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About the Project

This project is aimed at young and politically engaged individuals from the Indo-Pacific region to engage in a dialogue format to discuss regional challenges faced by their generation. The outcome of two in-person workshop sessions, guided by a professor of political science, and several months of self-organised group discussion are policy papers, published in a collection after successful completion of the programme.

The 'Visions of the Next Generation' project started in 2026 and is intended to be conducted annually. The topic of this first cohort is youth political participation. All content has been reviewed by an academic and corrected by professional proofreading services.

To learn more, please have a look at the KAS Korea social media channels.

Foreword

Today's generation is increasingly living at the expense of the younger generation by consuming resources and making decisions whose long-term consequences will fall primarily on young people. While the older generation benefits from existing structures, the younger generation is being burdened with ever-greater financial, environmental, and social burdens. As a result, responsibility for the future is increasingly being shifted onto those who have the least influence over today's decisions.

This finding, which is hardly disputed, was reason enough for the country office of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in South Korea to address this topic with politically engaged young people under the heading "Visions of the Next Generation". After all, the goal was to make the younger generation aware of an issue that is sometimes not yet sufficiently recognized and to lay the groundwork for them not only to want to participate in the political decision-making process, but also to be able to do so.

The Foundation is thus pursuing a goal that is particularly important to it: the representation and participation of all. The participation of young people from Malaysia, Singapore, and South Korea in workshops in Seoul not only fostered cross-national learning but also helped build a network of outstanding young people in the Indo-Pacific region.

Special thanks go to Sarah Fahrenkrug, Seonyeong Lee and Ilayda Asimgil, who led the two workshops with evident success.

Henrik Braun

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

Director Seoul Representative Office

Seoul, November 2026

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Settling For The Status Quo: Why Youths Or Young Persons Choose Not To Participate In Politics

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Executive Summary

Youth political disengagement is generally attributed to apathy; however, young people may instead choose to 'settle' when participation seems unlikely to foster meaningful change or when its costs, risks, and uncertainty outweigh the expected benefits. Employing the concept of **satisficing**, this policy brief examines how different political, socioeconomic, and institutional conditions in Singapore, Malaysia, and South Korea determine whether youths perceive participation as 'worth it'. It argues that both satisfaction with existing conditions and dissatisfaction coupled with structural barriers or low political efficacy may discourage participation. Therefore, addressing youth disengagement warrants making participation accessible, credible, and consequential, with meaningful avenues for young people to influence decisions that shape their future.

1. Background and Problem Statement

Young people occupy a distinctive position in the political life cycle, as they grow into political, economic, and social conditions shaped by decisions implemented before and during their formative years. Moreover, each generation experiences different circumstances, which affect not only their expectations of government but also their willingness to participate in politics. Accordingly, youth political disengagement should not be equated with apathy. Young people may recognise shortcomings in existing arrangements but consider them 'good enough', or desire change but doubt whether participation would make a difference.

This policy brief understands these decisions drawing on Herbert Simon's concepts of bounded rationality and satisficing. Simon argued that individuals do not invariably pursue the best possible outcome because limited information, cognitive capacity, and resources constrain their decisions. Instead, they may accept a sufficiently satisfactory outcome rather than invest additional effort in seeking a better alternative. This phenomenon is known as 'satisficing'. Importantly, accepting an outcome does not necessarily imply being satisfied with it. Further, Simon recognised that decisions are shaped by the environment in which individuals operate, including the opportunities and constraints that they encounter.

Within the context of youth political participation, satisficing helps elucidate why political interest or dissatisfaction may not translate into action. Young people must balance political engagement against other priorities, including education, employment, and family responsibilities. Their willingness to participate depends on how crucial an issue is to them and whether the expected benefits of

participation justify the time, effort, and risks involved. Despite desiring change, they may settle for existing arrangements or lower participation if political engagement appears unlikely to yield meaningful results.

Based on a comparison of Singapore, Malaysia, and South Korea, this policy brief utilises satisficing as one possible framework for understanding youth political disengagement. It does not suggest that satisficing is inherently problematic or that it directly lowers political participation; neither does it assume that satisficing may explain all forms of disengagement, as other factors—including structural exclusion, limited resources, and political disillusionment—may independently discourage participation. Rather, the objective is to examine how satisficing may contribute to our understanding of why some young people choose not to participate, particularly when political engagement competes with other priorities or appears unlikely to yield meaningful outcomes. This policy paper considers satisficing alongside other barriers to participation, thereby seeking to provide a starting point for understanding the policy considerations required to address youth political disengagement. Although Singapore, Malaysia, and South Korea are all democratic countries, they differ in their political systems, institutional arrangements, and existing policies. Instead of proposing a one-size-fits-all solution, this paper aims to identify common challenges and country-specific differences that may inform the subsequent development of more targeted and context-specific policy recommendations.

2. Singapore: When Political Interest Does Not Translate into Action

Singapore has experienced considerable political continuity, with the People's Action Party ('PAP') forming the government since self-government in 1959. Across successive generations, PAP governments have introduced policies addressing key aspects of everyday life, including housing, employment, healthcare, and social support. This pattern remains evident in the PAP's 2025 General Election ('GE2025') manifesto, which outlined measures targeting jobs and wages, affordable housing, infrastructure, and sustainable energy.[1] Thus, young Singaporeans have grown up in a relatively stable political environment characterised by sustained government provision.

However, political continuity does not necessarily imply youth apathy. GE2025 witnessed 38 of 90 first-time candidates below the age of 40,[2] including two independent candidates aged 28 and 34 who drew public attention for raising community and policy concerns.[3] Their participation highlights that some younger Singaporeans are willing to engage directly in politics and offer alternative perspectives. Beyond electoral politics, youth-led initiatives, such as the Community

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[1] Taufiq Zalizan, "GE2025: PAP Manifesto a Roadmap to Navigate Changed World, Says PM Wong," *CNA*, April 17, 2025, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/ge2025-peoples-action-party-general-election-manifesto-lawrence-wong-5069756.

[2] Teo Kay Key, "Commentary: In GE2025, the Political Voice of Singaporeans under 45 Was Louder and Clearer," *CNA*, May 6, 2025.

[3] Vanessa Paige Chelvan and Esther Loi, "GE2025: Independents Jeremy Tan, Darryl Lo Plan to Use

for Advocacy and Political Education ('CAPE'), have sought to promote political literacy and civic engagement within Singapore's regulated political environment.[4]

Nevertheless, political interest does not invariably translate into active participation. The Youth Study on Transitions and Evolving Pathways in Singapore ('Youth STEPS') found that, in 2019, although 39% of respondents expressed interest in social or political issues, only 13% reported participating in political activities.[5] In 2020, these figures increased to 52% and 19%, respectively.[6] Although these findings do not elucidate why young people participate less, they underscore a gap between political interest and participation.

One possible explanation is the resources and commitment necessary for political engagement. Reportedly, the two younger independent candidates in GE2025 spent approximately SGD$17,000 and SGD$12,000 on their campaigns, alongside the time and effort required to communicate their policy positions.[7] Beyond financial costs, political participation may warrant knowledge, experience, and networks that younger individuals have yet to develop. Moreover, institutional restrictions limit certain forms of engagement: Singaporeans must be at least 21 years old to stand for Parliament, while those aged 18–20 are not yet eligible to vote. Therefore, for young people balancing education, employment, financial responsibilities, and family commitments, political participation must compete with other immediate priorities.

Viewed from the perspective of satisficing, some young Singaporeans may recognise shortcomings in existing policies yet consider current conditions sufficiently acceptable to live with, particularly when pursuing change necessitates additional effort and yields uncertain results. Others may desire change but prioritise relatively immediate needs or perceive limited opportunities to influence political outcomes. However, these decisions should not automatically be attributed to satisficing, as institutional restrictions and other barriers may independently discourage participation. Consequently, the policy challenge in Singapore is not merely to heighten political interest, but to understand why existing interest does not consistently translate into meaningful engagement. Examining how young people weigh the costs, opportunities, and perceived benefits of participation may provide a starting point for developing more targeted policies that address the barriers that they face.

New-Found Platforms to Speak Up on Issues," *The Straits Times*, May 6, 2025, updated May 7, 2025, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/ge2025-independents-jeremy-tan-darryl-lo-plan-to-use-newfound-platforms-to-speak-up-on-issues.

[4] Global-Is-Asian Staff, "Beyond the Ballot Box: How Asia's Youth Movements Are Shaping the Region's Democratic Future," Global-Is-Asian, June 2, 2025, https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/gia/article/beyond-the-ballot-box--how-asia-s-youth-movements-are-shaping-the-region-s-democratic-future.

[5] National Youth Council, "Youth Study on Transitions and Evolving Pathways in Singapore (Youth STEPS)," last updated July 30, 2025, https://www.nyc.gov.sg/research-engagement/youth-studies/youth-steps/.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] Chelvan and Loi, "GE2025: Independents Jeremy Tan, Darryl Lo Plan to Use New-Found Platforms to Speak Up on Issues."

3. Malaysia: Structural and Institutional Barriers

Within the context of Malaysia, political apathy extends beyond the realm of *being satisfied*[8]. Unlike Singapore's advocacy towards policy and political continuity, Malaysia's structural and institutional barriers set a high cost for youths pursuing participation such that political interest and involvement are negotiated well before agency is determined.

Malaysia has a long history of civic mobilisation and political advocacy, evident in debates surrounding political ideologies that occur across society, from Parliament to neighbourhood kopitiams. During the late 1990s, the Reformasi movement was driven substantially by youth outcry against corruption[9,10], a tradition that civil society groups, such as Bersih, carried forward through sustained campaigns advocating for free and fair elections, despite government suppression[11]. Post-2021, the implementation of Undi18 lowered the voting age to 18 years old, added an estimated 5.8 million new voters to the electoral roll[12], and recorded an estimated electoral turnout of 75.6 percent[13]. Despite dissent regarding where majority youths voted and how they voted, one note was particularly evident: young people wanted a say in their future. Additionally, even amid shrinking civic spaces, youth-led movements in Malaysia have continued to engage through grassroots communities, organise protests, and adapt methods to digital advocacy, rather than withdrawing as a whole. Engagement in politics and engagement in political parties are substantially different. Whereas general political engagement is a civic responsibility, joining a formal political party is a choice that demands personal and social trade-offs. The cost of entry and commitment also varies. Within party structures, participation is highly complex.

Malaysia's median age is approximately 32[14]. Nonetheless, the majority (62 percent) of lawmakers are above 50 years old[15]. A gerontocratic leadership

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[8] Herbert A. Simon, "Rational Choice and the Structure of the Environment," *Psychological Review* 63, no. 2 (1956): 129–38, https://doi.org/10.1037/h0042769

[9] Zawiyah Mohd Zain, Mohammad Agus Yusoff, and Izham Hakimi Hamdi, "Civil Disobedience During Reformation Era," *e-Bangi Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, no. 2 (2015): 187–94, https://repo.uum.edu.my/id/eprint/31486/

[10] Asila Jalil, "Reformasi Student Activists Earn Their Place in History," *The Malaysian Insight*, 2018, https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/97515

[11] Khoo Boo Teik, "The Profound Impact of the BERSIH Movement since 2007," *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2021/167, ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-167-the-profound-impact-of-the-bersih-movement-since-2007-by-khoo-boo-teik/

[12] The Borneo Post, "Undi18 Won't Have Much Impact in GE15, Say Political Analysts," October 20, 2022, https://www.theborneopost.com/2022/10/20/undi18-wont-have-much-impact-in-ge15-say-political-analysts/

[13] Arfa Yunus, "GE15: No Clear Winner, Says EC Chairman," *New Straits Times*, November 20, 2022, https://www.nst.com.my/news/politics/2022/11/852848/ge15-no-clear-winner-says-ec-chairman-updated

[14] Department of Statistics Malaysia, "Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2026," July 31, 2026, https://www.dosm.gov.my/portal-main/release-content/current-population-estimates-2026

[15] The Rakyat Post, "Malaysian Politicians Wanted: Must Be 40 Years Old With 50 Years Of Experience [OPINION]," July 21, 2023, https://www.therakyatpost.com/opinions/2023/07/21/malaysian-politicians-wanted-must-be-40-years-old-with-50-years-of-experience-opinion/

structure persists alongside patronage-based advancement norms, such that by the time selected young individuals assume leadership positions, the existing system remains largely unchanged. Arguably, the existence of democratically elected party youth wings may be positioned as providing access points for young people; nevertheless, these structures may carry tokenistic elements, functioning more as symbolic positions than as avenues of genuine influence. Young people entering a legacy system and a political culture that is slow to embrace generational renewal or meaningful inclusion frequently have to accept existing hierarchies and inherited narratives. Simultaneously, opportunity costs exist unevenly among youths. A young person balancing full-time employment and family responsibilities faces a materially higher cost of sustained party involvement, which generally involves attending hours of meetings, forming internal relationships, and campaigning. Socioeconomic status and resources impact the ability to meaningfully participate. This cost may be further compounded by an additional and less tangible factor: accumulated scepticism regarding the returns of formal engagement itself. Political apathy, disillusionment, and legacy culture shape how younger people assess the value of their participation, sometimes irrespective of how accessible entry is made.

The 'middle class' label conceals one of its greatest inequalities. It may be tempting to assume that well-educated young individuals are more politically literate, as though education was a proxy for political access. However, this assumption is inappropriate, as formal educational attainment does not dependably translate to political literacy, which is, in today's age, further blurred within the context of disinformation, misinformation, algorithms, and social media. Education is crucial in terms of providing exposure to critical thinking skills, media literacy, and political discussion, which are themselves influenced by the same class and resource inequalities discussed above. Rather than a *lack of*, in the case of Malaysia, youth engagement may be considered as a displacement of political participation. Faced with compounding costs, some young Malaysians have displaced political agency from formal partisanship to informal, issue-driven, and non-traditional forms. Where the structural barrier remains the most salient, opting for participation through informal channels becomes, in this case, a rational response.

The inequality of how youths experience opportunity and cost, both intergenerationally and intragenerationally, influences how *satisficing* is experienced and who can afford to be satisfied. Hence, all youths do not experience *satisficing* in the same manner. Within this context, youths are neither a uniform bloc nor a monolithic group. Where existing conditions genuinely favour an individual through appropriate resources, social connections, and proximity to existing institutions, settling for minimal participation and action may be an easy choice, as maintaining the status quo is in their best interest. Where they do not, apparent settling is best understood as a form of coping or an observable symptom rather than the root cause. The underlying causes may include time scarcity, institutional gatekeeping, or a lack of accessible meaningful entry points, all of which are themselves experienced unevenly.

4. South Korea: From Speaking Up to Choosing When to Speak

Youth political disengagement in South Korea cannot merely be dismissed as apathy.

Some young people may decrease their engagement following repeated experiences of participation that appear to minimally influence political decisions. In this sense, satisficing in South Korea may be associated less with satisfaction with the political status quo and more with settling for a lower or more selective level of political participation when additional effort no longer appears worthwhile.

Young South Koreans' political preferences are relatively fluid. In Gallup Korea's pooled April 2025 survey data, 37% and 26% of respondents aged 18–29 and 30–39 years, respectively, reported no party affiliation; the former, unaffiliated group was larger than the support base of any single party.[16] Panel research on the 2022 presidential election found that voters who switched candidates during the campaign or decided on their preferred candidate later were generally younger and unaffiliated with a political party. Moreover, they exhibited smaller differences in their evaluations of competing parties and lower interest in the election.[17] For some young voters, disappointment with one political camp may not immediately foster withdrawal but instead result in a search for another political alternative.

Simultaneously, youth politics in South Korea may appear deeply polarised. Within the same pooled data, among respondents aged 18–29, support for the Democratic Party among women was 29 percentage points higher than among men, whereas support for the People Power Party among men was 25 percentage points higher than among women.[18] Additionally, during the 2022 presidential election, gender divisions among young people—reinforced by mobilisation by political parties and politicians—shaped political divisions and voting choices.[19] Although the coexistence of a large unaffiliated group and strong political polarisation may seem contradictory, rallying strongly around a particular candidate, party, or issue may itself reflect an attempt to have one's interests heard and translated into political change. At this stage, intense participation may not indicate resignation but rather reflect young people's belief that politics can make a difference.

However, repeated disappointment may diminish this willingness to engage. Fairness, a particularly sensitive issue for young South Koreans, provides a relevant example. Controversies regarding employment, university admissions, and so-called parental privilege have repeatedly entered political debate under different governments and across political camps. For young people who regard these concerns as unresolved despite changes in political leadership, disappointment with a particular party may develop into doubt regarding the value of participation itself.

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[16] Gallup Korea, *Daily Opinion*, no. 621 (April 25, 2025), section "2025년 4월 정당 지지도" [Party Support, April 2025], pooled monthly results. https://www.gallup.co.kr/gallupdb/reportContent.asp?seqNo=1554

[17] Jaesung Ryu, "Who Are Floating Voters and Intra-Election Swing Voters and How They Made Vote Choice in the 20th Presidential Election?," *Journal of Future Politics* 12, no. 1 (2022): 5–27. https://doi.org/10.20973/jofp.2022.12.1.5

[18] Gallup Korea, *Daily Opinion*, no. 621, "2025년 4월 정당 지지도."

[19] Hanna Kim, "The Gender Cleavage and Voting Choice among Young Voters in the 20th Korean Presidential Election," *Journal of Korean Social Trend and Perspective*, no. 115 (2022): 296–338. https://doi.org/10.22813/kssi.2022..115.296

'Perhaps the other side will be different' may eventually become 'Does it really matter which side I choose?' Consequently, political mobilisation and political resignation may not necessarily describe two entirely separate groups but may reflect different points that the same person passes through over time.

Political efficacy helps elucidate why repeated frustration is critical. Research on young South Koreans has found positive associations between political efficacy and trust in government and society, mediated by perceptions of social fairness.[20] Among adults in South Korea, the OECD's 2023 survey found a 49-percentage-point gap in the proportion of respondents reporting high or moderately high trust in the national government between those who felt that they had political voice and those who did not, with lower trust in the latter group.[21] The proportion of adults in South Korea who felt that the political system allowed people like them to influence the government's actions fell from 55% in 2021 to 39% in 2023 and 37% in 2025.[22] Furthermore, South Korean research has noted a negative association between political cynicism and political participation.[23] If young people repeatedly find themselves asking, 'What actually changes when I participate?', the expected return from investing additional time and effort in politics may gradually diminish.

