



Youth Democracy Dialogues

Rejuvenating Europe's democracy through active citizenship and youth participation

Educational Package



www.eesc.europa.eu/YEYS23

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Introduction

About the organisers



The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) is an EU advisory body that is consulted on EU legislation and policies. It brings together representatives from all areas of organised civil society. They come from groups that defend the interests of a wide range of economic, social and societal organisations at national level: employers' federations, chambers of commerce, farmers, organisations of small and medium-sized enterprises, trade unions, cooperatives, environmentalists, people with disabilities, youth, consumers, academia, etc. The EESC has **329 Members** – each appointed for five-year mandates – **from all 27 Member States**. **The EESC believes that youth participation in decision-making will result in better regulation and policies, and is thus working to engage with youth in a structured way.**

About YEYS!

Your Europe, Your Say! (YEYS!) is the EESC's annual event for young people. Schools from all 27 EU Member States, the 7 EU candidate countries and a Brussels-based European school are invited to meet and discuss, debate and draw up recommendations addressed to the EU institutions. The EESC, as the voice of civil society, wants to ensure that the ideas of Europe's younger generations are heard. To find out more about previous YEYS! events, [click here](#).

This year the discussions will **focus on the importance of youth empowerment, active participation and the engagement of young people in democratic and political processes**. The event aims to help young people understand what active citizenship means in a participatory democracy and what European values stand for, while exploring ways for them to actively engage in democratic processes.



Legacy of the European Year of Youth



The **14th YEYS! event** is well timed, as it follows the **2022 European Year of Youth** and is aligned with the European Union's priorities for youth engagement. What's more, **2023 is the European Year of Skills**. For young people to become fully engaged members of society, it is critical for them to be well informed and equipped with the skills they need to meet their full potential.

YEYS! is the ideal forum for young people to speak their minds on these and other issues that they care about, and to have their opinions heard by policy-makers at the highest level.



What is democracy and why is it important?¹

Formed from the Greek words **'demos'** (people) and **'kratos'** (power), **democracy gives people the power to govern themselves**. Democracy is easier to understand when we compare it to other forms of government. Democracy is not an autocracy or a dictatorship, where power lies in the hands of one person, or an oligarchy, where a small group of people control the government. **Democracy is a system in which power is vested in the people, who exercise this power in periodically held free elections.**

European Union and democracy

The functioning of the European Union is based on **representative democracy** – in fact, having a stable democracy is one of the key conditions for a country's accession to the EU. What's more, every adult EU citizen has the right to stand as a candidate and to vote in the European Parliament elections. There are some common principles and values that all democracies share. Firstly there is **popular sovereignty**, in which the will of the people is the only legitimate authority. Secondly there is **individual autonomy**, which states that in a democracy people should, within reason, be able to live as they please, and should not be subject to rules imposed by others. Thirdly there is the **principle of equality**, according to which everyone should have the same opportunities to influence the decisions that affect our society.

¹ Based on information from <https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/democracy> and <https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/yt/yt10/yt210/the-importance-of-youth-participation-in-formal>

Other principles include the accountability of elected officials, the transparency of electoral processes, the rule of law, and **the importance of individual participation in democratic processes**.

The most common method of democratic participation is to vote in an election, but there are many other ways to participate. Public debates and meetings as well as peaceful protests are all forms of democratic participation. Joining civic engagement groups, pressure groups and civil society organisations are great ways of coming together with like-minded people who have the same issues in order to make your collective voices heard. **Civil society organisations play a key role in participatory democracy, and the EESC supports this role by giving interest groups a voice.**

Participation is key

Active participation, where citizens vote in elections and become involved in other political activities, is key to the health of a democracy. **Young people have the opportunity to participate in both national and European elections**. Low turnouts in elections can call into question the legitimacy of election outcomes, and thus one of the main goals of a healthy democracy is to achieve broad participation in political decision-making, especially through the involvement of young people.

"NO ONE IS BORN A GOOD CITIZEN, NO NATION IS BORN A DEMOCRACY. RATHER, BOTH ARE PROCESSES THAT CONTINUE TO EVOLVE OVER A LIFETIME. YOUNG PEOPLE MUST BE INCLUDED FROM BIRTH."

*Kofi Annan,
Former Secretary-General of the United Nations*

What democracy brings, and what happens when things go wrong

Democracy and extremism

Protecting human rights also allows us to deal with some of the problems that can arise within the democratic process, such as extremism. You may be concerned by a trend you might have noticed recently: the growing support for extreme-right parties in elections across Europe. These extreme-right parties often play on nationalistic sentiment and use propaganda to promote their agenda and to target groups in society that they consider to be 'others'. However, **when human rights are enshrined in a country's legislation, it means that all members of society are protected.**



Democracy and human rights

Human rights – such as freedom of expression, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, the right to free association, freedom of the press, the right to work and earn a living, and the right to justice and social protection – are the cornerstones of any healthy democracy. **The links between democracy and human rights are deep and they reinforce each other.** Human rights are rights that all people should have, regardless of the form of government under which they live. Democracies promote these rights, while other forms of government, such as autocracies and dictatorships, see these rights as a threat, and therefore try to suppress them.

When democracy fails

When democratic processes are exploited and abused by individuals or groups to promote a narrow political agenda or their own self-interest, this results in a failure of democracy. Many images circulating the (social) media recently – from ravaged villages in Ukraine to football pitch invasions at the World Cup highlighting women's and LGBTQ rights – are linked to the suppression of democratic freedoms in countries where democratic processes have been hijacked to serve nationalistic political goals or religious ideologies.



