

Executive summary

Young people care – about our planet, our future and our political systems. In the last decade, young people have initiated social movements, tackling issues that impact their own lives and those of communities around the globe. They have done so with hope and optimism about the future, at a time when we face extreme challenges. In a world where global conflict, climate change and socio-economic issues are becoming ever more acute, we need young people’s fresh perspectives to guide political decision-making.

This report aims to outline how and why young people engage in political decision-making, and the challenges that sometimes prevent them from doing so. It puts forward policy and legislation recommendations for advancing the needs and rights of young people, ensuring their voices are meaningfully heard in public life and decision-making. The research from The Body Shop International and the Office of the United Nations Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth supports the *Be Seen Be Heard* campaign. Launching in 2022, this global campaign aims to increase young people’s participation in political arenas and help make their voices heard across all spheres of public life.

The objective of the campaign is to seek to inspire a change in legislation or policy, or support initiatives, to promote youth participation in political life in all 75+ countries where The Body Shop operates.



The *Be Seen Be Heard Global Youth Survey* shows that 67% of people believe in a better future, with 15 to 17 year-olds being the most optimistic about this.

Young people have the right to be included in political decision-making. However, there are existing challenges that young people face on the road to meaningful engagement with the complex political systems of today. Youth voting patterns are impacted by administrative, legal and financial hurdles, a lack of trust in politicians and institutions, an absence of civic education, as well as a lack of candidates with whom young people can identify.

Despite these significant barriers, young people continue to work tirelessly to raise their voices on the issues they care about – youth political apathy is a myth.

Youth participation throughout the electoral process results in positive outcomes for both young people and societies as a whole. Lowering the voting age, as an example, has been found to increase trust within democratic processes, is habit forming, makes political systems more fair, inclusive and representative of populations, and demonstrates that young people have the capacity to engage with difficult political choices alongside their adult peers.

Beyond voting, young people should also be encouraged to run for political office, where they are severely under-represented today. Globally, only 2.6% of parliamentarians are under 30 years old, and less than 1% of these young MPs are women.¹

This is not due to a lack of willingness; in fact, the *Be Seen Be Heard Global Youth Survey* found that a third of those under 30 would consider running

for public office. However, there are a number of structural and legislative barriers that prohibit their eligibility, including minimum legal candidacy age limits. Worldwide, there is an average discrepancy of more than four years between when young people are eligible to vote and when they can run for elected office. Also, gender, race, ethnicity, disability, socio-cultural norms and financial resources further influence young people's opportunities to stand for election in different countries.

Beyond standing as candidates themselves, young people may also choose to engage with youth wings of political parties. However, although these forums are the first frontiers for political candidates, they are rarely well equipped to facilitate meaningful youth engagement and face a general decrease in new, young members.

The *Be Seen Be Heard Global Youth Survey* found that three quarters (76%) of under 30 years old think politicians don't listen to young people. This feeling is particularly acute in South Africa (90%), Spain (80%) and the UK (80%). It isn't just young people who feel this way – 65% of over 60s think so too.

The world is becoming an increasingly complex place. Beyond the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, young people are facing rising inequalities, the worsening global crises of climate change, and challenges that are associated with violent conflict.

Providing space for young people to safely express their views and opinions is imperative when embarking on journeys towards social and environment justice and peace. We urgently need a forum in which young people can engage with each other, and those in power, in structured discussions to establish long-term and meaningful solutions.

Outside of electoral processes, other forms of political engagement are not particularly welcoming of young people. There is a lack of trust between young people and political institutions, and a growing perception that political participation does not make a difference. To bridge this gap, young people need support to engage with their adult peers, on an equal level. Civic education is one important way to facilitate knowledge of how public institutions work, however not all young people have equal access to it, which often further disadvantages those who are already marginalized.

Young people also need safe spaces to voice their opinions and effect change. In places where there is limited space for youth participation in formal processes, young people resort to protest to speak out on issues that they care about. Their right to public protest should be respected and, at the same time, additional avenues should be created within formal institutions and processes.

According to the *Be Seen Be Heard* Global Youth Survey, the majority of people agree that the age balance in politics is wrong. More than two thirds (69%) of people across all age groups agree that more opportunities for younger people to have a say in policy development/change would make political systems better.



In order to improve young people's participation in public decision-making, efforts that promote policy and legislation changes should be supported, including:

- Lowering the voting age for local, municipal or national elections.
- Addressing legislative or policy barriers that directly or indirectly prevent people under 30 running for leadership positions, including removing barriers such as registration fees.
- Implementing comprehensive civic education programmes for youth.
- Recognizing, supporting and establishing youth-led organizations and networks locally and nationally, with a direct relationship to national legislatures.
- Establishing formal, transparent and diverse youth engagement mechanisms in national policy development, such as on climate change.
- Implementing simplified voter registration for young and first-time voters.
- Applying minimum financial quotas for political parties on youth focused expenditure, especially relating to marginalized young people including young women, youth with disabilities, indigenous youth and those from rural areas.
- Ensuring independence and financial sustainability for political youth wings from their parent parties.
- Implementing minimum parliamentary quotas for members aged under 30, including gender parity.
- Developing national youth strategies and youth laws with young people and youth organizations.
- Recognizing new forms of youth participation and activism, such as online mobilization and issue-based campaigning.
- Ensuring that youth political participation spaces give young people real power and influence, including in budgeting and programming.