Youth voter turnout adds another piece to the puzzle. In the 2024 National Assembly election, turnout among voters aged 20–29 was 52.4%.[24] This figure neither demonstrates political resignation nor necessarily implies that young people have withdrawn from politics altogether. For some, it may reflect a decision to reserve political effort for elections, issues, or moments that seem sufficiently critical to render participation worthwhile.

Therefore, within the South Korean context, satisficing may assume the form of accepting a lower or more selective level of political participation, rather than accepting political outcomes as satisfactory. Some young people may restrict their involvement when its expected impact seems low, yet mobilise again around issues that they consider important. This reflects one possible response to disappointing political experiences; others may participate less owing to time pressures, financial

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[20] Sangwoo Hong, Donguk Kim, and Hwa Yeon Kim, "A Study on the Effect of Political Efficacy of Youth Generation on Social Trust and Government Trust: Focusing on the Mediating Effect of Social Fairness," *Modern Society and Public Administration* 33, no. 1 (2023): 1–32. https://www.kci.go.kr/kciportal/ci/sereArticleSearch/ciSereArtiView.kci?sereArticleSearchBean.artiId=ART002944864

[21] OECD, "Korea," *OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions 2024 Results—Country Notes* (2024), 2023 survey results. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-survey-on-drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-2024-results-country-notes_a8004759-en/korea_ab1a95c7-en.html

[22] OECD, "Korea," *OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions 2026 Results* (2026), political voice results for 2021, 2023 and 2025. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-survey-on-drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-2026-results_c88c8869-en/korea_16f14cae-en.html

[23] Hyeonsu Byeon, "The Impact of Political Efficacy on Political Cynicism and Political Participation," *Legislation and Policy Studies* 9, no. 2 (2017): 105–128. https://doi.org/10.22809/nars.2017.9.2.005

[24] Kim Ji-eun, "22대총선투표율, 70대가장높아…20대가가장낮아" [Voter Turnout in the 22nd General Election Highest Among Voters in Their 70s and Lowest Among Those in Their 20s], Newsis, September 30, 2024, https://www.fnnews.com/news/202409301340243947.

constraints, or institutional barriers. Accordingly, the policy challenge involves making sustained participation both feasible and consequential. Clear feedback on how youth input is considered and acted upon could help render the value of continued participation more visible.

5. Comparative Analysis

The three countries highlight distinct possible pathways through which young people may come to accept lower or more selective levels of political participation. In Singapore, this outcome may arise from sufficiently acceptable political conditions and competing priorities. In Malaysia, structural and institutional barriers may influence decisions regarding additional engagement. Finally, in South Korea, repeated political disappointment may diminish the perceived value of continued participation. Additionally, political disengagement may stem from structural barriers, resource constraints, low political efficacy, or previous experiences of participation. Hence, satisficing should not be understood as a measure of satisfaction with existing political conditions or as a definitive explanation for disengagement. Rather, it presents a framework for examining how young people assess the costs, opportunities, and expected benefits of additional participation within their respective political environments.

Singapore offers a possible pathway of satisficing through sufficiently acceptable conditions. Young people may recognise areas for political improvement but view existing arrangements as 'good enough', particularly when education, employment, and financial security take precedence. Accordingly, the question becomes 'Why push further?' By contrast, Malaysia illustrates how structural and institutional barriers may shape decisions regarding participation. Despite political interest and willingness to engage, unequal access to resources and opportunities for influence may discourage additional involvement. The question here is 'Can I meaningfully push further?' Such barriers are not themselves satisficing but may lead some young people to redirect their efforts towards less demanding or informal forms of participation. South Korea offers a different pathway, whereby repeated participation and political disappointment may diminish the perceived value of continued engagement. Young people may remain politically aware or participate selectively but become less willing to invest additional effort when previous participation appears to have yielded minimal change. Subsequently, the question becomes 'What is the point of pushing further?' Unlike Singapore, where existing conditions may be regarded as sufficiently acceptable, satisficing in South Korea may reflect resignation or diminished expectations following political disappointment.

Collectively, these differences highlight the criticality of understanding the circumstances that influence youth political participation. Instead of proposing detailed country-specific solutions, this paper draws on satisficing as a framework to identify broader policy considerations, including mitigating barriers to participation, expanding opportunities for meaningful engagement, and equipping young people with the knowledge and resources required to participate. The objective is to provide a starting point for policymakers to cultivate an environment wherein political participation becomes a more accessible and worthwhile option for

young people.

6. Policy Recommendations

Mandatory education - Democratic countries should consider introducing mandatory, non-partisan, civic and political literacy education before individuals reach voting age. Instead of promoting particular political views, such education should enable a factual understanding of political history, systems of government, democratic institutions, electoral processes, policymaking, and avenues for participation. The objective is to foster political literacy as a basic civic competency, thereby equipping young people to critically assess political information and understand how and where they can participate. Across Singapore, Malaysia, and South Korea, although the barriers to youth participation vary, ensuring that young people possess this foundational knowledge reduces the time and effort required to engage. From the perspective of satisficing, developing these capabilities before the need for participation arises lowers the additional cost of action; consequently, when an issue becomes sufficiently critical to warrant participation, a lack of political knowledge does not become another reason to settle for non-participation.

Lower voting age - Democratic countries where the voting age remains above 18 should consider lowering it to 18. Doing so would enable earlier access to one of the most direct and relatively low-cost forms of electoral political participation. Deeper forms of political engagement—including joining political parties, campaigning, or standing for office—may warrant considerable time, knowledge, financial resources, and sustained commitment. However, voting offers an institutionalised avenue through which young people may express their political preferences at comparatively lower cost. Simultaneously, lowering the voting age should not be regarded as sufficient to make political participation broadly accessible; rather, it should complement efforts to cultivate civic and political literacy before individuals become eligible to vote. Meanwhile, governments should examine age requirements and other institutional barriers that may restrict young people's political participation. Equipping young people with a factual understanding of governance, political institutions, and electoral processes from an earlier age may enable a clearer transition between fostering political literacy and gaining access to formal avenues of participation. From the perspective of satisficing, these measures may mitigate the costs and barriers associated with political participation by ensuring that young people who consider an issue sufficiently critical to warrant action have access to an immediate and relatively accessible institutional channel through voting, alongside clearer pathways towards deeper forms of engagement. The objective is not to require young people to become more politically active, but to expand the opportunities available to them should they choose to participate.

Empowering youth political leadership by strengthening access and meaningful participation - A formal role for youth should be institutionalised within the policymaking process, enabling young people to meaningfully contribute to day-to-day policymaking and decision-making; this can also be supported through ring-fenced budgeting with transparent accountability mechanisms. Meanwhile, supporting informal youth-led civil society through direct and indirect funding, legal protection, and recognition complements formal participation to foster democratic vibrancy and

system complexity. Moreover, political participation should be accessible in practice. Hence, civic participation stipends covering attendance, transport, materials, and campaigning should be in place to support and offset the cost burden of political participation; in this regard, the communication and delivery of specific programmes and grants should be accessible, inclusive, and universal. Such stipends may be logged by civic or political activities, rather than through membership. Enabling mechanisms—including statutory paid leave for young individuals contesting local elections or serving in civic bodies—could address barriers arising from opportunity costs. However, it must be acknowledged that youths do not constitute a uniform bloc. Hence, disaggregated data collection could facilitate more responsive policy delivery through targeted intervention.

Internal party reforms - Although internal party governance reform is challenging to mandate externally, meaningful change here is likely to stem from members' advocacy and generational pressure. However, registration bodies could potentially mandate transparency in internal governance—including clear processes in candidate selection, committee appointments, and leadership succession—for public and internal member evaluation and enhanced accountability. Funding incentives may also be explored to encourage transparency.

Heighten transparency in youth policymaking - Democratic countries should make it easier for young people to view the outcome of their participation in policymaking. Public institutions should provide clear information regarding how youth proposals are reviewed, which suggestions are reflected in policy, and why others are modified or rejected. When proposals are accepted, young people should be able to follow their progress throughout the policymaking process. This approach could be useful across Singapore, Malaysia, and South Korea, despite different barriers to youth political participation. Having an opportunity to participate does not necessarily imply that young people feel heard. Even when a proposal is not adopted, knowing that it was considered and understanding why it was rejected can make participation feel less disconnected from the final decision. From the perspective of satisficing, viewing the outcome of participation may decrease the likelihood of young people concluding that additional engagement is not worthwhile. This approach would entail focusing not only on how young people enter the political process but also on what they experience following participation.

7. Conclusion

Satisficing is not inherently undesirable. Considering limited time and resources, choosing not to participate politically may be a rational decision, particularly when other needs are more immediate. The policy concern arises when young people systematically perceive political participation as excessively costly, inaccessible, or inconsequential to justify their involvement. If particular groups repeatedly withdraw or remain absent from political processes for these reasons, their interests may become less visible in policymaking, and political institutions may face weaker incentives to respond to them. Therefore, the concern is not political inactivity itself, but whether avoidable barriers and low perceived efficacy systematically discourage young people who would otherwise choose to participate.

Youth political disengagement does not emerge from a single political experience. In Singapore, sufficiently acceptable conditions may lead young people to ask, 'Why push further?' In Malaysia, structural and institutional barriers may raise the question, 'Can I meaningfully push further?' In South Korea, repeated cycles of participation and disappointment may eventually prompt the question, 'What is the point of pushing further?' Consequently, different political environments shape different reasons for satisficing, even where the outcome may similarly be lower levels of or more selective political participation. Satisficing does not imply that young people are necessarily happy with existing political conditions; rather, they may recognise that better outcomes are possible, but decide that pursuing them is not sufficiently worthwhile—considering the costs, constraints, uncertainty, and expected returns of additional participation. Thus, addressing youth disengagement requires changing these perceptions by mitigating barriers to participation; strengthening young people's capacity to engage; and ensuring that when they do participate, they can see how their voices contribute to political outcomes. Collectively, these dynamics may extend beyond the three cases examined here. Young people across political systems are coming of age amid technological change, economic inequality, globalisation, and labour-market uncertainty. Nonetheless, similar pressures need not yield the same political response: whether young people mobilise, remain on standby, withdraw, or redirect their efforts may depend on the personal, cultural, and institutional environment wherein those pressures are experienced. Therefore, future research could examine whether similar micro-level calculations operate in different political systems and through different forms of disengagement.

Engaged but Excluded: Formal and Informal Youth Political Participation in the Indo-Pacific

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Executive Summary

Although young people across the Indo-Pacific are politically active, this activity translates poorly into influence over binding decisions. Therefore, the challenge facing policymakers is not youth apathy but a formal–informal participation gap: substantial engagement in protest, digital advocacy, and civil society, alongside persistent underrepresentation in parties, legislatures, and executive decision-making.

This gap is examined through a three-stage framework of access, agency, and aggregation—applied to the Republic of Korea (ROK), Malaysia, and Singapore. Three key findings emerge. Reforms that widen access, though worth completing, exert limited independent effect, with the cases that went furthest on entry rules exhibiting the least movement in who is elected. Instead, the binding constraint lies in aggregation: the rules and institutions, above all political parties, that convert dispersed preferences into candidacies and legislation. Moreover, young people do not form a bloc, because cleavages within youth cohorts rival intergenerational differences and influence how participation translates into influence.

These findings inform five recommendations, ordered by the political commitment that each requires: publishing comparable, age-disaggregated participation data; expanding deliberation and tracking what it produces; rebuilding civic education for a digital age; lowering the structural barriers to formal representation; and cooperating regionally while supporting youth solidarity.

1. Introduction

The Indo-Pacific houses both the youngest and the fastest-ageing electorates worldwide. Malaysia's median age is near 30, whereas Singapore's median age is around 43. Finally, the ROK's is above 45, with one of the lowest fertility rates recorded globally.[1] Where youth cohorts are large, exclusion carries a legitimacy cost; by contrast, where they are shrinking, the young are outvoted by arithmetic alone.

The brief rests on a distinction well established in the participation literature, distinguishing institutionalised political activity from the extra-parliamentary forms surrounding it.[2] Formal participation refers to voting, party membership, candidacy, and office-holding: legally structured activity that carries decision rights. Informal participation refers to protest, petitioning, digital advocacy, volunteering, and civil society organising activity that influences agendas without directly allocating

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[1] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects 2024: Summary of Results* (New York: United Nations, 2024); Department of Statistics Singapore, *Population and Population Structure*, https://www.singstat.gov.sg/find-data/explore-data-themes/population/population-and-population-structure/latest-news-data

[2] Joakim Ekman and Erik Amnå, "Political Participation and Civic Engagement: Towards a New Typology," *Human Affairs 22*, no. 3 (2012): 283–300.

authority.[3] These two forms have diverged, and this divergence is where policy attention must be devoted.

The divergence is measurable on both sides. At the formal level, Asia has among the fewest parliamentarians aged 30 or under of any region at 2.1 percent; within it, East Asia records the lowest proportion at 0.4 percent.[4] Moreover, turnout among younger voters is well below that of older cohorts.[5] At the informal level, youth mobilisation has been among the region's most visible political forces. This divergence reflects a perception that institutions are unresponsive to young people's priorities, rather than detachment from democratic ideals.[6]

The gap is crucial because the two forms contribute to democratic resilience in different and non-interchangeable ways. Comparative research has distinguished a democracy's capacity to avoid the onset of erosion from its capacity to resist erosion once it has begun.[7] Informal participation supplies the latter, mobilising quickly when institutions are threatened; however, only formal participation supplies the former, as avoidance relies on the routine institutions from which young people are most frequently absent. A system that draws on youth mobilisation for crisis resistance while excluding the young from ordinary decision-making spends a reserve that it is not replenishing, which renders the gap a question of institutional durability rather than of fairness alone.

The three cases maximise variation: the ROK is a consolidated democracy with permissive entry rules; Malaysia constitutes a competitive democracy that executed one of the region's largest enfranchisement reforms, and Singapore represents a dominant-party system with compulsory voting and a developed consultative architecture.

2. Analytical Framework: Access, Agency, Aggregation

A three-stage framework locates where the gap is produced, drawing on both the civic voluntarism tradition and the systems literature on interest articulation and

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[3] Jan W. van Deth, "A Conceptual Map of Political Participation," *Acta Politica* 49, no. 3 (2014): 349–67.

[4] Devin Joshi, *Youth Participation in National Parliaments: 2025 The Voices of Young MPs* (Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2026), 7.

[5] Richard Wike, Janell Fetterolf, Maria Smerkovich, Sarah Austin, Sneha Gubbala, and Jordan Lippert, "Representative Democracy Remains a Popular Ideal, but People Around the World Are Critical of How It's Working," Pew Research Center, 2024, 15, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/02/gap_2024.02.28_democracy-closed-end_report.pdf

[6] Sare Knoope, Pauline Deneufbourg, Kiri Ginnerup, and Josip Ivanovic, *Youth, Peace and Security and Electoral Processes in Times of Youth-Led Protests Around the World* (Geneva: UNDP, 2025), 5, https://www.undp.org/publications/youth-peace-and-security-and-electoral-processes-times-youth-led-protests-around-world.

[7] Vanessa A. Boese, Amanda B. Edgell, Sebastian Hellmeier, Seraphine F. Maerz, and Staffan I. Lindberg, "How Democracies Prevail: Democratic Resilience as a Two-Stage Process," *Democratization* 28, no. 5 (2021): 885–907.

aggregation.[8] Each stage marks a point at which informal participation either converts into formal influence or dissipates.

Access pertains to entry: the franchise age, the minimum age of candidacy, registration mechanics, party membership rules, and candidate deposits. Failure results in formal exclusion, the most visible of the three problems and the most frequently addressed.

Agency pertains to meaningful action after entry is secured and depends on autonomy from gatekeepers, the legal environment for association and expression, and the resources that participation demands. Failure precipitates tokenism, whereby young people are present but not consequential, and chilling, whereby participation is permissible but costly.

Aggregation pertains to the combination of numerous individual preferences into collective decisions with tangible effect, thereby turning dispersed private views into names on ballots, legislative seats, and statute provisions. Its mechanisms are candidate selection, the translation of votes into seats, apportionment, and whether competition is organised around programs or identities.[9] Selection is decisive, as parties determine who appears on a ballot before voters determine anything.[10]

The stages are sequential rather than substitutable; hence, a shortfall at any one limits what the others achieve. Nonetheless, reform tends to concentrate on access, which is legislatively tractable, whereas aggregation is left untouched.[11]

3. Case Studies

3.1 ROK: High Participation, Low Representation

The ROK reveals how the spaces and repertoires of youth political participation are evolving. Young people remain markedly underrepresented in formal institutions and vote less than older generations; nevertheless, they are highly visible in protests, digital campaigns, online communities, and issue-based civic engagement.

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[8] Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Gabriel A. Almond and G. Bingham Powell Jr., *Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1966).

[9] On programmatic versus clientelistic and identity-based linkage between parties and voters, see Herbert Kitschelt and Steven I. Wilkinson, eds., *Patrons, Clients, and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[10] Gideon Rahat and Reuven Y. Hazan, "Candidate Selection Methods: An Analytical Framework," *Party Politics* 7, no. 3 (2001): 297–322.

[11] Pippa Norris, *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Russell J. Dalton, *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation Is Reshaping American Politics*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2015); Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "The Danger of Deconsolidation: The Democratic Disconnect," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 3 (2016): 5–17, with the principal critique in Amy C. Alexander and Christian Welzel, "The Myth of Deconsolidation: Rising Liberalism and the Populist Reaction," *Journal of Democracy* Web Exchange (2017).

