what next steps will follow. Outcome communication can include summary reports, infographics, videos, quote cards, newsletters, public presentations, or digital dashboards. This follow-up visibility helps participants feel that their contribution mattered. It also allows others to learn from the process and possibly join future activities. Dissemination after participation closes the democratic loop: people are invited, they participate, and then they see what their participation produced.

### **Recommendations for Youth Organisations and Policymakers**

Youth organisations play a central role in supporting youth-led participation. They often understand young people's realities better than formal institutions and can create safe, flexible, and accessible spaces for engagement. To support youth-led initiatives, organisations should give young people real responsibilities, not only consult them.





This can include involving them in planning, facilitation, communication, decision-making, evaluation, and representation. Youth-led participation does not mean leaving young people without support. It means offering mentoring, resources, training, and trust while allowing young people to shape priorities and methods. Organisations should act as enablers rather than controllers. This balance between support and autonomy is essential for empowerment.

Youth organisations should also invest in digital competences. Digital participation requires more than the ability to use social media. Organisations and youth workers need skills in online facilitation, digital safety, media literacy, accessible communication, data protection, digital campaigning, and evaluation of online engagement. They should be able to choose appropriate tools, protect participants, moderate discussions, and connect digital activities to learning outcomes. Capacity-building for youth workers is therefore an important part of strengthening youth e-democracy. When youth workers feel confident using digital methods, they can support young people more effectively and create higher-quality participation processes.

Policymakers should create regular and accessible channels for youth participation. One-off consultations are not enough to build trust. Young people need repeated opportunities to engage with public issues, share views, and receive feedback. These channels can include youth councils, advisory boards, participatory budgeting, digital consultations, local youth forums, youth representatives in committees, or structured dialogue mechanisms. The format should be adapted to the context, but the principle should remain the same: youth participation must be continuous, inclusive, and connected to decision-making. Policymakers should also communicate in language that young people can understand. Institutional complexity should not become a barrier to participation.

Improving digital participation systems requires attention to accessibility, transparency, and user experience. Digital platforms should be easy to navigate, mobile-friendly, secure, and inclusive for people with different needs. They should clearly explain the purpose of participation, the rules, the timeline, the use of data, and the expected outcomes. Participants should be able to understand what they are contributing to and what will happen next. Digital systems should also provide feedback after participation. A platform that collects youth input but does not communicate results may weaken trust. Good digital participation systems are not only technically functional; they are democratically accountable.

Institutions and organisations should cooperate more closely. Youth participation is strongest when schools, youth organisations, local authorities, NGOs, universities, European networks, and policymakers work together. Each actor brings different strengths. Schools can reach large numbers of young people. Youth organisations can provide non-formal education and trust-based engagement. Local authorities can connect participation to community decisions. NGOs can bring expertise and advocacy experience. Policymakers can open channels to institutional processes. Digital platforms can connect these actors and make cooperation more visible. However, cooperation requires clear roles, communication, and shared values. Partnerships should be built around the aim of strengthening youth participation, not only around administrative requirements.

Both youth organisations and policymakers should prioritise inclusion. Participation systems often reach young people who are already active, educated, confident, or connected to organisations. Special efforts are needed to include young people with fewer opportunities, rural youth, young people with disabilities, migrants, economically disadvantaged youth, and those who distrust institutions. Inclusion requires outreach, adapted methods, financial support, accessible tools, and cooperation with community actors. It also requires listening to young people about the barriers they face. Policymakers and organisations should avoid assuming that digital tools automatically solve inclusion challenges. Digital participation can reduce barriers, but it can also create new ones if access, skills, language, and safety are not addressed.

Recommendations from young people should be treated with seriousness and transparency. When young people produce proposals, institutions and organisations should acknowledge them, analyse them, and respond. A clear response can explain which recommendations can be implemented, which need further development, which are outside the institution's competence, and what next steps are possible. This does not mean that every recommendation must be accepted. It means that young people deserve a reasoned response. Transparent feedback strengthens trust and shows respect for the time, energy, and ideas that young people contribute. It also helps young people understand how democratic decision-making works in practice.

Finally, youth participation should be recognised as a democratic investment. Supporting youth e-democracy is not only beneficial for young people; it strengthens society as a whole. When young people participate, they bring new perspectives, identify emerging challenges, increase democratic legitimacy, and contribute to social innovation. When they are excluded, democracies risk losing trust, creativity, and connection with future generations. Youth organisations and policymakers should therefore view youth participation not as an optional activity, but as a core part of democratic governance. This requires resources, political will, long-term planning, and a genuine belief that young people have the right and capacity to shape public life.