Youth participation in democracy

A [Eurobarometer Youth Survey](#) carried out by the European Parliament in 2021 found that a majority of young Europeans feel that they don't have much or any say over important decisions, laws or policies that affect them.

To participate fully, young people need access to information about their civil rights and how to exercise them.

For a government to reflect the society it represents, all members of society must be involved. In particular, young people need to be engaged as equal partners in the democratic process and be able to influence decision-making, particularly when it comes to decisions that affect them.

Active citizenship, where people get involved in their local communities and in democracy at all levels, **is the foundation of every functioning democracy.**

Through active citizenship young people have the opportunity to influence issues affecting their own development and that of their communities, while decision-makers benefit from the fresh ideas and perspectives that they bring.

Youth participation is vital at all levels of government. At local level, young people have direct knowledge of the issues at stake and, by engaging in political activities in their communities, they can have a significant direct impact and see the results of their participation. However, the arena for youth political participation is much wider than that. **The European Union sees young people as the engine of the European project**, and believes their creativity, energy and enthusiasm to be the driving force behind the sustainability of the Union.

The most common means of democratic participation is by voting in elections, however many young people do not yet have the right to vote. This right is generally granted at 18 years of age (or at the age of majority in their country, if different). This does not, however, mean that they are automatically excluded from democratic processes. **From taking part in peaceful protests to signing petitions, there are many ways for young people to be politically active.** This activism can also have a much greater impact than that of exercising their single vote once they reach voting age.

EESC and youth engagement

For a number of years, **the EESC has been working on ways to better tap into the enthusiasm of young people** and consider their opinions in its work and in the EU decision-making process in a structured and meaningful way. With this in mind, it has engaged with young people on **climate and sustainability** by setting up the **Youth Climate and Sustainability Round Tables**, and including a youth delegate in the official EU delegation to UNFCCC COP meetings, as well as in the EESC delegation. It is also working to make sure that their voices are included in EESC opinions relating to climate and sustainability.

What's more, in its opinion on the **EU Youth Test**, **the EESC commits to enhancing the engagement of young people** and youth organisations in its work, and calls for improved youth participation in policy- and decision-making processes, with a view to creating better regulations and policies.



How do you envision youth participation?

Informal participation

Young people may be more inclined to participate in informal action. Common methods of informal political participation include local or regional youth initiatives, online movements, and youth parliamentary assemblies, as well as activism, peaceful protests and campaigns. Young people are frequently the driving force behind campaigns for reform. Another avenue for informal youth participation is to get involved in civic activities, such as volunteering for social causes. For many young people, it is more effective to join a group that provides direct aid to refugees, for example, than to join a political party to shape national refugee policy.



Formal participation

Youth participation in formal political processes is **relatively low** compared with the participation of older generations, which may be a sign that young people lack trust in traditional political institutions and feel disconnected from political processes. Formal participation includes voting, becoming a member of a political party and joining its youth wing, supporting a politician and taking part in their political campaign, becoming a polling official during an election, becoming an election observer, or joining a civil society organisation. According to the European Parliament's 2021 **Eurobarometer Youth Survey**, only 66% of young people who were eligible to vote in the most recent European elections did so.

Obstacles to youth participation

Obstacles to youth political participation can be structural, such as age restrictions to be able to vote and to participate in campaigning, and also social and cultural traditions. There can also be organisational obstacles that prevent effective youth participation, such as limited data on youth political participation, which is needed to understand the complexities of political exclusion. Social and economic exclusion can also translate into political marginalisation. Many young people are struggling to find a decent job, to pay rent and to access education, and these issues can take priority over political participation.



What to expect when participating in the Youth Democracy Dialogues?



Workshop 1

11.00-13.00, Friday 24 March

The first workshop will focus on citizen participation in policy-making processes at local, national and especially EU level.

The discussion will also cover **possible threats and challenges to democracy in the EU.**

The structure of the workshop is as follows:

1. A general presentation on EU democracy and the EU's decision-making processes during the plenary session. The discussion will also touch on threats to democracy and on the various methods of active citizen engagement in Europe, with a particular focus on methods for youth political participation. This will be followed by a Q&A session.
2. The participants will then split into different groups and take part in a 'European dystopia' game. This game is an interactive icebreaker that will ask the students to think about how to prevent European elections from potentially leading to dangerous democratic situations. The aim is to invite the students to share their worst-case scenarios for Europe, and come up with actionable ideas to avoid them.

Workshop 2

14.00-16.30, Friday 24 March

The second workshop will consist of an interactive session where students will brainstorm about what they learned in the first session, and come up with concrete policy recommendations on the topic of youth engagement and sustainable democracy in Europe.

This exercise will take the form of a simulation game based on the framework of the [European Citizens' Initiative](#), where the students will work together in groups to create an initiative and present it to the other groups.

By testing out the European Citizens' Initiative in an experimental setting, the students will gain a better understanding of the policy areas where the EU is able to legislate, how processes work within the EU institutions, how to communicate and campaign around European themes, how to collaborate with other citizens for active engagement, and more. The ultimate goal is to use games to improve the participants' civic education and to develop a policy proposal to be presented in the plenary session.

Your Europe, Your Say! 2023

23-24 March 2023

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