Therefore, apparent disengagement from conventional politics may be better understood, at least, in part, as a shift in where and how participation occurs.[12]

The gap in formal representation is the starting point. In the 22nd National Assembly elected in 2024, lawmakers under the age of 40 accounted for only 4.6 percent of all members.[13] The same election revealed a substantial generational turnout gap: 52.4 and 55.1 percent of voters in their twenties and thirties, respectively, against over 80 percent of those in their sixties and seventies.[14] The 2026 local elections presented a more varied picture, with a record 810 candidates aged 39 or younger standing and 403 elected, though none won a metropolitan or basic local government head position.[15] Despite the growing presence of young candidates, their absence from local executive positions highlights the uneven nature of generational renewal in formal politics. Moreover, electing younger representatives does not necessarily ensure that youth concerns are reflected in party agendas or policy decisions.

However, focusing on elections alone overlooks where younger citizens increasingly practice politics. Participation has developed through close interaction between digital communication and offline collective action, already evident during the 2016–17 Candlelight Movement, when mass demonstrations demanded the resignation of then-President Park Geun-hye over a corruption scandal and contributed to her impeachment.[16] Research on the protests has revealed a close association between social media use and participation, indicating how digital communication had become embedded in the process through which political awareness became collective action.[17] Furthermore, cultural expression formed part of the protest repertoire, with singing and dancing accompanying demonstrations in streets and public squares.[18]

This combination of cultural expression and political participation became even more visible following President Yoon Suk Yeol's declaration of emergency martial law on 3 December 2024, when younger participants, particularly young women, brought cultural practices developed outside conventional politics into the protest arena. K-Pop lightsticks, popular songs, memes, and hashtags were repurposed as forms of democratic expression.

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12 Su Jung Kim, Jihyun Oh, and SetByol Choi, "Political Participation of Young Generation: Is It Marginalization of Politics or the Emergence of New Politics?" *Ewha Journal of Social Sciences* 36, no. 2 (2020): 283–318.

13 Ji-yoon Seo, "22대 청년 당선자 14명에 그쳤지만 존재감 커진 이유는," *Financial News*, April 17, 2024, https://www.fnnews.com/news/202404161833260759

14 Cheol-seon Kim, "총선 투표율, 50대 이상 올랐고 40대 이하 내렸다…꼴찌는 20대." *Yonhap News Agency*, September 20, 2024, https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20240930081400001

15 Da-woon Cho, "지방선거서 '2030 젊치인' 403명 당선…단체장은 없어," *Yonhap News Agency*, June 5, 2026, https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20260605135900001

16 Shin-Goo Kang, "Candlelight Demonstrations and the Presidential Impeachment in South Korea: An Evaluation of the 30 Years of Democracy," *Asian Education and Development Studies* 8 no. 3 (2019): 256–67.

17 Sangwon Lee, "Connecting Social Media Use with Gaps in Knowledge and Participation in a Protest Context: The Case of Candle Light Vigil in South Korea," *Asian Journal of Communication* 29, no. 2 (2019): 111–27.

18 Kim Seon-woo, "Beyond the Typical: Free Heart and Sense of Beauty," *Koreana*, Winter 2018, Korea Foundation,https://www.koreana.or.kr/koreana/na/ntt/selectNttInfo.do?bbsId=1114&langTy=KOR&mi=1544&nttSn=51634.

Notably, the lightstick became among the most visible symbols of the demonstrations calling for Yoon's impeachment.[19] A survey of young protesters in Daegu found that participants were predominantly young women and that mobilisation relied more on diffusion through social networking services and loose networks than on recruitment by parties or established organisations, with familiar fandom repertoires lowering barriers to collective action.[20]

Digital platforms and online communities circulate political information rapidly and at low cost; nonetheless, greater accessibility does not necessarily foster more deliberative politics. A nationwide voter survey found that greater use of online communities was associated with wider gender differences vis-à-vis several policy issues.[21] The protests around the Olympic Park Handball Gymnasium following the June 2026 local elections underscore the risks associated with digital political mobilisation. Following disruptions caused by ballot shortages, information disseminated rapidly through social media and university networks, thereby mobilising a diverse range of participants. However, unsubstantiated claims of electoral fraud and conspiracy theories circulated online, raising concerns regarding the role of digital platforms in amplifying misinformation.[22] This case highlights that heightened political mobilisation does not necessarily translate into more informed or deliberative democratic participation.

The resulting challenge is a gap between formal and informal participation. Despite fostering visibility, solidarity, and rapid mobilisation, digital and cultural engagement does not translate automatically into sustained influence over parties, legislation, or policy. Therefore, strengthening youth participation warrants credible channels through which expression emerging from contemporary cultural and media environments may be converted into representation.

3.2 Malaysia: Informal Success, Formal Lag

Malaysia most clearly demonstrates that informal participation succeeds on its own terms while leaving the formal channel largely unchanged.

The informal side yielded an outright constitutional victory. A youth-led civil society campaign built cross-party support for lowering the voting age, while the resulting Constitution (Amendment) Act 2019 passed unanimously in both houses, integrating a lower franchise age, a lower minimum age of candidacy, and automatic voter registration.[23] When implementation was delayed, litigation brought by young Malaysians resulted in a court ruling necessitating it, with the provisions coming into

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19 Hyunsu Yim, Nicoco Chan, and Minwoo Park, “K-pop light sticks fire up Yoon’s impeachment protests in South Korea,” *Reuters*, December 10, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/k-pop-light-sticks-fire-up-impeachment-protests-south-korea-2024-12-10/

20 InSul Park and WooJin Kang, “Lightsticks and Youth Politics in Daegu: Patterns of Participation, Collective Action, and Political Demands,” *Analyses & Alternatives* 10, no. 1 (2026): 70–106.

21 Gyeongho Choi, “Do Online Communities Intensify Gender Conflict?: Analyzing the Interaction Effect of Online Community Use and Gender on Attitudes Toward Gender Policies,” *Journal of Social Science* 51, no. 2 (2025): 121–47.

22 Cynthia Kim, Joyce Lee, and Kyu-Seok Shim, “How South Korea's ballot shortage spurred turnout of thousands to defend democracy,” *Reuters*. June 12, 2026, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/how-south-koreas-ballot-shortage-spurred-turnout-thousands-defend-democracy-2026-06-12/

23 Constitution (Amendment) Act 2019 (Malaysia), gazetted September 10, 2019; ConstitutionNet, "Bipartisan Support for Constitutional Amendment to Lower Voting Age in Malaysia," International IDEA, 2019.

force in December 2021.[24] Few examples illustrate more directly what organised youth activity outside institutions can achieve. Noteworthily, the achievement was an expansion of the formal channel, not a policy concession.

The formal effect on access was correspondingly large, fostering an expansion of the electoral roll from 15.22 million to 21.02 million—an increase of around 5.8 million voters in a single step.[25] Turnout at the 2022 general election among voters aged 18–30 was strong at 75.6 percent, though turnout among 18–20-year-olds lagged the national average and declined further at the 2023 state elections.[26]

Conversion into representation did not follow. Analysis across over 7,000 polling districts found one coalition leading in 46 percent of districts with the youngest voter profiles, most pronounced in Malay-majority seats.[27] Subsequent research has suggested that this finding reflected a judgment on governance performance and economic conditions, rather than an endorsement of a theocratic program.[28] Interpreted through this framework, the electoral outcome is a grievance in search of a programmatic channel: where party competition is organised around identity and digital salience, expanded access is captured by whichever mobilising frame is best organised.

Agency and aggregation constraints explain the lag. Voter education did not keep pace with automatic registration, thereby leaving several newly enrolled voters uncertain of their status.[29] The legacy of restrictions on campus political activity continues to influence the pipeline into party politics.[30] Youth wings generally lack independent nominating authority, while apportionment favours rural constituencies, underrepresenting a young and heavily urbanised electorate.

3.3 Singapore: An Inverted Gap

Despite Singapore's reputation for rigidly regulating political expression, young people there exhibit high levels of trust in the government's ability to deliver on their concerns. As restrictions limit traditional modes of political expression, they turn to digital spaces to mobilise support for causes. This trust has translated into meaningful youth political participation under state oversight.

In Singapore, voting is mandatory for citizens aged 21 and above who are in the country on polling day. Therefore, gauging the extent of youth disengagement from voting patterns alone is challenging. Citizens aged 21 and above may contest

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24 "EC: Undi18, Automatic Voter Registration Gazetted on Dec 1," *Malay Mail*, December 2, 2021; Malaysian Bar, "Undi-18 and Automatic Voter Registration Now!," press release, 2021.

25 James Chai, "The Paradox of Malaysia's Lowering of Voting Age: Expanded Enfranchisement Devalued by More Unequal Representation," *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2022/63 (June 15, 2022).

26 "Analysis: Young Voters Helped 'Green Wave' at GE15 but Will They Show Up Again?," *Bernama*, November 8, 2023, citing analysis by Bridget Welsh and Merdeka Center pre-election survey data.

27 "GE15: Was the 'Green Wave' Powered by Young Voters?," *Malaysiakini Newslab*, 2023, https://newslab.malaysiakini.com/greenwave-generational-gap/en/; see also "Why Young Malay Voters in Malaysia Are 'Turning Green'," *Trends in Southeast Asia*, no. 12/2024 (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024).

28 Iman Research, study on Malay youth voting behavior at the 2022 general election, reported in "Did Malay Youths Succumb to 'Green Wave' in GE15?," *Malay Mail*, August 20, 2025.

29 "Barriers to Youth Political Participation: Insights from Malaysia's Lowered Voting Age Policy (Undi18) in the 15th General Election," *Cogent Social Sciences* 11, no. 1 (2025).

30 Meredith L. Weiss, *Student Activism in Malaysia: Crucible, Mirror, Sideshow* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2011).

elections through Single Member Constituencies or Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs). Specifically, GRCs were introduced to ensure that ethnic minorities were represented, as each slate of three to six candidates must include a member of an ethnic minority.[31] However, no comparable measure ensures that young people are represented, and the proportion of members of parliament aged 40 or younger is only 22.2 percent, with none aged 30 or younger.[32]

The government maintains strict control over protests by restricting them to Speakers' Corner at Hong Lim Park in central Singapore, where a permit is required to organise an event. Nonetheless, formal and informal channels remain through which young people may make their views known: petitions to change government policies circulate online, while the government solicits feedback on its initiatives through online forms.[33]

Despite these restrictions, young Singaporeans report high levels of trust in the government. In the TODAY Youth Survey 2023, 58 percent of respondents believed that the government was actively engaging and listening to young people on important issues, while 54 percent believed that it was receptive to differing or opposing views on its policies.[34] Among the successful cases of the Singapore government implementing youth feedback in policymaking is the case of SG Climate Rally, a youth-led group focusing on climate issues, whose contributions informed discussions on Singapore's net zero emissions goal and the eligibility criteria for carbon credits for companies in 2023.[35] Another youth-led advocacy group for Malay-Muslim issues, Lepak Conversations, believed that they had successfully contributed towards the overturning of the policy that banned wearing the hijab in uniformed services through their discussions with the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore.[36] Those involved in successes, such as SG Climate Rally, a youth-funded group, believe that their voices tend to be heard when their cause aligns with a current government priority.[37] Further, they have realised that the feedback mechanism remains non-transparent; for instance, Lepak Conversations has encountered difficulties in advocating for more comprehensive sex education for Islamic religious teachers during their interactions with the government.[38]

Singaporean youth are highly active in civic life, with approximately 84 percent of those aged 15–34 participating in at least one civic activity in 2024.[39] Among these,

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[31] Elections Department Singapore, "Types of Electoral Divisions," https://www.eld.gov.sg/elections_type_electoral.html

[32] Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Singapore," https://data.ipu.org/parliament/SG/SG-LC01/data-on-youth/

[33] One example is the 2026 call to reconsider the clearing of Maju Forest in western Singapore, which assumed the form of an approved protest organised by SG Climate Rally and that of a feedback form managed by the Housing Development Board, which will oversee the housing project planned for the cleared land.

[34] Nicole Lam, "TODAY Youth Survey: Most Say Taking Part in Civic Discourse is Important; Just Over Half Feel Govt is Receptive to Differing Views, *Channel News Asia*, October 18, 2023, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/today-youth-survey-civic-participation-5604436

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

[39] *YOUTH.sg: The State of Youth in Singapore 2024* (Singapore: National Youth Council, 2024), 14, https://isomer-user-content.by.gov.sg/139/89600539-360b-4e48-9b72-20990dba0e80/YOUTHsg%20State%20of%20Youth%202024%2004%20Youth%20&%20The%20Power%20of%20Communities.pdf

40 percent engaged with political content online by reposting or liking such content on social media.[40]

As in the ROK and Malaysia, Singaporean youth rely on digital means to participate politically. During the 2025 general election, voters aged 34 and below used TikTok more frequently than older voters to seek election information.[41] In a survey of social media use among Singaporean voters, younger respondents reported using social media platforms more frequently than traditional party channels.[42] Nonetheless, measures to combat misinformation and fake news, such as the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, serve as a barrier to airing views, possibly resulting in self-censorship in some cases.

Therefore, the case of Singapore indicates that high trust in the government leads young people to use official channels to air their views and participate in state-led civic activities. Instead of exhibiting disillusionment and disempowerment, most Singaporean youth are eager to use the means at their disposal to work with the government to advance causes that are important to them.

3.4 Key Divergences and Common Themes

The three cases locate the binding constraint in different aspects: in the ROK, primarily in aggregation, where access is comparatively open and informal agency is robust; in Malaysia, jointly in aggregation and agency; and in Singapore, in access and in what consultation is empowered to decide. Therefore, the ROK and Malaysia exhibit an informal surplus alongside a formal deficit, while Singapore exhibits formal saturation alongside a narrower informal channel.

Nonetheless, three patterns hold. First, access reform does not close the gap, because the binding constraint lies downstream. Although each government has widened entry, representation has increased in none; instead, conversion is determined by candidate selection, seat allocation, apportionment, and the weight assigned to consultative output—the least reformed institutions in all three. Second, where formal channels do not convert, other mechanisms substitute imperfectly, as digital platforms perform the aggregating role that parties have relinquished, thereby organising action around personalised frames rather than programmatic interest. Third, young people do not constitute a bloc: gender in the ROK, ethnicity and religiosity in Malaysia, and class and outlook in Singapore divide young citizens just as markedly as age divides them from older ones; hence, reforms premised on a single youth constituency risk empowering only its best-organised segment.

4. Policy Recommendations

The recommendations are ordered by political cost, thereby enabling incremental adoption, with each step strengthening the case for the next.

40 YOUTH.sg, 14.

41 Carol Soon, Natalie Pang, and Samantha Quek, “Media and Internet Use During General Election 2025,” *IPS Working Paper no. 70* (January 2026), 19, https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/ips-working-paper-70---media-and-internet-use-during-general-election-2025.pdf?sfvrsn=538d040a_1

42 Soon, Pang, and Quek, 34.

4.1 Publishing comparable, age-disaggregated participation data

Electoral management bodies and statistical agencies should publish turnout, registration, candidacy, and elected-office data disaggregated by age and, where feasible, by age and gender jointly. Such transparency gains its value from comparability; thus, reporting should align with established international frameworks, rather than bespoke national categories, including the conventions employed for parliamentary age datasets and Sustainable Development Goal indicator 16.7.1.[43]

Where statutory surveys of youth conditions exist, their conventions provide a template that can be extended to the electoral side. Harmonisation allows governments to measure informal engagement against formal representation and supplies the evidentiary foundation for what follows.

4.2 Expanding deliberation and tracking what it produces

Consultation exercises have proliferated but remain consultative in the narrow sense: agency-convened, bounded by predetermined problem statements, and culminating in recommendations. The stronger model provides participants with a defined question, deliberative time, expert support, and a published outcome.[44] Governments should expand the repertoire, drawing on citizens' assemblies with age-stratified membership, youth parliaments with access to legislative committees, and participatory budgeting.

Deliberation becomes influence only when linked to something traceable, which entails recording how recommendations are incorporated once submitted: which have been taken forward, which are under consideration, and which have not been pursued and why. The objective is not to bind governments to outcomes but to render the path from deliberation to decision legible to those who participated.

Among the three cases analysed, Singapore is the only country with an existing youth deliberation process under government oversight. While Singaporean youth appear content with the government's attempts to solicit feedback from youth, they remain dissatisfied with the lack of transparency regarding which feedback would be considered. Therefore, deliberation mechanisms should adopt meaningful follow-up processes in the form of two-way dialogue between the government and youth-advocacy groups.

4.1 Rebuilding civic education for a digital age

Civic education across the region remains oriented towards institutional description.

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43 Inter-Parliamentary Union, Parline database, "Age of Parliamentarians," accessed August 2026, https://data.ipu.org/; United Nations, Sustainable Development Goal indicator 16.7.1, on the proportions of positions in national and local public institutions relative to national distributions, by sex, age, disability, and population group; International IDEA, *The Global State of Democracy* report series (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance).

44 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020); see also OECD, *Governance for Youth, Trust and Intergenerational Justice: Fit for All Generations?* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020).

The evidence that knowledge alone produces participation is weak. Durable engagement is predicted by repeated practice, as early participation is habit-forming and the first years of eligibility disproportionately influence lifetime turnout.[45] Therefore, programs should be built around settings that resemble real political activity: deliberation on live policy trade-offs, school and campus governance with real budgets attached, and pre-registration that makes first-time voting a routine rather than an event.

As most political information now reaches young citizens through algorithmically curated platforms, this dissemination must be paired with digital, media, and artificial intelligence literacy.[46] The competencies involved extend beyond identifying false claims to understanding how recommender systems influence what is viewed and how synthetic media are designed and detected. The test is whether participants continue to participate five years later.

4.2 Lowering structural barriers to formal representation

Structural barriers function cumulatively rather than in isolation; hence, removing one while leaving the others intact yields minimal change. Governments may act directly on the legal, financial, and electoral architecture of representation; the internal practices of parties, though analytically central, lie largely outside direct state action and are better approached through transparency and registration conditions rather than through statute.[47]

Four areas warrant collective attention: legal thresholds, including franchise and candidacy ages set above 18 years, registration requirements, and ballot access rules; financial barriers, including deposits and campaign costs that serve as a de facto age filter, and political financing integrated within a legislated framework;[48] electoral mechanics that suppress younger and urban electorates, whether by diluting proportional tiers or by apportionment that underweights urban constituencies; and pathways into office, as local bodies are where most careers begin, and entry costs are lowest.