### **Towards a More Participatory Europe**

The future of youth participation in Europe will be shaped by how effectively democratic systems respond to the realities of young people's lives. Young people are growing up in societies marked by digital transformation, social change, climate uncertainty, economic pressures, information overload, and changing forms of identity and belonging. Traditional participation channels remain important, but they are not always enough to engage younger generations. Digital democracy can help create new bridges between young people and democratic life. It can make participation more flexible, visible, creative, and accessible. However, it must be designed with democratic values at its centre. Technology should serve participation, not replace it.





Digital democracy can be a powerful tool for inclusion when it reduces barriers and creates new spaces for voice. Young people who cannot easily attend physical meetings may participate online. Young people who feel uncomfortable speaking in formal settings may contribute through written comments, digital storytelling, polls, or collaborative tools. Young people from different countries can connect and exchange ideas without always needing to travel. These possibilities are important for a more participatory Europe. At the same time, inclusion cannot be assumed. Digital participation must address unequal access to devices, internet, skills, language, confidence, and safe environments. A democratic digital future must be intentionally inclusive.

A more participatory Europe also requires trust. Young people need to trust that participation is meaningful, that their data is protected, that discussions are respectful, and that institutions will respond honestly. Trust is built through transparency, consistency, feedback, and accountability. If young people are repeatedly asked for their opinions but never see results or responses, participation may become frustrating. If digital spaces are unsafe or confusing, engagement may decline. If institutions communicate in inaccessible language, young people may feel excluded. Building trust requires effort from all actors involved in democratic life: policymakers, youth workers, educators, civil society organisations, digital platform designers, and young people themselves.

Youth e-democracy should also be understood as a learning process. Young people learn democracy by practising it: discussing, voting, negotiating, campaigning, facilitating, evaluating, and reflecting. Non-formal education, digital tools, and participatory governance can work together to create these learning experiences. Through participation, young people develop competences that are valuable not only for civic life, but also for personal development, employment, community involvement, and social cohesion. They learn to think critically, communicate clearly, cooperate with others, manage disagreement, and take responsibility. These competences are essential for democratic societies.

The future of European youth e-democracy will depend on the quality of cooperation between young people and institutions. Young people need open doors, but institutions also need youth perspectives in order to remain relevant and responsive. Cooperation should not be based only on consultation after decisions have already been shaped. It should involve young people earlier, in agenda-setting, design, implementation, and evaluation. This requires a shift from seeing young people as an audience to seeing them as partners. A participatory Europe cannot be built for young people without young people. It must be built with them.

Moving towards a more participatory Europe requires a call to action for everyone involved. Youth organisations can create empowering spaces and support youth-led initiatives. Educators and youth workers can develop democratic competences through non-formal learning. Policymakers can open meaningful channels for dialogue and respond to youth recommendations. Digital platform designers can build tools that are accessible, safe, and transparent. Young people can use their voices, support each other, challenge misinformation, and participate in shaping their communities. The future of democracy is not only a question of institutions or technologies; it is a question of relationships, trust, values, and shared responsibility. Digital democracy is not a complete solution to the challenges facing European democracies, but it is an important opportunity. It can help make participation more continuous, inclusive, and connected to young people's realities. It can support dialogue across borders, strengthen civic learning, and give visibility to diverse youth voices. Its success, however, depends on how it is used. If digital democracy is reduced to symbolic clicks or isolated platforms, its impact will be limited. If it is combined with education, inclusion, safety, transparency, and real follow-up, it can contribute to a stronger democratic culture. The goal is not only to create more digital participation, but to create better participation.

A more participatory Europe is possible when young people are trusted as democratic actors. Their voices, experiences, and ideas are essential for addressing present and future challenges. Youth e-democracy can help create spaces where these voices are heard, connected, and translated into action. It can strengthen the relationship between young people and European democratic life, while also promoting inclusion, active citizenship, and shared responsibility. The task ahead is to ensure that digital participation remains human-centred, value-based, and genuinely meaningful. By investing in youth participation today, Europe invests in a more democratic, inclusive, and resilient future.

# Conclusion

European democracy is constantly evolving, shaped by social change, technological development, and the expectations of new generations. In this changing environment, young people have an essential role to play. They are not only future voters or future leaders; they are already active members of society, with experiences, concerns, ideas, and capacities that can contribute to democratic life today. Their participation strengthens communities, improves the relevance of policies, and brings new perspectives into public dialogue. A democratic Europe that wants to remain responsive and inclusive must create meaningful spaces where young people can express themselves, participate in decisions, and feel that their voices are taken seriously.