4.3 Cooperating regionally and supporting youth solidarity

The most demanding recommendation entails the longest horizon, because it engages sovereignty sensitivities and non-interference norms; however, it also compounds, as the problems are shared and the solutions are transferable. In this regard, the following three approaches are available: facilitating intergovernmental cooperation, extending regional youth work beyond its customary focus on employment, education, and volunteering to include political participation indicators and comparative reporting;[49] promoting peer learning among electoral management bodies, parliamentary youth caucuses, and statistical agencies, which is technical

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45 Eric Plutzer, "Becoming a Habitual Voter: Inertia, Resources, and Growth in Young Adulthood," *American Political Science Review* 96, no. 1 (2002): 41–56.

46 UNESCO, *Media and Information Literate Citizens: Think Critically, Click Wisely! Media and Information Literacy Curriculum for Educators and Learners* (Paris: UNESCO, 2021).

47 On the relationship between party system institutionalization and representational quality in Asia, see Allen Hicken and Erik Martinez Kuhonta, eds., *Party System Institutionalization in Asia: Democracies, Autocracies, and the Shadows of the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

and thus politically low-friction; and fostering solidarity among young citizens and civil society organisations.

In this respect, two cautions apply: first, external support should extend to intermediary institutions, rather than to leadership programs and short-form civic events, which build networks without conversion capacity; and second, framing youth participation as a security concern is best avoided, as it converts a question of representation into one of risk management.

5. Conclusion

The evidence emphasises a consistent conclusion: although young people in the Indo-Pacific are already participating in the informal register, the machinery required to translate this activity into formal representation and representation into policy remains scarce. While the ROK has substantially widened formal access, younger generations remain markedly underrepresented in the legislature. Malaysia witnessed a youth-led campaign secure a constitutional amendment and a large expansion of its electorate, only to find its candidate pool determined elsewhere. Singapore has built a sophisticated consultative architecture and now faces the question of how much weight to assign to it. In each case, the outstanding work lies at the aggregation layer.

At this point, the connection to democratic resilience becomes clearest, because systems that convert informal activity into formal influence develop the routine capacity that prevents erosion from beginning: legislators with long horizons, parties with reasons to address intergenerational questions, and citizens confident that institutions will respond. Systems that do not convert retain only the capacity to resist erosion once it is visible, which depends on crisis mobilisation. This reserve, though real, is expended in days, whereas conversion capacity compounds over decades. None of the measures proposed herein depends on enthusiasm that does not already exist.

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48 International IDEA, *Political Finance Database* (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance), accessed August 2026, https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/political-finance-database.

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KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

Pedagogies Of Asia's Young Electorate: Political Education Shaping Youth Participation in Select East and Southeast Asian Democracies

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Executive Summary

South Korea, Malaysia, and Singapore are among the more institutionally developed democracies in East and Southeast Asia; nevertheless, each country exhibits a distinct form of democratic fragility. South Korea has been experiencing diminishing institutional trust, Malaysia is exhibiting a shrinking independent-information space, and Singapore is witnessing self-censored public discourse. This paper argues that these fragilities do not completely differ from each other; rather, they share a common root: in all three countries, political education—whether delivered through formal school curricula or informal civic and media channels—lacks sufficient diversity in access and in the range of voices and narratives that citizens are exposed to.

Employing David Easton and Jack Dennis' Systems Theory of Political Socialization, this paper demonstrates that all three governments depend on top-down civic education aimed at cultivating passive loyalty and stability, rather than active political efficacy. This approach has increasingly clashed with a highly digitised, cause-oriented youth demographic that now derives most of its political knowledge and mobilisation from digital spaces, not formal institutions. Comparative analysis across civic education, youth participation, and legal frameworks governing expression reveals the following three cross-cutting problems: a digital blindspot whereby schools offer minimal guidance on navigating digital citizenship or identifying misinformation; a knowledge–action gap whereby political knowledge does not reliably convert into sustained participation; and legal liberalisation outpacing cultural change, leaving durable norms of caution within these societies that legal reforms alone cannot undo.

Benchmarking against international standards for political and civic education, this paper recommends a shift from state-managed compliance towards structural empowerment. This transition involves embedding digital and media literacy into civic curricula and linking digital activism to institutional responses, alongside country-specific proposals: a non-partisan democratic-participation curriculum at the secondary level in Malaysia, accessible political third spaces in Singapore, and a Local Democracy Practicum in South Korea. This paper emphasises that reconciling formal civic education with informal, digital political socialisation is essential to sustaining youth political efficacy and long-term democratic legitimacy throughout the region.

1. Introduction

Status Quo of Democracy in Malaysia, Singapore, and South Korea

‘Democracy’ in East Asia and Southeast Asia is neither monolithic nor static. South Korea, Malaysia, and Singapore are considered some of the more institutionally developed democracies in the regions; nonetheless, the current political cycle has exposed cracks in the machinery and culture of democratic participation in these countries. The nature of democracy in these three countries ranges from an electorally competitive system in South Korea that faces challenges in maintaining democratic checks and balances and securing public trust in political institutions, to a system characterised by proceduralised governance but constrained liberties in Malaysia, and a stable but discursively bounded system in Singapore.

Although South Korea remains a competitive electoral democracy, recent evidence underscores substantial pressures on institutional trust.[1] However, among young citizens, the central challenge is not merely political disengagement. Studies of South Korean youth have revealed that young people participate through both institutional and non-institutional channels, including electoral activities and other forms of political participation; meanwhile, digital and social media–based political experiences have become a key component of youth political engagement.[2] Nevertheless, opportunities for participation and political efficacy remain uneven, suggesting that political interest and participation do not automatically translate into a sustained sense of influence over political institutions.[3] Simultaneously, young people remain substantially underrepresented in formal representative institutions: only 5.7 percent of members were aged 40 or younger in the 2024 National Assembly.[4] Existing research has attributed this underrepresentation partially to institutional and party-level barriers to recruiting and sustaining young politicians.[5] Collectively, these patterns highlight a gap between youth political engagement and sustained institutional representation and influence in South Korea.

Malaysia's political machinery is procedurally generally 'healthy' but frequently constrained by transparency and malapportionment concerns, compounded further by a deteriorating information environment[6]. Reporters Without Borders' 2026 Index recorded the country's global press freedom at a 25-year low, prompting warnings regarding legal threats and diminishing public trust in media[7]. Civil society groups cite intimidation and self-censorship pressures on journalists, though the government attempts to dissuade such notions. Concerning Malaysian youth participation in democracy, only 12.6% of parliamentarians were youths at the time of election[8], despite a robust voter turnout post-Undi18 reforms that lowered voter and candidacy age limits[9].

Singapore exhibits a similar pattern, witnessing orderly elections despite being known for its tightly bounded space for public dissent against the incumbent

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[1] OECD, *OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions 2024 Results – Country Notes: Korea* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024).

[2] Nam Ho Kim, "The Mediating Effect of Political Awareness in the Impact of Youth Political Participation on Political Efficacy," *The Journal of Learner-Centered Curriculum and Instruction* 24, no. 19 (2024): 59–70; Bungchan Yoo and Junghee Bae, "Adolescents' Political Participation and Internal Political Efficacy: The Mediating Role of Social Media-Based Political Experience," *Korean Journal of Social Welfare Studies* 56, no. 3 (2025): 63–88, https://doi.org/10.16999/kasws.2025.56.3.63.

[3] Hyeyoung Yoo, "Impacts of Youth Participation Activities on Internal Political Efficacy and Political Participation Intention," *Journal of Law-Related Education* 18, no. 2 (2023): 75–110, https://doi.org/10.29175/klrea.18.2.202308.75.

[4] Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Republic of Korea: Data on Youth," *IPU Parline*, May 2024.

[5] Seonhwa Jang and Yun Cheol Kim, "Youth Political Representation in South Korea: Centering on Institution, Culture, and Political Parties," *The Journal of NGO Studies* 16, no. 1 (2021): 77–119, https://doi.org/10.23193/kngos.2021.16.1.77.

[6] Wathshlah G Naidu, "Malaysia's Decline in Press Freedom Index Signals Urgent Need for Reform," *Aliran*, May 7, 2026, https://aliran.com/civil-society-voices/malaysias-decline-in-2026-press-freedom-index-signals-urgent-need-for-reform; Bertelsmann Stiftung, "BTI 2026 Malaysia Country Report," BTI Project, accessed September 1, 2026, https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report?isocode=MYS&cHash=dca3d45187f7253da971e51845a8818c

[7] Naidu, "Malaysia's Decline in Press Freedom Index Signals Urgent Need for Reform."

[8] Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Malaysia | House of Representatives | Data on Youth," *IPU Parline: Global Data on National Parliaments*, accessed September 1, 2026, https://data.ipu.org/parliament/MY/MY-LC01/data-on-youth.

[9] Bridget Welsh, "GE15 Generational Voting: Looking beyond Ethnicity Part 2," Articles, April 14, 2023, https://bridgetwelsh.com/articles/ge15-generational-voting-looking-beyond-ethnicity-part-2/.

government. In 2025, while the long-ruling PAP retained its supermajority, critics had flagged boundary redistricting that disadvantages weaker PAP areas[10], alongside media restrictions and the use of the Protection from Online Falsehoods Act and Public Order Act against critics[11]. Underlying this situation is Singapore's system of unwritten 'out-of-bounds' markers, which reflect informal limits on acceptable political topics that commentators highlight as a form of self-censorship, with citizens effectively policing their own speech and assembly rights[12]. Thus, formal democratic procedures operate alongside informal pressures influencing what Singaporean citizens may question. Regarding youth representation and participation, even though voter age is slightly older than South Korea and Malaysia at 21 years old, youth representation in parliament is substantially higher at 22.2% of seats[13] owing to intentional party renewals and grassroots pipelines[14].

Defining Political Education

Education researchers have distinguished between formal, non-formal, and informal learning—a typology developed by Philip Coombs during the early 1970s amid concerns regarding global school systems[15]. Formal education represents the structured, credentialed system from primary school through university. Non-formal education is intentional but delivered outside the formal system, through community programs or civil-society workshops, complementing rather than replacing it. Informal education constitutes the unplanned, lifelong absorption of knowledge and values from family, work, and media. This distinction is crucial because political knowledge typically stems from all three channels in conjunction, not classroom instruction alone.

Political education, also occasionally termed civic or citizenship education, is the deliberate or incidental process of acquiring knowledge and dispositions required to understand political institutions and participate in civic life[16]. Basic definitions centre on understanding government and rights, whereas broader ones focus on critical thinking and participatory skills.

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[10] Netina Tan, "Gerrymandering and Its Effects in Singapore's 2025 General Elections," *Perspectives* 98, no. 3 (2025), World, https://doi.org/10.5509/2025983-art6.

[11] Civicus, "Singapore: Despite UN Review, First Charges Brought under POFMA While Journalists and Activists Continue to Be Targeted," *Civicus Monitor*, July 3, 2026, https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/singapore-despite-un-review-first-charges-brought-under-pofma-while-journalists-and-activists-continue-to-be-targeted/.

[12] James Rowlins, "Out of Bounds: Freedom of Expression in Singapore Revisited," *New Naratif*, April 3, 2019, https://newnaratif.com/out-of-bounds-freedom-of-expression-in-singapore-revisited/.

[13] Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Singapore | Parliament | Data on Youth," *IPU Parline: Global Data on National Parliaments*, accessed September 1, 2026, https://data.ipu.org/parliament/SG/SG-LC01/data-on-youth.

[14] The Business Times, "PAP's Slate of New Faces Shapes up with 30 Likely Names; Party Could Field Younger Group, More Women," March 31, 2025, https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/singapore/paps-slate-new-faces-shapes-30-likely-names-party-could-field-younger-group-more-women; Teo Kay Key, "In GE2025, the Political Voice of Singaporeans under 45 Was Louder and Clearer," *Channel News Asia*, May 6, 2025, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/ge2025-young-candidates-voters-gen-z-millennials-politics-5108861.

[15] Philip H. Coombs et al., *New Paths to Learning for Rural Children and Youth* (New York, 1973).

[16] Camila Teixeira, "Exploring Civic Education," UNICEF, Office of Strategy and Evidence Innocenti, accessed September 1, 2026, https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/exploring-civic-education.

Thesis Statement

In each country, the citizens' capacity to understand, evaluate, and participate in political life is influenced not merely by formal institutions but also by the quality, availability, and diversity of the political education that they receive, both inside and outside the classroom. This paper argues that political education in South Korea, Malaysia, and Singapore—whether delivered through formal school curricula or informal civic and media channels—suffers from an insufficient diversity of access and of the alternative voices and narratives citizens are exposed to; further, it posits that this narrowness of political education helps explain the specific forms of democratic fragility documented above, ranging from challenges to democratic checks and balances and public trust in political institutions in South Korea, to the shrinking space for independent information in Malaysia, and self-censored public discourse in Singapore.

2. Literature Review

The word 'democracy' originates from the Greek words *demos* ('the people') and *kratos* ('rule' or 'power'), literally referring to a political system wherein the people hold sovereignty and govern themselves[17].

Democracy is commonly understood as a political system wherein citizens exercise political authority, either directly or through elected representatives. However, democracy involves more than the existence of elections. Procedural democracy emphasises competitive elections and peaceful transfers of power. Liberal democracy additionally guarantees civil liberties, the rule of law, and institutional checks on executive power. Participatory democracy focuses on citizens' meaningful and equal involvement in public decision-making[18].

The EIU Democracy Index, Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* report, and V-Dem assess these dimensions in different ways. The EIU evaluates electoral process and pluralism, governmental functioning, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties. Freedom House focuses on political rights and civil liberties. V-Dem assesses electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian dimensions of democracy[19]. Comparing these indices is useful because countries may hold regular elections while still restricting political expression, opposition activity, or citizens' effective influence over public affairs.

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[17] Robert Alan Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, repr. (Yale University Press, 2007).

[18] Dahl, *Polyarchy*.

[19] Freedom House, "South Korea: Freedom in the World 2025 Country Report," accessed September 1, 2026, https://freedomhouse.org/country/south-korea/freedom-world/2025; Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2024* (2025), https://d1qqtien6gys07.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Democracy_INDEX_2024.pdf; Marina Nord et al., *V-DEM Democracy Report 2025 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?* (V-Dem Institute, 2025), https://v-dem.net/documents/54/v-dem_dr_2025_lowres_v1.pdf.

While South Korea is the strongest democratic case among the three, recent assessments have revealed institutional vulnerabilities. The EIU Democracy Index 2024 gave South Korea 7.75 points and classified it as a Flawed Democracy; meanwhile, Freedom House rated it Free with a score of 81 out of 100. V-Dem classified South Korea as an Electoral Democracy[20]. The December 2024 martial law declaration demonstrated that even an established electoral democracy may face serious threats when institutional checks and constitutional norms are challenged[21].

Singapore demonstrates the greatest difference across the three indices. The EIU classified it as a Flawed Democracy, and Freedom House rated it Partly Free with 48 out of 100 points; finally, V-Dem classified it as an Electoral Autocracy[22]. Singapore maintains regular elections and strong state capacity; however, the dominance of the People's Action Party—alongside restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, and association—constrains political competition and the growth of opposition parties[23].

Malaysia occupies an intermediate position. The EIU Democracy Index 2024 classified Malaysia as a Flawed Democracy with a score of 7.11, while Freedom House rated it Partly Free with 53 out of 100 points. Further, V-Dem classified Malaysia as an Electoral Democracy[24]. Since the Barisan Nasional coalition lost power in 2018, electoral competition has become more open, and opportunities for reform have expanded. Nonetheless, restrictions on speech and online content regulation continue to constrain civil liberties and independent political discussion[25].

Overall, South Korea may be understood as an electoral democracy with relatively strong political competition but institutional vulnerabilities; Malaysia as an increasingly competitive electoral democracy with uneven civil-liberties protections; and Singapore as a stable but rigidly managed electoral system wherein public debate and opposition activity remain constrained.

Country	EIU	Freedom House	V-Dem EDI
South Korea	7.75/10, 32nd, 'Flawed Democracy'	81/100 'Free'	0.73, 'Electoral Democracy'
Singapore	6.18/10, 68th, 'Flawed Democracy'	48/100, 'Partly Free'	0.41, 'Electoral Autocracy'
Malaysia	7.11/10, 44th 'Flawed Democracy'	53/100, 'Partly Free'	0.52, 'Electoral Democracy'

Table 1: Comparison of Scores, Ranks, and Classifications from Major Democracy Indices in 2024[26]

[20] Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2024*; Freedom House, "South Korea"; Nord et al., *V-DEM Democracy Report 2025 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?*

[21] Freedom House, "South Korea."

[22] Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2024*; Nord et al., *V-DEM Democracy Report 2025 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?*; Freedom House, "Singapore: Freedom in the World 2025 Country Report," accessed September 1, 2026, https://freedomhouse.org/country/singapore/freedom-world/2025.

[23] Freedom House, "Singapore."

[24] Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2024*; Freedom House, "Malaysia: Freedom in the World 2025 Country Report," Freedom House, accessed September 1, 2026, https://freedomhouse.org/country/malaysia/freedom-world/2025; Nord et al., *V-DEM Democracy Report 2025 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?*

3. Systems Theory of Political Socialisation and Connective Action Theory

To explain the state's motivation to promote democratic actions, David Easton and Jack Dennis' 1969 Systems Theory of Political Socialization[27] provides a theoretical explanation for why youth political participation is in decline. This theory will serve as a foundation for the discussion informing the policy proposed later in this paper. It elucidates how citizens learn political values, regarding socialisation as a survival mechanism. Societies utilize this process to teach individuals the rules of government, thereby maintaining stability and ensuring that the political system continues to function smoothly.