Digital transformation offers important opportunities for this purpose. E-voting platforms, online consultations, digital campaigns, participatory tools, youth forums, simulations, and cross-border online networks can make democratic engagement more accessible, flexible, and visible. These tools can help young people share opinions, exchange ideas, vote on priorities, advocate for change, and connect with others beyond geographical boundaries. However, digital democracy should not be understood as a technical solution on its own. A platform, campaign, or online tool becomes meaningful only when it is supported by trust, inclusion, transparency, preparation, facilitation, and follow-up. Technology can open doors, but democratic culture determines whether people feel welcome and empowered to enter.

Youth participation must be meaningful rather than symbolic. Young people should not be invited to contribute only to give visibility to an activity, complete a consultation form, or confirm decisions that have already been made. Meaningful participation requires clear information, accessible processes, enough time for reflection, opportunities for dialogue, and visible feedback on how youth input is used. When young people understand the purpose of participation and can see that their contribution is taken seriously, they are more likely to trust democratic processes and remain engaged. When participation lacks follow-up, it risks creating frustration and reinforcing the belief that institutions do not listen.

Digital participation must also be inclusive by design. Digital tools can reduce barriers for young people who cannot easily attend physical meetings, who live in rural or remote areas, or who prefer alternative ways of expressing themselves. At the same time, digital participation can create new forms of exclusion if it assumes that all young people have equal access to devices, stable internet, digital skills, language confidence, or safe online environments. Inclusion therefore requires intentional planning. Accessible platforms, clear language, mobile-friendly tools, multilingual support where possible, safe facilitation, and outreach to young people with fewer opportunities are all necessary. Equal participation is not achieved simply by opening a digital space; it is achieved by ensuring that different young people can actually use that space, feel safe within it, and influence the process.

Digital citizenship and media literacy are central to responsible participation. Young people participate in an information environment where news, opinions, images, videos, advertising, political messages, and disinformation circulate rapidly. In such an environment, democratic participation requires more than access to information. It requires the ability to evaluate sources, recognise manipulation, understand bias, protect personal data, communicate respectfully, and make informed choices. Critical thinking and media literacy are therefore core democratic competences. They help young people participate online in ways that are responsible, ethical, and resilient to misinformation.

Non-formal education plays a central role in developing these competences. Democracy cannot be learned only through theory. It must be practised through discussion, cooperation, disagreement, reflection, decision-making, and action. Non-formal education offers methods that are participatory, experiential, flexible, and learner-centred.





Through debates, simulations, role-plays, world café discussions, design thinking workshops, reflection circles, and collaborative activities, young people can experience democratic participation in practice. These methods help them build confidence, communication skills, leadership, empathy, problem-solving abilities, and intercultural understanding. They also create spaces where young people can learn from each other and recognise their own capacity to contribute.

Facilitation is essential in this process. A well-designed activity can lose its democratic value if the facilitation does not support inclusion, dialogue, and safety. Youth workers, educators, trainers, and facilitators have an important responsibility to create spaces where young people feel respected and able to participate. This involves managing group dynamics, encouraging quieter voices, addressing harmful behaviour, supporting intercultural understanding, and helping participants reflect on their learning. In digital spaces, facilitation becomes even more important because misunderstandings, exclusion, fatigue, or harmful communication can appear quickly. Safe and respectful digital participation requires clear guidelines, moderation, privacy awareness, and attention to emotional wellbeing.

The future of youth e-democracy in Europe also depends on stronger connections between young people and decision-makers. Young people need opportunities to express their views, but they also need channels through which their ideas can reach institutions, organisations, and policy processes. Policy recommendations developed by young people should be acknowledged, analysed, and answered. Participatory governance models, youth councils, advisory boards, online consultations, local youth forums, and structured dialogue mechanisms can help create more regular links between youth voices and decision-making. These mechanisms are strongest when they are transparent, inclusive, and supported by real feedback. Youth participation should not be an occasional gesture; it should become a normal part of democratic governance.



Sustainability is another important priority. Youth participation should not end when a workshop, campaign, consultation, or project activity ends. Long-term civic engagement requires continuity, communication, networks, and shared ownership. Young people are more likely to remain involved when they receive updates, see results, take on roles, and feel part of a wider community. Sustainable youth participation also requires resources, mentoring, leadership development, and institutional support. Digital communities can help maintain connection, but they need purpose, coordination, safety, and trust. The goal is to move from isolated moments of participation to lasting civic cultures where young people continue to learn, collaborate, and act.