Based on the rational actor model, we assume that governments in power are rational actors who will want to stay in power. A political system survives by socialising citizens at a young age through top-down methods to foster passive loyalty. By adopting methods such as civic education, the government relies on socialisation—in the classroom in this case—to generate diffuse support and maintain political stability. However, instead of nurturing a healthy relationship between political efficacy and formal institutional structures, such attempts at fostering passive loyalty resulted in the modern youth turning to decentralised digital spaces to express their political viewpoints. This shift is evident in the growing role of digital consumption as a primary mode of political socialisation among youth in South Korea, Singapore, and Malaysia. As governments continue to rely on top-down methods to foster passive loyalty, youths are increasingly socialised via digital spaces, leading them to demand active, policy-driven representation, rather than the passive compliance expected by traditional systems. This disconnect is exacerbated by a 'Digital Blindspot' within formal education systems, which provide minimal guidance on navigating digital citizenship, identifying misinformation, and engaging constructively in democratic online spaces. Nonetheless, the high levels of knowledge acquired do not necessarily translate to actual and meaningful political engagement; this knowledge–action gap is prevalent owing to the lack of effective integration between the youth's digital expressions and formal political participation.

Easton and Dennis posited that the state-managed mechanisms of socialisation have stagnated into demanding passive compliance, thereby creating a disconnect with a highly digitised, cause-oriented youth demographic. To bolster political participation and ensure effective representation, policies must move from a socialisation model that prioritises passive compliance for ensuring stability to one that actively empowers youth to politically express themselves through different channels.

Regarding youth behaviour, the Connective Action Theory—posited by W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg (2012)—explains how digital media transforms modern social movements by replacing traditional, hierarchical organisations with personalised, decentralised digital networks. The theory provides a theoretical rationale for why digitally connected youths are not participating in traditional means of political participation that typically require rigorous structural requirements, including formal organisational memberships, ideological conformity, hierarchical leadership, and adherence to standardised

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[25]Freedom House, "Malaysia."

[26] Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2024*; Freedom House, "Malaysia"; Freedom House, "Singapore"; Freedom House, "South Korea."

[27] David Easton and Jack Dennis, *Children in the Political System: Origins of Political Legitimacy* (McGraw-Hill, 1969).

collective action frames. By contrast, connective action through digital media depends on personalised decentralised digital network groups with a relatively lower barrier to entry. These loosely coordinated networks may struggle to translate viral online outrage into concrete, long-term legislative or policy reforms. The lack of long-term legislative or policy reforms frequently undermines young people's incentive for meaningful engagement in political processes.

4. Comparison between Malaysia, Singapore, and South Korea

Aspect 1: Education

Formal Education

Civic education involves teaching people how to be active, responsible members of their community and country[28]. It contributes to building a robust society by helping individuals understand how their government functions, what their legal rights are, and how they can participate in public life. This section discusses the formal civic education in the three countries and focuses on the similarities among them.

Civic education is generally categorised into three distinct areas—namely, political knowledge, rights and duties, and social responsibility. In this paper, civic education refers to the formal education that is compulsory for every citizen in their curriculum.

In South Korea, Singapore, and Malaysia, civic education entails a highly centralised and state-mandated curriculum designed by the government to explain governance, national identity, and social cohesion. Employing the Systems Theory of Political Socialization, civic education constitutes a formal process that societies utilise to teach individuals the rules of government to maintain stability and ensure that the existing political system continues to function smoothly. Across the three countries, political knowledge is taught primarily from a historical perspective, with an emphasis on current policies and frameworks that maintain social stability. Unlike Western models of civic education, which emphasise individual liberties, the Asian civic education system focuses on rights and duties through a communitarian approach. Social responsibility is taught in the curriculum through moral education and character-building programmes, such as South Korea's moral education, Singapore's Citizenship Education, and Malaysia's Pendidikan Moral. These moral education classes are designed to cultivate students who prioritise collectivism, practice mutual respect, and cultivate harmony, with the overall objective of maintaining the current societal and government state.

Informal Education

Formal education in terms of classroom civic education remains rather restrained and limited. Thus, youths turn to informal education to gather information and participate politically. These methods of informal education are generally delivered outside formal school curricula through civil society, social movements, volunteering, digital media, and community networks. The three countries differ in how informal civic education is conducted. In South Korea, civic learning outside school is facilitated through various channels, including civil society activities, volunteering, community engagement, digital media, and social movements. Moreover, participation in protests and social movements may

[28] Camila Teixeira, "Exploring Civic Education."

enable opportunities for civic learning. Malaysia's informal education integrates civil society, activism, and social media movement participation. Meanwhile, Singapore's informal education largely occurs through state-supported volunteering, community engagement, and dialogue platforms. Across the three countries, the most evident similarity is that informal education is conducted through digital media. Young people increasingly learn about public policy issues, civic responsibility, and demonstrations through social media. As illustrated by W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg's Connective Action Theory, digitally connected youths are increasingly utilising these online spaces to discuss public issues and organise civic initiatives, bypassing traditional institutional barriers. This observation is valuable within our paper's context, as subsequent sections address the digital blind spot.

South Korea	Singapore	Malaysia
Traditionally, civic education focused on cultivating citizens with a strong sense of national identity, community consciousness, social responsibility, and moral character. South Korea's historical experiences—including Japanese colonial rule, national division, the Korean War, democratisation, and rapid economic development—have significantly shaped civic education, thereby providing a crucial context through which students learn about the development of the nation and its democracy. Rather than being taught through a single standalone subject, civic education is predominantly incorporated into subjects such as Moral Education, Social Studies, and History. Social Studies teaches students about democratic institutions, constitutional rights and duties, elections, and political processes. Meanwhile, Moral Education emphasises responsibility, respect, Cooperation, and harmonious community life. Further, History contributes to civic learning by connecting South Korea's historical development with national identity and the	Civic education in Singapore centres on nation-building, social cohesion, and character formation, focusing most recently on cultivating more active, thoughtful citizenship. Civic learning still frequently emphasises loyalty, harmony, and responsible contribution over adversarial politics or democratic contestation The clearest gap is direct evidence on students' lived experiences and long-term democratic participation, because most research has analysed policy texts or curricula rather than examining how young people interpret and enact civic learning over time. Despite digital spaces' growing importance, schools offer limited guidance for civic learning online. Education primarily produces social compliance rather than political efficacy.	Malaysia's formal education on politics and democratic participation predominantly spans the following two subjects: 1. Civic education in Malaysia is a subject that has had several names; however, the core aim has consistently been to produce citizens who know their rights, shape character, and contribute to collective wellbeing. 2. Political education in Malaysia is integrated into several subjects—namely, History and Moral Education. However, citizenship and politics are not taught in depth and remain vague because they are scattered across multiple subjects with less emphasis on practice. Beyond mainstream education, the STPM and Matriculation pre-university courses focus on Malaysia's democratic systems; however, as pre-university is not mandatory, only some parts of the population formally study these courses, which are also limited to understanding theory. Malaysians are attempting to bridge this gap through informal political education, such as hosting independent workshops on politics and democracy, and the

development of democracy.		dissemination of information online through activists, volunteers, and influencers; nonetheless, the reach is restricted to those with access to these spaces and is at risk of creating echo chambers.

Table 2: Comparison between formal and informal political education in South Korea, Singapore, and Malaysia

Aspect 2: Knowledge to Practical Actions

Although most civic learning is facilitated formally through education, a gap exists between obtaining information and participation. The transition from understanding civic concepts to exercising real political power reveals a sharp drop-off, dictated by each country's unique political architectures.

South Korea	Singapore	Malaysia
South Korean youth have broad access to political information through social media, online news, and digital platforms; however, political knowledge does not invariably translate into sustained participation or strong political efficacy. Youth engagement is typically concentrated aroun d elections and major political events, rather than continuous involvement in formal political institutions. Beyond voting, young people increasingly participate through protests, online petitions, social media campaigns, and issue-based activism, as demonstrated by the 2016–2017 Candlelight Protests. Overall, South Korea demonstrates a gap between civic knowledge and practical action: youth may mobilise strongly around specific issues, though sustained institutional participation remains relatively limited.	In Singapore, the youth most frequently engage through reposting sociopolitical content online, donations, and cause-based activities, rather than rallies or formal community problem-solving. Few practical ways exist for Singaporean youths to participate in physical spaces; however, youths remain risk-averse. • Low-risk and Consultative: Micro-actions, such as reposting infographics, online petitions, crowdfunding, and volunteering for safe, state-sanctioned civic causes.	Currently, the practical engagement of youths skews towards promoting electoral participation, rather than sustained civic action. 1. **Undi18 reform** Implemented in 2021, the reform enfranchised millions of new voters and was a youth empowerment watershed. However, four years on, the promise of a politically active youth bloc remains unevenly realised. Although youth wings and membership in political parties are encouraged, numerous youths refuse to join owing to distrust and apathy. One youth-centric party, MUDA, holds only one parliamentary seat and lost its sole state assembly seat in 2026. **2. Campus protests and student movements** Youth participation markedly clusters around campus and protest movements. However, the demographics of students joining the protests are frequently observed in urban, tertiary-educated youth populations, thereby leaving other demographics underrepresented. **3. Political Simulations** A youth parliament and state assembly simulations are gaining traction, thus offering youths structured channels for policy engagement, though focus remains heavily on electoral readiness over long-term civic participation.

Table 3: Comparison between youth political participation in South Korea, Singapore, and Malaysia

Aspect 3: Legal and Institutional Frameworks on Expression

This aspect examines how select state laws, regulations, and institutional structures influence, safeguard, and restrict the spaces where young people can safely voice their political opinions and organise.

South Korea	Singapore	Malaysia
South Korea offers relatively strong legal protection for freedom of political expression, association, and peaceful assembly, allowing young people and university students to participate in political parties, protests, and civic movements. Moreover, the expansion of youth political rights is reflected in the Political Parties Act, under which citizens aged 16 and older can generally become political party members. However, political expression is not completely unrestricted. Public demonstrations are regulated under the Assembly and Demonstration Act, which establishes requirements and restrictions concerning demonstrations, including limitations in certain locations and circumstances involving public order. Further, the National Security Act has been controversial because of concerns that its application, particularly regarding expression associated with North Korea, may restrict freedom of expression and association. Overall, South Korea provides substantial institutional space for youth political expression, though tensions remain between protecting political freedoms and maintaining public order and national security. Likewise, recent human-rights assessments have raised concerns regarding barriers to peaceful assembly.	Strictly Managed and Consultative: highly regulated physical speech and assembly via the *Public Order Act* and digital speech via *POFMA* (Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act) This creates a high perceived risk for independent or adversarial political expression. Consequently, youth prefer low-risk, state-sanctioned consultative spaces (like the National Youth Council) or highly anonymous online profiles, limiting their ability to build independent political momentum. Expressing minority or highly progressive views frequently triggers intense pushback, either from state legal mechanisms or from conservative online counter-movements. Government attempts have focused on creating state-managed 'youth councils' or forums to channel youth energy into safe, predictable, and non-disruptive dialogues. Hong Lim Park's Speakers' Corner is the only designated outdoor venue in Singapore where citizens can legally hold public assemblies, demonstrations, and protests without requiring a police permit, insofar as they satisfy specific registration and regulatory conditions.	**1. Universities & University Colleges Act 1971 (AUKU)** - 1969–1975: Following racial riots, the government enforced the Sedition Act 1948 and AUKU 1971 (amended 1975) to restrict political opposition and ban students from political activities. - 2012–2018: Subsequent amendments gradually permitted student political participation off- and on-campus, though university administrations retained final oversight, frequently dampening engagement. - August 2026**:** PM Anwar Ibrahim pledged to abolish AUKU. Students welcomed the decision but remained cautious pending details concerning the replacement act. **2. Peaceful Assembly Act (PAA)** Public assembly is governed by the PAA, which allows rallies without a permit but requires organisers to notify police at least 10 days in advance. Failure to comply renders the rally unlawful and exposes organisers to charges, thus discouraging spontaneous demonstrations. Other acts controversially used to censor and deter political expression: 1. The Sedition Act 1949 2. Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (CMA)

Table 4: Comparison between frameworks regulating political expression in South Korea, Singapore, and Malaysia

5. Analysis

The comparison and analysis suggest that the similarities among the three countries seem to have converged in certain aspects—specifically, the lack of digital literacy and the knowledge–action gap. This analysis helps inform the policy suggestions that follow in the later sections.

Digital Blindspot in School Curriculum

Although youths in South Korea, Singapore, and Malaysia are highly connected and active online, guidance regarding digital citizenship is lacking. Students are neither able to safely navigate political information online nor engage meaningfully and effectively in online democratic spaces. Additionally, the rampant prevalence of misinformation and disinformation poses a threat to youth participation in democracy. The school curriculum is struggling to keep up with these evolving obstacles. This problem is exacerbated when the youths in these countries turn primarily to digital spaces to acquire their political information owing to a heavily guarded and failing formal education system. As discussed in the earlier sections, these digital spaces constitute the default platforms of participation and information gathering, and have become a form of informal civic learning and political consumption. The curriculum of formal civic education should be updated constantly to ensure that digital literacy is sufficiently covered in education from a policy perspective.

Knowledge–Action Gap

Knowing how a political system functions does not automatically result in formal political participation. Young people in South Korea, Singapore, and Malaysia have widespread access to political information through digital media; however, each country presents different barriers to translating political knowledge into institutional influence.[29]

Connective Action Theory further explains this knowledge–action gap. Modern youth mobilisation occurs through personalised decentralised digital networks rather than traditional hierarchical organisations. The acquisition of political knowledge online does not naturally translate into traditional institutionalised forms of participation

In South Korea, young people can mobilise actively through elections, protests, petitions, and online campaigns. However, this engagement tends to be temporary and concentrated around particular issues or political events, rather than sustained participation in local government, political parties, and civic organisations[30]. In Singapore, legal restrictions and a risk-averse political culture encourage lower-risk forms of participation, such as reposting political content, donating to social causes, volunteering, and joining state-supported consultation platforms[31]. In Malaysia, although Undi18 expanded formal political rights, unequal access to information and the legacy of student depoliticisation imply that youth participation tends to remain concentrated around elections, campus activism, and temporary protest movements[32]. Therefore, the three countries demonstrate different forms of the knowledge–action gap. South Korea struggles to convert issue-based mobilisation into long-

[29] Bungchan Yoo and Junghee Bae, "Adolescents' Political Participation and Internal Political Efficacy: The Mediating Role of Social Media-Based Political Experience," *Korean Journal of Social Welfare Studies* 56, no. 3 (2025): 63–88, https://doi.org/10.16999/KASWS.2025.56.3.63; Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani et al., *Prospect of Electoral Reforms in Malaysia* (University Utara Malaysia Press, 2022), https://www.uumpress.com.my/product/prospect-of-electoral-reforms-in-malaysia; Marko M. Skoric and Qinfeng Zhu, "Social Media and Offline Political Participation: Uncovering the Paths From Digital to Physical," *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 28, no. 3 (2016): 415–27, https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edv027.

[30] Yoo and Bae, "Adolescents' Political Participation and Internal Political Efficacy."

[31] Skoric and Zhu, "Social Media and Offline Political Participation"; Freedom House, "Singapore."

[32] Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani et al., *Prospect of Electoral Reforms in Malaysia*; Freedom House, "Malaysia."

term participation; Singapore provides limited space for independent political expression; and Malaysia faces inequalities in access to information and institutional participation. Digital access alone does not guarantee meaningful democratic engagement. Young people need regular and safe opportunities to witness their political knowledge influence real public decisions[33].

Additionally, this gap is connected to the institutional infrastructure available for political learning. In the three countries, civic education is largely organised through state-designed school curricula. While students learn about democratic institutions and civic rights and responsibilities in classrooms, they have limited opportunities to experience actual decision-making outside school. The key distinction of the knowledge–action gap is between narrow, classroom-based instruction and a broader public infrastructure for democratic learning that emphasises discussion, stimulation and participation.

Legal Liberty Without Cultural Updates

Across all three countries, formal restrictions on youth political expression have eased in favour of greater autonomy and freedom over time: Singapore's Speakers' Corner and POFMA since 2000; Malaysia's AUKU amendments in 2012 and 2018 and the proposed abolishment in 2026; and South Korea's Constitutional Court ruling of July 21, 2022, which struck down provisions banning certain election-related gatherings during the election campaign period for violating freedom of assembly and political expression. However, the psychological and behavioural residue of earlier restrictive eras remains deeply ingrained in society. In Malaysia, students technically gained the right to join political organisations off-campus in 2012 and on-campus in 2018; nonetheless, large-scale activism remains concentrated in episodic protest moments (e.g. *#Lawan* and the 2026 AUKU marches), rather than routine institutional participation, especially from more marginalised youth populations. This suggests that the gap is not purely legal; rather, decades of depoliticisation created durable norms of caution among students, universities, and even civil society groups, which formal rights alone have not been able to undo. This predicament parallels the 'psychological taboo' that Singapore's Speakers' Corner identifies with, as it is heavily regulated, as well as South Korea's wariness over political expression, even after their court ruled parts of the Elections Act as unconstitutional. This paper's findings reinforce the broader knowledge–action gap, whereby removing a legal barrier does not automatically convert civic knowledge into civic behaviour when the surrounding culture of risk-aversion persists in the society owing to the act's effects. Furthermore, legal frameworks governing public assembly, such as Malaysia's Peaceful Assembly Act or Singapore's Public Order Act, are designed for centralised institutional collective action. These legal frameworks struggle to accommodate or recognise decentralised connective action, which discourages youths from progressing beyond mere digital expressions into formal civic spaces.

Benchmarking between International Best Practices

International examples indicate that political education is most effective when it extends beyond classroom-based instruction. Germany provides a crucial model

33 Yoo and Bae, "Adolescents' Political Participation and Internal Political Efficacy"; Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani et al., *Prospect of Electoral Reforms in Malaysia*; Skoric and Zhu, "Social Media and Offline Political Participation."

through its system of out-of-school political youth education, known as *außerschulische politische Jugendbildung*. Political learning is offered through youth organisations, trade unions, civic associations, political foundations, youth centres, and federal and state civic education agencies. Young people participate in workshops, debates, simulations, local research projects, and museum or memorial-site visits[34]. This creates a broader civic-learning infrastructure whereby young people may connect democratic principles with real social and political issues.

Finland provides a model for integrating democratic and digital competences across the curriculum. Instead of treating citizenship or digital literacy as separate subjects, Finnish education incorporates transversal competences into distinct areas of learning. These areas include factual criticism, multiliteracy in the digital era, constructive communication, societal competence, and democratic participation[35]. This approach is relevant because young people increasingly encounter political information through algorithm-driven platforms and, therefore, need the ability to evaluate information critically[36].

Sweden demonstrates the value of experiential democratic learning. Schools organise mock elections alongside national elections, allowing students to experience voting, party competition, and political debate in practice. Additionally, the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society provides educational resources to support young people's discussions of democracy and participation[37]. Such programs extend civic education beyond learning institutional facts and enable students to practice disagreement, evidence-based judgment, and collective decision-making.

Overall, these cases highlight that South Korea, Singapore, and Malaysia should enhance political education in three ways—specifically, by expanding learning opportunities beyond the classroom, integrating digital literacy and critical evaluation of political information into the curriculum, and providing students with repeated opportunities to practically experience democratic participation.

6. Policy Recommendations

Cross-cutting recommendation: addressing digital blind spots in civic education

Across all three countries, formal civic education has not kept pace with the reality that digital platforms rather than classrooms are currently the primary site of youth political socialisation. Each country should work towards incorporating digital elements grounded in realities within their civic education frameworks as a whole through a two-pronged approach:

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[34] Benno Hafeneger, "Jugendbildung | Politische Bildung," Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, March 19, 2015, https://www.bpb.de/lernen/politische-bildung/193383/jugendbildung/.
[35] Finnish National Agency for Education, "Transversal Competences in Finnish General Upper Secondary Education | Finnish National Agency for Education," Finnish National Agency for Education, accessed September 1, 2026, https://www.oph.fi/en/education-and-qualifications/transversal-competences-finnish-general-upper-secondary-education.
[36] Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor, "Riksdags-och EU Skolval," accessed September 1, 2026, https://www.mucf.se/kunskap-och-utbildningar/unga/ungas-delaktighet/skolval.
[37] Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor, "Demokratipaketet," accessed September 1, 2026, https://www.mucf.se/kunskap-och-utbildningar/unga/ungas-delaktighet/demokratipaketet.

1. **Embedding digital and media literacy as a cross-cutting competency within existing civic and social studies curricula.** This recommendation emulates Finland's transversal-competences model, ensuring that digital and media literacy is integrated throughout a citizen's education, rather than treating it as a supplementary or optional unit. These efforts should include explicit instruction in identifying misinformation, understanding algorithmic curation of political content, and evaluating source credibility on the platforms that youths in each country actually use.
2. **Establishing formal linkages between digital civic activity and institutional response.** Administrations should require government agencies to formally acknowledge or respond to petitions or campaigns that cross a defined threshold of youth engagement, such that online mobilisation is not structurally disconnected from policy outcomes. Addressing the digital blind spots in education in these ways targets the knowledge–action gap at its source. Youths in these countries already possess political knowledge and digital fluency to some degree. What is missing from the equation is the bridge that connects fluency to institutional legitimacy and impact.

Malaysia-specific recommendation: Establishing in-depth, non-partisan democratic participation education

An asymmetry in access to civic and political information and discourse outside urban areas has been linked to lower political efficacy among Malaysian youths. A more comprehensive syllabus covering Malaysian politics, democracy, and civic participation is taught unevenly at the post-secondary level, a gap compounded by the fact that not all youths in Malaysia have access to tertiary education. Hence, Malaysia should consolidate and enhance democratic-participation education at the secondary level of education, which should be delivered through a dedicated, non-partisan curriculum, rather than via the current arrangement wherein civic content is thinly dispersed across various subjects. Providing exposure to youths at this age is critical, as most Malaysian students complete secondary school at or near the eligible age for voting, thereby rendering the final years of secondary education a pivotal and currently underutilised window to build durable civic habits before first-time voter registration.

The curriculum in schools should extend beyond static transmission and rote memorisation of institutional facts towards developing critical thinking skills that encourage students to analyse competing political narratives, interrogate media coverage, and engage with contested policy issues. Considering ongoing concerns regarding press freedom and shrinking independent information space, non-partisanship should be viewed as a design requirement, rather than an assumption; further, a cross-institutional body (e.g. involving not merely the Ministry of Education, but also the Election Commission and civil society representatives) should review syllabus content to guard against its use as a vehicle for incumbent political messaging.

Singapore-specific recommendation: increase in physical third-spaces for political action

Speakers Corner, an outdoor space in Hong Lim Park, is the first and only designated outdoor venue where Singaporeans are allowed to deliver public speeches without applying for a Public Entertainment License[38]. It is the only venue where political rallies and demonstrations may occur without legal

consequences. Although regulations have eased since its inception in 2000, restrictions governing the area's accessibility prevail: for instance, foreigners are disallowed from entering the premises and participating in any of these demonstrations, and permitted speakers require approval from the police before demonstrating. Moreover, Singaporeans and residents are screened upon entering the premises. Consequently, these restrictions created barriers to entry and reinforced psychological taboos among the youth.

Accordingly, a 'softer', physical third space where youth can meaningfully engage in politics in a non-destructive and encouraging manner is warranted. As detailed in the literature review, the Systems Theory of Political Socialization[39] could serve as a guiding framework for a policy aimed at establishing such spaces. To foster political involvement, third spaces in Singapore may be repurposed to integrate elements of political engagement, enabling youth wings from various political parties to connect with young people through varied activities. Rather than being strictly associated with 'hard' politics, these initiatives can focus on more accessible and easily comprehensible concepts of democracy.

South Korea-specific recommendation: from civic knowledge to sustained local democratic participation

South Korea should introduce a Local Democracy Practicum for upper-secondary and university students. Rather than addressing a lack of political knowledge, the programme would create an institutional bridge between young people's existing political engagement and sustained participation in formal democratic processes. Students would gain direct experience of local democracy through activities such as attending local council meetings; identifying community issues; drafting participatory-budget or policy proposals; conducting mock or youth public hearings; and discussing local issues with councillors, civil servants, and civic organisations. The programme could be implemented through partnerships among schools, universities, local governments, and civil-society organisations, building on existing local democratic institutions rather than developing an entirely new participation structure.[40] Schools would provide civic and digital-literacy education, while local governments and civil-society organisations would offer practical opportunities for participation. Participating students could develop proposals on local issues and submit them to relevant local authorities. To ensure that participation is not merely symbolic, participating local governments should provide formal responses that indicate whether proposals will be considered, adopted, or rejected, with an explanation of the decision. This design could help address South Korea's specific knowledge–action gap. Young people already demonstrate political engagement through elections, protests, petitions, and digital campaigns; nonetheless, issue-based mobilisation does not necessarily translate into sustained participation in political parties, local government, and civic organisations.[41] Therefore, the practicum seeks to complement political education with repeated opportunities for institutional engagement, rather than assuming that enhanced political knowledge alone will

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38 Cheryl Sim, "Speakers' Corner," *Singapore Infopedia*, National Library Board of Singapore, 2024, https://www.nlb.gov.sg/main/article-detail?cmsuuid=f865fe16-e413-40ba-9883-a7df3628d04b.

39 Easton and Dennis, *Children in the Political System: Origins of Political Legitimacy*.

40 Ministry of the Interior and Safety, "Introduction to the Participatory Budgeting System" [주민참여제도 소개], December 22, 2021.

41 Yoo and Bae, "Adolescents' Political Participation and Internal Political Efficacy."

automatically yield greater participation. The programme could allow students to experience both participation and institutional response, thereby strengthening political efficacy, particularly their sense that public institutions can respond to citizen input.[42] To assess its feasibility, the programme could initially be piloted in selected municipalities and participating schools or universities before wider implementation; its effects could be evaluated through changes in political efficacy, continued participation in local civic activities, and the number and proportion of student proposals formally reviewed or acted upon by local authorities.

7. Conclusion

This paper contends that the lack of democratic participation among youths across South Korea, Malaysia, and Singapore is linked to limited diversity in formal civic and informal education. It highlights the tension between the state's desire to maintain a stable society and the efforts to bolster healthy democratic participation. Across the three countries, the emphasis on maintaining stability and the status quo may constrain government support for frameworks that support youth democratic participation. The policy suggestions on addressing the digital blindspot in formal education could help improve effective youth participation. To maintain a healthy rate of democratic participation, these countries should shift from state-managed compliance to structural empowerment, including digital literacy, third-space deliberative arenas, and experiential local politics. Ultimately, failing to reconcile formal civic education with informal, digital political socialisation risks alienating younger generations from the state, diminishing their political efficacy, and threatening the long-term legitimacy of regional democratic systems.

42 Hafeneger, "Jugendbildung | Politische Bildung", Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor, "Riksdags-och EU Skolval."

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

The Missing Mile: Youth Political Efficacy in South Korea and Malaysia

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Executive summary

Young people in South Korea and Malaysia are not as disengaged from politics as they are from the belief that their political actions can make a difference. This paper argues that youth participation in both countries is best understood through the perspective of internal political efficacy: an individual's confidence in their own ability to understand and participate in politics. South Korea exhibits comparatively lower confidence in personal political competence despite relatively positive perceptions of institutional responsiveness; meanwhile, Malaysia presents a different challenge. While reforms such as Undi18 and Automatic Voter Registration have expanded formal political access, numerous young people continue to report only moderate levels of political efficacy and limited engagement in formal political activities. Collectively, both cases reveal a common gap between political access and agency.

To address this challenge, this paper proposes the Youth Citizens' Jury, a deliberative mechanism that regards political efficacy not as a prerequisite for participation but as a capacity developed through participation itself. The model encompasses stratified civic lottery recruitment, structured learning, facilitated deliberation, policy recommendations, and a mandatory public response from the responsible institution, with the aim of enhancing young people's confidence in their ability to engage with politics while demonstrating that participation can foster tangible outcomes. Adapted to local contexts within South Korea and Malaysia, the proposal aims to bridge the gap between political access and agency, enabling young people to participate in democratic processes and to believe that their participation is worthwhile.

1. Introduction

A Malay saying, 'Perjalanan seribu batu bermula dengan langkah pertama', familiar to audiences in Malaysia, carries a kindred sentiment with the Korean proverb, '천 리 길도 한 걸음부터' (*cheon ri gildo han geol-eumbuteo*). Both highlight the same thing: a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Two language families, one
shared philosophical root, and the same insistence that building something substantial requires someone to take the initiative to move forward. Political scientists would term this insistence a claim regarding efficacy—specifically, the belief that one's political action counts for something. It is commonly divided into internal efficacy confidence that one understands politics well enough to participate) and external efficacy (confidence that the system will actually respond).[1] The proverb, in both its Malay and Korean form, speaks primarily to internal efficacy, assuming that the walker is capable of taking the step. However, it does not promise that the road will lead anywhere in particular, which is precisely the key impediment for South Korea and Malaysia's young people.

[1] Richard G. Niemi, Stephen C. Craig, and Franco Mattei, "Measuring Internal Political Efficacy in the 1988 National Election Study," *American Political Science Review* 85, no. 4 (1991): 1407–13, https://doi.org/10.2307/1963953.

This hesitation is not a minor concern because young people remain a substantial component of each society. In South Korea, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family's 2025 Youth Statistics placed the youth population, aged 9–24, at 7.63 million, or 14.8% of the national population.[2] Meanwhile, Malaysia had an estimated population of approximately 34.2 million in 2025, with people aged 15–30 at approximately 9.6 million, or about a quarter of all citizens.[3] These figures are critical not because young people are merely tomorrow's voters or leaders, but because they are already voting, organising, and holding office today, and because current decisions regarding employment, housing, education, digital governance, climate resilience, and social protection will shape their lives most directly and for the longest time. This paper examines the strength of this participation through the lens of political efficacy. The subsequent section develops this framework and diagnoses the barriers that weaken youth political efficacy.

2. Conceptual Framework and Problem Diagnosis

Key Concept: Political Efficacy

The concept of political efficacy was introduced by Campbell et al., who defined it as 'the feeling that individual political actions do have, or can have, an impact upon the political process'.[4] Subsequent works modified the concept to encompass two distinct components—namely, internal and external political efficacy.

Internal political efficacy reflects the individual's belief in their own capability to properly understand and participate in politics. External political efficacy reflects the individual's belief in the responsiveness of political institutions and leaders.[5] The two dimensions typically exhibit a weak relationship; an individual may lack confidence in their own ability but exhibit trust in the government's responsiveness; conversely, they may possess strong faith in their capabilities but remain critical of the government's responsiveness.[6] This paper focuses on internal political efficacy as a challenge to greater youth political participation.

For Better and For Worse: Political Efficacy and Political Participation

Political efficacy is widely regarded as being positively associated with political participation. Prats and Meunier observed that internal political efficacy exhibits a significantly positive relationship with all forms of political participation—traditional or digital, collective or individual, and within or outside the political

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2 Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, Republic of Korea, *2025 Youth Statistics* (2025), https://www.mogef.go.kr/eng/pr/eng_pr_s301d.do?mid=eng004.

3 Department of Statistics Malaysia, *Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2025* (Putrajaya: Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2025), 1–4.

4 Angus Campbell, Gerald Gurin, and Warren E. Miller, *The Voter Decides* (Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson and Company, 1954).

5 Warren E. Miller and Santa A. Traugott, *American National Election Studies Data Sourcebook, 1952–1986* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

6 Katharina Groskurth, Désirée Nießen, Beatrice Rammstedt, and Clemens M. Lechner, "An English-Language Adaptation and Validation of the Political Efficacy Short Scale (PESS)," *Measurement Instruments for the Social Sciences* 3, no. 1 (2021): 1, https://doi.org/10.1186/s42409-020-00018-z.

system—among European nations.[7] Employing the Asian Barometer Survey, Sanborn found the same positive relationship among Asian countries.[8] These findings indicate that internal political efficacy functions as a base psychological resource that motivates political participation of all forms. Therefore, before evaluating the openness and sophistication of political systems, policymakers must assess how young people perceive their own abilities.

Furthermore, political efficacy and participation exhibit a mutually reinforcing relationship, raising the prospect of a self-perpetuating cycle. Lee identified internal political efficacy as a key connective tissue that holds the cycle together; high internal political efficacy increases participation, which further enhances one's sense of confidence.[9] However, a debilitating loop is possible, thereby raising the salience of internal political efficacy as a policy target. Notably, internal political efficacy is not a fixed precondition but a malleable resource that may be cultivated through participation.

The Challenge of Low Internal Political Efficacy

Low internal political efficacy is neither a recent nor an isolated problem. Across successive surveys, most respondents demonstrated low internal political efficacy. Further, OECD analysis found that only approximately one-third of respondents across 22 OECD countries felt confident participating in politics in 2016, increasing only marginally to 35% in 2018.[10] More recently, the OECD Trust Survey found that 40% of respondents across OECD countries were confident in their ability to participate in politics in both 2023 and 2025.[11] Despite the uptick, these findings largely suggest that bolstering citizens' sense of political agency remains a persistent challenge.

The issue is particularly consequential for younger generations, who are yet to fully develop and acquire the requisite knowledge, skills, and experiences through which a sense of political competence may emerge. Therefore, without a proper framework, one may expect a cycle of disengagement, whereby the lack of opportunities lowers confidence, thus yielding further detachment. From a macroscopic standpoint, differences in efficacy may contribute to inequalities in political participation and representation. [12] Consequently, persistent political powerlessness among the underrepresented may diminish young people's sense

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7 Mariana Prats and Axel Meunier, "Political Efficacy and Participation: An Empirical Analysis in European Countries," *OECD Working Papers on Public Governance*, no. 46 (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1787/4548cad8-en.

8 H. Sanborn, "Broken Back? Efficacy and Participation in Asia's Democracies," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 3, no. 1 (2018): 13–24.

9 이강형, 「정치참여 행위에 있어서 정치 효능감과 정서적 반응의 역할: 분노(anger)와 두려움(fear)을 중심으로」, 『의정연구』 19 권 1 호 (2013): 137–67.

10 OECD, *Government at a Glance 2021* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2021), sec. 13.4, "People's Confidence to Participate in Politics, 2016 and 2018."

11 OECD, *Government at a Glance 2025* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025), sec. 6.2, "Political Efficacy"; OECD, *OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions 2026 Results* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2026), sec. 6.2.

12 Susanne Garritzmann, Sigrid Roßteutscher, Arndt Leininger, Birgit Becker, Thorsten Faas, Max P. Jansen, and Armin Schäfer, "Unequal Turnout Among the Newly Enfranchised: The Role of Political Efficacy," *Politics and Governance* 13 (2025): Article 9196, https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.9196.

of connection to democratic institutions and their belief that they can actively shape politics.[13]

An Emerging Challenge: Artificial Intelligence (AI)

The development and diffusion of AI represent pertinent, new variables that may reshape the social and psychological landscape for younger generations. The rapid integration of AI into most sectors of life raises questions regarding the definition of human competence and the extent to which individuals retain agency. Such uncertainties indubitably attach themselves to ideas of political efficacy and participation, with AI possessing the potential to either undermine individuals' confidence or provide novel approaches for individuals to access information and engage with politics. Cui et al. found that although the government's use of generative AI may improve access to policy information and opportunities for political participation, its effects on political efficacy depend on whether meaningful policy responsiveness follows engagement.[14] Therefore, AI-enabled participation may enhance young people's sense of political efficacy only when institutions demonstrate that their engagement translates into tangible responses and outcomes.

3. Comparative Context

The South Korean Context: A Political Efficacy Asymmetry

Youth political participation in South Korea presents a complex picture, with electoral participation remaining uneven across generations despite a high overall turnout rate; OECD data from 2012–18 places South Korea in a group of three nations where the gap in electoral participation between younger and older citizens exceeded 30 percentage points. An analysis of the 2024 National Assembly election revealed that the generational gap has persisted.[15] Disengagement extends beyond electoral politics; OECD data identified South Korea as among three countries wherein over 35% of respondents reported no participation through varied non-electoral channels, including petitions, demonstrations, public consultations, political consumerism, contacting politicians, and political activity on social media.[16]

Concerning political efficacy, South Korea is among four countries wherein confidence in one's own ability to participate in politics (37%) falls below the OECD average (40%), while perceptions of the political system's responsiveness exceed the OECD average.[17] Weak internal political efficacy, in conjunction with robust external efficacy, suggests that the challenge does not lie in the lack of institutional trust, but in one's confidence in one's own ability. The same is the

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13 OECD. *Government at a Glance 2023* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023), chap. 2.3, "Political Efficacy."