Dissemination and visibility are also part of democratic participation. Communicating opportunities clearly helps young people understand how they can get involved. Communicating results shows that participation produced something valuable. Digital campaigns, social media strategies, visual communication, testimonials, and impact messages can make youth participation more visible and relatable. However, dissemination should be ethical, accurate, and inclusive. It should not exaggerate impact or use young people's experiences without care. Good dissemination informs, invites, and empowers. It helps close the participation loop by showing what happened, what was learned, what changed, and what can happen next.

Youth organisations have a central role in creating empowering environments where young people can participate actively and safely. This means supporting youth-led initiatives, offering training and mentoring, using non-formal education methods, investing in digital competences, and designing inclusive activities. Youth organisations can act as bridges between young people and wider democratic structures. They can translate institutional language into accessible formats, help young people formulate proposals, and create spaces for dialogue with stakeholders. At the same time, empowerment requires trust. Young people need support, but they also need autonomy to shape their own priorities, methods, and messages.

Policymakers and institutions also have a responsibility to make participation more open, understandable, and responsive. Young people should not have to navigate complex systems alone in order to be heard. Institutions can strengthen youth participation by creating regular dialogue channels, simplifying communication, supporting digital participation systems, cooperating with youth organisations, and responding clearly to youth input. This requires political will and practical commitment. It is not enough to say that youth voices matter; democratic systems must show how they matter. When institutions listen, respond, and adapt, they build trust with younger generations.

Young people themselves are central actors in this process. Their voices, experiences, and ideas are valuable. They have the right to participate in democratic life and the capacity to contribute to change. At the same time, participation requires responsibility: to seek reliable information, listen to others, communicate respectfully, protect rights, challenge exclusion, and remain open to dialogue. Digital tools give young people powerful ways to express themselves and connect with others, but these tools should be used thoughtfully. Active citizenship is not only about speaking; it is also about listening, learning, cooperating, and acting with respect for the common good.



A more participatory Europe will not be built through technology alone, nor through institutions alone, nor through young people alone. It will be built through cooperation. Youth workers, educators, civil society organisations, policymakers, digital platform designers, local communities, and young people all have a role to play. Each actor brings different resources and responsibilities. The challenge is to create democratic ecosystems where these actors work together, where young people are treated as partners, and where digital tools are used to widen access rather than deepen inequalities. Cooperation is essential because the challenges facing European societies are complex and shared. They require collective intelligence, dialogue, and participation.

The future of European youth e-democracy should be guided by a clear democratic vision: young people should have the knowledge, confidence, tools, and opportunities to participate in shaping the societies they live in. Their participation should be valued not as an exception, but as a normal and necessary part of democratic life. Building this future requires investment in digital citizenship, non-formal education, inclusive participation, safe online spaces, sustainable networks, and stronger links between youth and institutions. If these elements are taken seriously, digital democracy can become more than a technological trend. It can become a pathway towards a more inclusive, responsive, and participatory Europe.

### **The Way Forward**

Strengthening youth e-democracy is a shared responsibility. Youth organisations are called to create inclusive and empowering spaces where young people can learn, participate, and lead. Policymakers are called to open meaningful channels for youth input and respond transparently to young people's ideas. Educators and youth workers are called to develop the competences needed for responsible digital citizenship and active participation. Digital platforms and civic tools should be designed with accessibility, safety, and democratic value at their core. Young people themselves are called to use their voices, question information critically, support one another, and take part in shaping their communities.

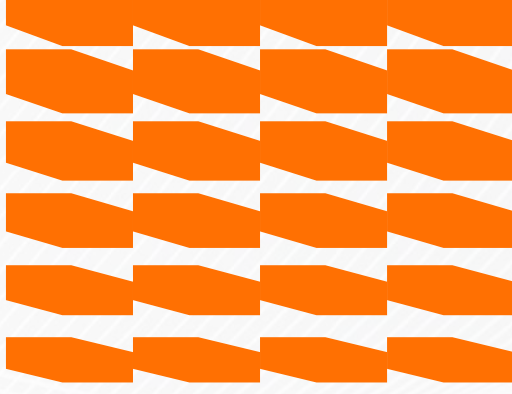
A more participatory Europe is possible when young people are trusted, heard, and supported. Digital democracy can help build this future, but only if it remains connected to human rights, inclusion, dialogue, and real democratic influence. The task ahead is not simply to bring democracy online. It is to make democracy more open, meaningful, and responsive for the generations who will carry it forward.



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# Thank you!

Thank you for taking the time to read this report. If you have any questions or would like to discuss our findings further, please don't hesitate to reach out to us.



E-DEVOY HANDBOOK

# e-Democracy: Empowering European Youth Voices



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