14 Wei Cui, Beichen Lu, Yuanyuan Guo, and Yunpeng Guo, "How Political Interest and Knowledge Shape Political Efficacy in Institutionalized Participation: Insights Into Generative AI and Political Engagement" *International Journal of Electronic Government Research* 21, no. 1 (2025): 1–30, https://doi.org/10.4018/IJEGR.387830.

15 OECD, *Governance for Youth, Trust and Intergenerational Justice* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020), 91–92; National Election Commission of the Republic of Korea, "Analysis of Voter Turnout for the 22nd National Assembly Elections," October 28, 2024.

16 OECD, *OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions – 2024 Results* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024), chap. 4.

17 OECD, *OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions 2026 Results: Navigating Rising Expectations and New Horizons* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2026), https://doi.org/10.1787/9eb63fec-en.

case for younger South Koreans; the *2025 Quality of Life of Youth Report* found that, among South Koreans aged 19–34, only 25.5% expressed confidence in their ability to participate in politics, while 21.6% believed that they could exert influence over political development.[18] Although one must not assume a one-to-one translation between the two metrics, they nevertheless underscore a meaningful gap in young South Koreans' perceived political competence.

A similar asymmetry is evident vis-à-vis AI. South Korean respondents demonstrate greater confidence in AI use in the public sector and the government's ability to regulate emerging technologies, but report weaker confidence in their own understanding of AI than the OECD average.[19] While political efficacy and AI are indubitably distinct concepts, the parallel is noteworthy: South Korean respondents appear relatively more confident in institutional capacity than in their own ability to navigate increasingly complex environments.

Overall, these findings carry several implications. First, as low internal political efficacy discourages participation, mechanisms that depend on voluntary engagement are unlikely to reach the intended target. Second, robust external political efficacy implies that merely increasing pathways may prove insufficient. Instead, participation must allow younger generations to observe tangible results. Finally, as political issues become increasingly intertwined with complex technologies, such as AI, mitigating informational barriers must not come at the expense of young people's ability to exercise independent judgment.

The Malaysian Context: Political Access Without Political Confidence

Malaysia has made significant strides in expanding opportunities for youth political participation. Specifically, the implementation of Undi18 and Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) in December 2021 lowered the voting age from 21 to 18 and automatically added eligible citizens to the electoral roll, thereby bringing approximately 5.7 million additional voters into the electorate, including around 1.4 million first-time voters aged 18–20.[20] These reforms removed key institutional barriers to participation and represented among the most substantial expansions of youth political rights in Malaysia's democratic history. However, greater access to political participation does not necessarily translate into greater confidence in one's ability to participate meaningfully. The Malaysian case highlights that despite the expansion of formal opportunities, internal political efficacy remains a more persistent challenge.

Evidence has indicated that several Malaysian youths continue to exhibit only moderate levels of confidence in their political competence. In a study of Gen Z university students in Sabah, respondents demonstrated only moderate levels of

[18] 국가데이터처 국가데이터연구원, 『청년 삶의 질 2025』 (대전: 국가데이터처, 2025).

[19] OECD, *OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions 2026 Results: Navigating Rising Expectations and New Horizons.*

[20] Election Commission of Malaysia, *Soalan-Soalan Lazim Pelaksanaan Umur Kelayakan Pengundi 18 Tahun dan Pendaftaran Pemilih Secara Automatik (PPSA)* (Putrajaya: Election Commission of Malaysia, 2021), https://www.spr.gov.my/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Final-FAQ-Pengundi-18-Tahun-dan-PPSA_0.pdf.

political efficacy despite extensive exposure to political information through social media.[21] Likewise, Abdullah et al. found that political efficacy, political knowledge, and social media's perceived usefulness were significant predictors of political information-seeking behaviour among Malaysian university students.[22] Wan Ahmad Khairi noted similar findings, revealing that political efficacy played a mediating role between social media use and political participation among potential young Malay voters; this result suggests that access to political information alone may be insufficient to facilitate meaningful participation unless young people also develop confidence in their own ability to engage with political issues and processes.[23] In sum, these studies indicate that participation is shaped not only by access to political information but also by whether young people perceive themselves as capable political actors. Hence, minimising institutional barriers may be a necessary condition for participation, though it is likely insufficient without corresponding improvements in young people's confidence in their own political abilities.

This challenge is especially evident in Malaysia's so-called digital participation paradox. Drawing on Malaysian Youth Index 2023 data, Hairi et al. found that 92% of Malaysian youth were active on social media, while 43% engaged in some form of digital activism. Nevertheless, only 6% reported participating in formal political activities, such as joining political parties, attending political events, and contacting elected representatives.[24] This study reported an average political literacy score of only 5.2 out of 10, alongside substantial urban-rural disparities in access to civic education and political information. Despite lowering the cost of engaging with politics, digital platforms have not generated a corresponding rise in more demanding forms of political participation. If internal political efficacy remains only moderate, there is limited reason to expect online engagement to automatically translate into sustained involvement in formal political processes.

4. Policy Proposal

A Shared Challenge: From Political Access to Political Agency

South Korea and Malaysia exhibit distinct patterns of youth political participation; however, both face the same fundamental problem: a gap between political access and agency. Notably, this challenge emerges from distinct institutional contexts. South Korea is generally considered an established electoral democracy with a history of civic mobilisation, wherein citizens also possess a high degree of trust in political institutions. The key challenge is to allow young people to grow confidence and exercise agency within the political system. Meanwhile,

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21 Latif Lai, "Beyond the Ballot: Measuring Political Literacy in the Age of Social Media," paper presented at the Third Regional Symposium on Social Sciences and Humanities Issues, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, September 24, 2025.

22 Nor Hafizah Abdullah et al., "Digital Pathways to Political Engagement: Youth Information-Seeking and Social Media in Malaysia," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 9, no. 9 (2025): 497–504.

23 Wan Ahmad Khairi bin Wan Ahmad, "Social Media Use and Political Participation among Potential Young Malay Voters: Exploring the Mediating Role of Political Efficacy" (master's thesis, International Islamic University Malaysia, 2026).

24 Nur Atika Hairi et al., "Malaysian Youth & Political Socialization: Navigating Democracy, Leadership, and Global Citizenship," based on Malaysian Youth Index 2023 data, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia Open Access Repository, 2025, https://oarep.usim.edu.my/entities/publication/cdc41944-5894-4132-bfae-90b08ae308a2.

Malaysia has enacted hallmark reforms to expand youth access to electoral politics, which have yet to translate into sustained participation or greater political efficacy. Therefore, the focus should be on reinforcing democratic reforms through sustained civic deliberation.

Policy Proposal: Youth Citizens' Juries

The Youth Citizens' Juries provide young people aged 18–30 with a structured opportunity to engage in policymaking. The recruitment will assume the form of a modified two-stage civic lottery; a large, randomly selected pool of young people will first be invited to participate, following which basic demographic information and measures of political efficacy and interest will be collected. A second stratified random selection would form a jury that broadly reflects demographic diversity and the varying levels of political efficacy. Participants would receive appropriate compensation and support for their time and expenses.

The program will operate across two weekends, during which selected jury members will receive briefing materials, hear from experts and stakeholders, and engage in deliberation to generate recommendations for relevant public institutions. A formal public response will be issued explaining whether the institution accepts, modifies, or rejects the proposal. Following a defined period, the original participants could reconvene to evaluate how the recommendations were addressed and monitor subsequent implementation.

The Youth Citizens' Juries address three key challenges. First, the modified civic lottery seeks to mitigate the inherent self-selection bias observed in most voluntary participation. By employing internal political efficacy as a key criterion that dictates the jury's composition, the politically disengaged receive proper representation and the opportunity to engage. Second, the deliberative process directly addresses low internal political efficacy. Participants learn to acquire and apply political knowledge, assess competing perspectives, and exercise independent judgment in formulating policy recommendations. The system recognises the reinforcing cycle between political efficacy and participation; meaningful participation is a source of efficacy, which, in turn, results in greater participation. Finally, a formal institutional response and subsequent review tackle the central doubt among young citizens: 'am I capable of impacting real-world politics?' A tangible, concrete, and publicly recognised result will not only foster among participants a sense of confidence but may also bolster external political efficacy by establishing a visible relationship between participation and institutional decision-making.

Alternative approaches—including civic education, digital participation platforms, and existing youth consultation programs, albeit invaluable—do not tackle the challenge in all its dimensions. Political education may function as the bedrock of youth participation but may not provide opportunities to apply political knowledge in action; digital platforms may offer convenience and greater engagement without ensuring sustained participation or efficacy. Likewise, voluntary consultation mechanisms risk disproportionately attracting young people who are already politically engaged.

Existing Models: Case and Evidence

The Youth Citizens' Juries draw on an international model of deliberative mini-publics, including citizens' assemblies and citizens' juries, whose effects have

proven to be substantial. A meta-analysis of 100 quantitative studies found that participation in mini-publics positively influences political knowledge, internal political efficacy, and reasoning skills.[25] Likewise, research on the Australian Citizens' Parliament reported increases in participants' reported internal efficacy and, to a more limited extent, external efficacy and communicative or community-based engagement.[26] Although the magnitude and durability of such effects may vary, similar developments can be expected for South Korea and Malaysia.

Recent youth-specific initiatives have provided insightful illustrations of how the model can link youth participants to real-life politics. In Finland, the Youth Citizens Jury on Food had approximately 40 young adults aged 18–24 to deliberate on the National Food Strategy and develop recommendations for the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry.[27] In Ireland, the Children and Young People's Assembly on Biodiversity Loss gathered 35 participants aged 7–17, whose deliberations produced 58 calls to action, which were subsequently presented to the adult Citizens' Assembly on the same issue.[28] Qualitative research on the Irish initiative has examined how such processes may support young people's participation in democratic decision-making and emphasises the criticality of inclusive design and meaningful opportunities to influence public affairs.[29]

Such cases reveal the practical feasibility of youth-specific deliberative processes and the importance of linking participants' contributions to established policy institutions. However, notably, both cases do not conclusively prove causal effects on internal political efficacy. Nevertheless, the Finnish and Irish initiatives primarily demonstrate how youth deliberation may be organised and linked to policymaking. Therefore, the proposed Youth Citizens' Juries would adapt an established model to South Korea and Malaysia and evaluate whether, and under what conditions, participation bolsters young people's political agency within each context.

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25 Marie-Isabel Theuwis, Carolien van Ham, and Kristof Jacobs, "A Meta-Analysis of the Effects of Democratic Innovations on Participants' Attitudes, Behaviour and Capabilities," *European Journal of Political Research* 64, no. 2 (2025): 960–84, https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12722.

26 Katherine R. Knobloch and John Gastil, "Civic (Re)Socialisation: The Educative Effects of Deliberative Participation," *Political Studies* 63, no. 2 (2015): 253–71, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.12069.

27 Finnish Environment Institute (Syke), "Youth Citizens Jury on Food (*Nuorten ruokaraati*)," project documentation; Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of Finland, *Youth Jury on Food: Citizens' Panel to Support the Implementation of the National Food Strategy 2040*, Publications of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry 2026:10.

28 Children and Young People's Assembly on Biodiversity Loss, "About the Assembly," official project website, https://cyp-biodiversity.ie/about-the-assembly/.

29 Benjamin Mallon, Valery Molay, Katie Reid, Clodagh Harris, and Diarmuid Torney, "Children and Young People's Assemblies against the Backdrop of the European Green Deal: Opportunities for Consolidating and Extending a Sustainable and Democratic Transition," *Journal of European Integration* 47, no. 2 (2025): 319–37, https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2025.2456617.

Country-Specific Adaptation

South Korea

South Korea possesses abundant experience and a substantial institutional foundation for adapting the proposed model. Despite not being specifically designed around youth political efficacy, South Korea has repeatedly employed participatory and deliberative mechanisms in addressing major public issues—namely, the 2017 Shin-Kori construction, which brought citizens into structured discussion and decision-making. Accordingly, the Youth Citizens' Juries is not an alien concept but a target-specific adaptation of existing traditions.

Further, the South Korean model should primarily operate at the local-government level, thereby directly addressing a notable weakness for South Korea: it is among the few countries where trust in the national government exceeds trust in local government.[30] Moreover, only 31% of South Korean respondents expected to have an opportunity to voice their opinions regarding local matters, compared with the OECD average of 41%.[31] Integrating Youth Citizens' Juries within local governments allows participants to discuss issues that are locally and personally relevant to them, providing fertile ground for greater political efficacy and stronger connections to local institutions.

Finally, the system should employ AI, either as a subject of deliberation or as a tool for effective participation. South Korea has consistently positioned itself at the forefront of AI governance, notably through the AI Basic Act. Additionally, OECD data reveal that South Korean respondents perceive AI use in the public sector more positively but report lower confidence in their own ability to utilise AI.[32] This situation provides an opportunity for the Youth Citizens' Juries, wherein participants can deliberate pertinent questions surrounding AI governance or utilise AI tools to effectively navigate complex discussions.

Malaysia

Malaysia already possesses several formal structures typically associated with youth participation. Beyond elections, mechanisms such as the Youth Parliament of Malaysia, now administered fully under the Parliament rather than a ministry, along with state-level bodies, such as the Selangor Youth State Assemblyman (ADN Muda) Program, have expanded formal opportunities for youth policy input.[33,34] Consequently, the challenge is not a shortage of participatory channels but persistently moderate levels of internal political efficacy despite these expanded opportunities. This is particularly relevant in Malaysia, where high levels of digital engagement coexist with extremely low levels of formal political participation.

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30 OECD, *OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions 2026 Results: Navigating Rising Expectations and New Horizons.*

31 OECD, *OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions – 2024 Results: Country Notes: Korea* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024), https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-survey-on-drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-2024-results-country-notes_a8004759-en/korea_ab1a95c7-en.html

32 OECD, *OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions 2026 Results: Navigating Rising Expectations and New Horizons.*

33 Parlimen Belia Malaysia (Youth Parliament of Malaysia), "Latar Belakang," official portal, https://pbmy.parlimen.gov.my/en/latar-belakang/.

34 Dewan Negeri Selangor, "Program ADN Muda," selangor.gov.my.

The Youth Citizens' Jury could address this gap by providing a form of participation distinct from those already available in Malaysia. Existing mechanisms tend to draw individuals who are already politically interested or already active in some capacity. By contrast, the proposed jury would employ a stratified civic lottery to recruit participants across varying levels of political interest and prior engagement, thereby reaching young people who would not otherwise volunteer to participate. This design responds directly to what Malaysian research has identified as the actual predictor of engagement: not the availability of a channel, but political knowledge, internal efficacy, and the ability to judge information critically. Hence, each jury cycle should open with a structured learning phase, during which participants receive balanced briefings, engage directly with experts, and question competing viewpoints before deliberating, such that the exercise fosters confidence rather than merely collecting opinion.

Equally crucial is ensuring that participation yields a visible institutional response, as this is precisely where Malaysia's existing youth mechanisms fall short. The Youth Parliament's resolutions remain non-binding, while ADN Muda's motions pass to the Selangor State Legislative Assembly with no statutory requirement for the Assembly to reply. This absence should be considered a central finding for the Malaysian case, rather than an incidental gap; importantly, a jury pilot must seek to correct this gap: the responsible ministry or state committee should be legislatively required to publish a written response within a fixed period, stating which recommendations are accepted, modified, or rejected. Early cycles should focus on issues that young Malaysians already grapple with, including employment, cost of living, and housing, rather than abstract governance reform, to ensure that a first response feels concrete rather than distant.

Considering Malaysia's federal structure and the recent narrowing of the statutory youth definition from 15–40 down to 15–30, with Sarawak exempted, a state-by-state pilot is more realistic than an immediate national rollout. The jury is not another platform added to an already crowded field but a mechanism developed specifically to close the gap between political access and confidence, which this paper identifies as Malaysia's core problem.

5. Evaluation and Risks

Potential Benefits: Developing Political Efficacy Through Participation

The primary strength of the Youth Citizens' Jury is that it addresses political efficacy directly rather than merely creating another participation channel. Evidence from deliberative mini-publics has suggested that structured participation may enhance political knowledge, reasoning skills, and internal political efficacy by allowing participants to engage with information, deliberate with others, and contribute to collective recommendations. This situation is particularly relevant in both South Korea and Malaysia, where the central challenge is not necessarily a lack of participatory opportunities but limited confidence among numerous young people that they can participate meaningfully in politics. The Jury integrates political learning, deliberation, and visible institutional engagement, thereby fostering opportunities for young people to develop political agency through participation itself.

Key Risks: Symbolic Participation, Participation Bias, and Information Quality

The effectiveness of the Youth Citizens' Jury relies markedly on whether participants can observe tangible policy responses. If recommendations are routinely disregarded, the process risks becoming another symbolic consultation exercise, potentially reinforcing—rather than mitigating—political disengagement. A second challenge concerns representation. Although civic lotteries improve inclusiveness, participation may remain skewed towards individuals with greater time, resources, or confidence unless adequate financial and logistical support is provided. Finally, the legitimacy of the process is determined by the quality and neutrality of information provided to participants. Within increasingly polarised and digitalised information environments, perceptions of bias in briefing materials, expert selection, or facilitation could undermine trust in the process itself. While these risks do not invalidate the proposal, they highlight the criticality of mandatory institutional responses, inclusive recruitment, and transparent deliberative procedures as necessary safeguards.

6. Conclusion

Political participation depends both on the opportunities available to citizens and on whether individuals believe that they are capable of understanding and engaging with political life. As elucidated in this paper, internal political efficacy is particularly critical because it both shapes and is shaped by participation. South Korea and Malaysia illustrate different manifestations of the same challenge. In South Korea, relatively positive perceptions of institutional responsiveness coexist with weaker confidence among young people in their own ability to participate effectively in politics. Meanwhile, in Malaysia, although reforms such as Undi18 and AVR have expanded formal political access, greater access and information have not invariably translated into stronger political confidence or sustained forms of formal participation. Despite their distinct contexts, both countries demonstrate that political access and participatory channels do not automatically foster political agency. Accordingly, the policy challenge does not merely involve creating more opportunities for participation, but also creating opportunities through which young people can develop and exercise political agency. The proposed Youth Citizens' Jury addresses this gap by integrating stratified civic-lottery recruitment, structured learning, deliberation, and a formal institutional response, treating political efficacy not as a prerequisite for participation but as a capacity cultivated through participation itself. Ultimately, the objective is not eliminating political apathy or requiring every young person to become politically active, but to ensure that disengagement does not stem from a belief that politics is beyond one's understanding, influence, or reach. In this sense, bolstering internal political efficacy does not entail producing more participants but ensuring that young people possess the confidence and capacity to act when they decide that their participation can be meaningful. If the democratic journey commences with a single step, the missing mile is crossed when young people not only take that step but also develop the confidence to understand the road, help determine its direction, and make their participation count.

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

The Art of Dissent: Who Draws the Line? Rethinking the Boundaries of Youth Artivism in Singapore and South Korea

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Executive Summary

South Korea has a history of utilising artivism as a form of political participation, from the Minjung Cultural Movement to the use of K-pop during the 2024–2025 impeachment protests. However, the media environment continues to discourage open political expression, especially among young people. To address these barriers, this paper proposes two policy approaches: (1) linking politically engaged performances to civic discussions and (2) supporting youth-led political content creation through professional resources. Likewise, the Singapore government's stringent censorship in the local arts scene and creation of OB markers inevitably impede the arts' potential for political participation. Hence, this paper analyses the limits of governmental overreach in the arts and proposes a reform to the current system's boundaries. Thereafter, two policy alternatives are posited whereby the arts can be utilised to increase political participation following a two-step approach: (1) consumption and (2) creation of political art. This paper postulates that exposing young people in the Indo-Pacific to activism heightens their political participation and performs a cross-examination between South Korea and Singapore. Thereafter, this paper delves into policy recommendations on enhancing political participation in each country.

1. Introduction: Why Artivism?

Singapore functions under an 'authoritarian democracy'[1] framework that imposes restrictions and boundaries on 'assembling, performance, and critical expression…and varying degrees of de facto (and dejure) censorship and self-policing'.[2] Additionally, a study found that South Koreans expressed support for 'the right to publicly [criticise] the government'.[3] Considering the numerous formal and informal rules regulating the information that people consume, the arts are crucial to 'circumvent repressive state structures' through diverse forms of creative expression, such that people can express their genuine opinions.[4]

Artivism derives from the amalgamation of 'art' and 'activism', which manifests itself as contemporary and interdisciplinary art.[5] Artivism places equal importance on artistic expression and sociopolitical action, enmeshing art's predominant purpose as 'aesthetic and emotional expression, and activism'[s]...purposeful action to achieve social or political change'.[6] Artivism's creative dimension enables individuals to challenge social norms and power relations by

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1 Weiyu Zhang, "The Effects of Political News Use, Political Discussion and Authoritarian Orientation on Political Participation: Evidences From Singapore and Taiwan," *Asian Journal of Communication* 22, no. 5 (2012): 474–92. https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2012.701313.

2 Jason David Luger, "Must Art Have a 'Place?' Questioning the Power of the Digital Art-Scape," *M/C Journal* 19, no. 3 (2016). https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.1094.

3 Jonathan Evans, Kelsey Jo Starr, Manolo Corichi, and William Miner, "7. Religion and Politics," Pew Research Center, September 12, 2023. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/09/12/religion-and-politics-2/

4 Luger, Jason David, "Must Art Have a 'Place?' Questioning the Power of the Digital Art-Scape," *M/C Journal* 19, no. 3 (2016). https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.1094.

5 Olha Lukovska, Olena Hrabovska, and Tetyana Nestorenko, "The Phenomenon of Artivism: the Interaction of Art and Social Activism," *Zeszyty Naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Technicznej w Katowicach*, no. 21 (2025): 117–28, https://doi.org/10.54264/0135.

6 Olha Lukovska, Olena Hrabovska, and Tetyana Nestorenko, "The Phenomenon of Artivism: the Interaction of Art and Social Activism," *Zeszyty Naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Technicznej w Katowicach*, no. 21 (2025): 117–28, https://doi.org/10.54264/0135.

undermining the boundaries of censorship and state oppression to 'expand the perimeters of individual rights and freedoms in the public sphere'. [7,8] Moreover, artivism can produce tangible effects, though its impact is challenging to measure because art does not necessarily have a clearly defined objective. Beyond observable outcomes (*effects*), art may also evoke emotional and perceptual responses (*affects*) that may be difficult to articulate or quantify. These two facets operate symbiotically, as 'affect leads to effect and effects have affective impact'.[9]

Existing research has devoted limited attention to the relationship between political art and participation. However, the European Commission found that large-scale population-level studies have indicated a high correlation between cultural participation and 'civic and democratic behaviours', such as 'voting…community activities, [and] volunteering'.[10] Reportedly, both active and passive arts participation are positively associated with 'civic attitudes and outcomes'.[11] However, the effects are stronger in 'more active forms of arts participation', when an individual actively participates in arts and resonates with the experience.[12]

Democratic and civic behaviours encompass both formal and informal dimensions. The formal dimension entails 'voting, attending public meetings, and engaging with political institutions', whereas the informal dimension includes involvement in civil society, as well as in 'charitable or community organisations'. In general, political participation can be classified dichotomously into conventional forms that include 'mass electoral politics…voting…party membership and campaigning for political parties', or non-conventional forms, such as 'online activism, public protests…demonstrations, and other forms of advocacy forms, including civic engagement, and social involvement'.[13] Activism's merit lies in its unrestricted ability to empower one's engagement in conventional, non-conventional, or both forms of political participation.

2. Conceptual Framework: What Counts as Artivism?

Artivism can manifest in numerous forms, including 'graffiti, murals, painting (including stencil painting), flash mobs, street theatre, poetry and music performances, stage performances, film and video creation and screening,

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7 Sara Borrillo, "Returning the Megaphone to the People: The Theatre of the Oppressed as Artivism in the Public Space for a New Critical Citizenry in Morocco," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 48, no. 1 (2021): 153–70. https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2021.1885853.

8 A. Medrado and I. Rega, *Media Activism, Artivism and the Fight Against Marginalisation in the Global South: South-to-South Communication* (New York: Routledge, 2023), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003215103.

9 Ibid.

10 William Hammonds. *Culture and Democracy: The Evidence: How Citizens' Participation in Cultural Activities Enhances Civic Engagement, Democracy and Social Cohesion* (European Commission, 2023). https://doi.org/10.2766/39199.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Jin Yao Kwan, "'Democracy and Active Citizenship Are Not Just About the Elections': Youth Civic and Political Participation During and Beyond Singapore's Nine-Day Pandemic Election (GE2020)," *Young* 30, no. 3 (2021): 247–64. https://doi.org/10.1177/11033088211059595.

poster, postcard, and sticker production'.[14] As mentioned earlier, cultural participation constitutes the different ways of becoming involved in 'artistic and creative activities' that occur in both 'formal and informal settings and forms'.[15] A misconception arises when people assume that cultural participation only exists in its 'active' form, which must include an individual's 'action' in arts creation or volunteering with a cultural organisation. However, most people might not realise that a passive form of cultural participation exists, which has a lower barrier to participation—for example, watching a film.

Where's the line?

At this juncture, the question of where the line between artistic expression and political expression lies arises; one may wonder: what counts as political art? In this regard, Livingston's analysis examined Jerrold Levinson's philosophical distinction between two types of artistic intentions. First, categorical intentions concern the artist's intended conception of their art, which governs how a work is fundamentally conceived, categorised, and approached on a basic level. By contrast, semantic intentions reflect how art is conceptualised, governing the specific meanings, attitudes, or political messages intended to be conveyed within or by the work.[16] These two theories generally overlap and intertwine with each other, thereby rendering the boundary between the 'artistic form' and 'political agenda' philosophically problematic. Livingston's partial intentionalism recognises 'that authorial intentions figure in... yet combine with other factors, such as features of the finished text, artefact, or performance, and aspects of the historical and artistic context in which the work was created'.[17] Hence, applying this conceptualisation to artivism, for an intended political agenda to count as part of an artwork's genuine meaning, the artist's intentions must successfully 'mesh' with the art's actual features, conventions, and structure.[18] Thus, determining whether an artwork is political may be more complex than merely identifying the artist's stated intentions or a regulator's interpretation. A problem of interpretive authority arises when artistic meaning becomes subject to regulation: Why should an institution's interpretation determine whether political artistic expression is permissible, especially when other reasonable interpretations may exist? The issue is not simply what counts as political art, but who gets to decide, according to which criteria, and with what accountability. Instead of advocating for a clear separation between artistic and political expression, this paper questions the legitimacy of imposing rigid political constraints on art when its meaning remains open to interpretation.

3. What Do Youths Care About?

South Korea

Youths are legally defined as individuals aged 19–34 under the Framework Act

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14 Olha Lukovska, Olena Hrabovska, and Tetyana Nestorenko, "The Phenomenon of Artivism: the Interaction of Art and Social Activism," *Zeszyty Naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Technicznej w Katowicach*, no. 21 (2025): 117–28, https://doi.org/10.54264/0135.

15 Hammonds. *Culture and Democracy: The Evidence*.

16 Paisley Livingston. *Art and Intention: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford University Press, 2005), https://doi.org/10.1093/0199278067.001.0001

16 Republic of Korea, *Framework Act on Youth* (2025).

17 Livingston. *Art and Intention*.

17 Republic of Korea. *Framework Act on Youth* (2025).

18 Livingston. *Art and Intention*.

on Youth, as provided by the National Law Information Center.[19] According to the Office for Government Policy Coordination's 2024 Youth Life Survey, only a small proportion of respondents reported being 'very interested' in politics (2.9%), whereas a larger share reported being 'somewhat interested' (24.2%). Overall, barely over a quarter of young people expressed an interest in politics (27.1%).[20] During the past year, a considerable proportion of young people had not discussed political or social issues with people around them (37.0%). Relatively active forms of participation were even less common: most had never directly submitted a petition (85.5%), and an even larger proportion had never participated in demonstrations or rallies (87.8%). Collectively, these figures indicate a significant gap between young people and active forms of political participation.[21]

Singapore

The Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth in Singapore defines youths as individuals aged 15–35 years.[22] A study conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies as part of the World Values Survey[23] found that almost two-thirds of Singaporeans are uninterested in politics[24] and that only 7.1 of respondents frequently discussed politics with their friends.[25] A poll by the Singapore National Youth Council (NYC) conducted in 2023 found that 47% of 1,000 respondents demonstrated interest in partnering and engaging with the government on issues that they are interested in.[26] The National Youth Survey 2024 found that older youths (69%) tend to prioritise bread-and-butter issues, including affordability and work-life balance, whereas younger youths demonstrate greater concern for broader societal issues, including gender inequality (32%) and racism (37%). Furthermore, mental health has emerged as a key concern across all youth age groups.[27]

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19 Republic of Korea. *Framework Act on Youth*, Act No. 21065, amended October 1, 2025. National Law Information Center, Ministry of Government Legislation, https://www.law.go.kr/LSW/lsInfoP.do?lsiSeq=277289.

20 Office for Government Policy Coordination, "Youth Life Survey," Korean Statistical Information Service (KOSIS), accessed [date], https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=170&tblId=DT_170002_F003&conn_path=I2.

21 Office for Government Policy Coordination, "Youth Life Survey," Korean Statistical Information Service (KOSIS), accessed [date], https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=170&tblId=DT_170002_F004&conn_path=I2.

22 Ministry for Culture, Community and Youth, "Youth," July 11, 2026, https://www.mccy.gov.sg/sectors/youth/.

23 Mathews Mathew, Kay Key Teo, Melvin Tay, and Alicia Wang. *Attitude Towards Institutions, Politics and Policies: Key Findings from The World Values Survey* (Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, Institute of Policy Studies, 2021).

24 Grace Ho, "Singaporeans Have High Level of Confidence in Government but Politically Uninterested: IPS Study," *The Straits Times*, March 24, 2021, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/singaporeans-have-high-level-of-confidence-in-government-but-politically.

25 Justin Ong, "Most Singaporeans Politically Apathetic, Not Keen on Activism: IPS," *The Straits Times*, July 2, 2021, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/most-singaporeans-politically-apathetic-not-keen-on-activism-ips.

26 Nicole Lam, "The Big Read in Short: Growing Desire Among S'pore Youths to Have a Say in How Country Is Run," *CNA*, November 11, 2023, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/today/big-read/big-read-in-short-growing-desire-among-spore-youths-have-say-in-how-country-run-5883401.

27 National Youth Council. *YOUTH.Sg: The State of Youth in Singapore 2024 Youth & Their Diverse Priorities*
(National Youth Survey, 2024): 1–32.

4. A Comparison between South Korea and Singapore's Artivism

4.1 Historical Artivism

South Korea: Minjung Cultural Movement

South Korea has a history of utilising artistic expression as a form of political participation through the Minjung Cultural Movement during the 1970s and 1980s. Under military authoritarian rule, the movement employed art and culture as a means to criticise social inequality and political repression.[28] During the 1980s, the Minjung Cultural Movement contributed to a reinterpretation of the 'minjung' as both the subjects of history and active agents of social transformation. Additionally, it sought to represent the hardships experienced by ordinary people and foster greater awareness and participation among them.[29]

A representative example is *Madanggeuk*, a form of participatory theatre that emerged during the 1970s through the modern reinterpretation of traditional South Korean mask dance and folk performance.[30] Unlike conventional one-directional stage performances, *Madanggeuk* emphasised active performer–audience interaction. Performances addressed pressing issues of the time—including social inequality and political power—through satire, humour, song, and dance.[31] By eliminating the rigid boundary between the stage and the audience and encouraging voluntary audience participation, *Madanggeuk* enabled spectators to become part of the performance's collective experience. One notable example was the 1978 *Madanggeuk Resolve the Dongil Textile Dispute* (「동일방직 문제 해결하라」), created and performed by dismissed workers from Dongil Textile themselves. At the time, the workers had experienced repression of their trade union activities and unfair treatment; simultaneously, media censorship rendered it challenging for them to communicate their situation to the wider public. In response, they reconstructed their experiences through theatre to raise public awareness regarding the realities and injustices faced by workers.[32]

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28 Byoungjoo Hwang, "Minjung Cultural Movement," *Encyclopedia of Korean Culture*. Academy of Korean Studies. June 25, 2024, https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0075909.

29 Man-sik Yoon, "The Impact of Minjung Cultural and Artistic Activities on Social Change in South Korea: Focusing on the Minjung Cultural Movement and Artistic Activities during the May 18 Democratization Movement" (master's thesis, Chosun University, 2020), https://www.dbpia.co.kr/journal/detail?nodeId=T15678899.

30 Young-Mee Lee. 2023, "Madanggeuk (Korean Open-Air Theater)," *Encyclopedia of Korean Culture Academy of Korean Studies*, February 7, 2023. https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0068013.

31 Hunseong Jo, "A Study on the Changes of Political Consciousness of 'Minjokgeuk (Korean People's Theatre) Movement': Centering on 1970s–80s Madang-Play and the Development Process of 'Korean People's Theatre Festival Hanmadang.'" *The Institute of Education of Korean Language and Literature* 27 (2012), 421–49. https://www.kci.go.kr/kciportal/ci/sereArticleSearch/ciSereArtiView.kci?sereArticleSearchBean.artiId=ART0017 13269.

32 Ji-hee Im, 2010, "Settle Dongil Textile Company's Affairs," *The Journal of Korean Drama and Theatre*, no. 32: 379–412. https://doi.org/10.17938/tjkdat.2010..32.379.

Singapore: Censorship of The Arts

Before delving into the arts scene, the environment that has shaped it, particularly the concept of out-of-bounds (OB) markers, warrants discussion. As Ho Khai Leong explains, 'In political discussions, Singaporeans are constrained in what they can comment on by the OB markers that designate issues deemed too sensitive to be discussed in public for fear of destabilizing or jeopardizing public peace and order'.[33] Ho identified the following four primary characteristics of Singapore's OB markers:

1. They are politically defined by elected officials, not the electorate.
2. No explicit boundaries exist; instead, one can only assume that topics such as race, religion, and political institutions (i.e. the judiciary) are out-of-bounds.
3. An unspoken expectation prevails that individuals who wish to discuss political issues within the OB markers must formally enter politics.
4. Individuals who make comments falling outside these undefined boundaries must 'take responsibility for their views and be prepared to face challenges from the government'.[34]

Furthermore, OB markers bleed into the arts, as artists who have transgressed these boundaries have faced severe repercussions. In a seminal performance, Josef Ng staged *Brother Cane* (1994) at the Artists' General Assembly to protest a police sting operation whereby 12 gay men were arrested, jailed, and sentenced to caning. His performance ended with him snipping his pubic hair. Sensationalised coverage by *The New Paper* using the headline 'Pub(I)ic Protest' sparked public uproar, resulting in Ng being charged by the government with obscenity, banned from public performance, and handed a 10-year state ban on public funding for performance art and forum theatre from 1994 to 2004.[35] Another trailblazer for artivism was Kuo Pan Kun, whose early plays focused on 'politicised social issues'. Consequently, he was detained in 1976 'under the Internal Security Act by the Singapore Government for four years and seven months on communist conspiracy charges'.[36] His words, 'You see, how you draw the line is difficult. It depends on who draws the line', also reflect the power held by gatekeepers of arts in deciding what constitutes acceptable art for public consumption.[37]

1.1 Current Landscape of Artivism

South Korea: Art as Political Protest

Contemporary political protests in South Korea demonstrate how popular culture may become a medium for civic and political expression. During the 2024–2025 impeachment protests, K-pop was utilised as a tool of political expression and

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33 Ho Khai Leong, "Citizen Participation and Policy Making in Singapore: Conditions and Predicaments," *Asian Survey (Berkeley)* 40, no. 3 (2000): 436–55. https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2000.40.3.01p0079e.

34 Ibid.

35 Wei Hao Goh, "Performing Protest in Singapore: Performance Tactics in Brother Cane and Don't Give Money to the Arts," *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift (Abingdon)* 92, no. 1 (2023): 36–55. https://doi.org/10.1080/00233609.2023.2181864.

36 Melanie Chua, "Remembering Kuo Pao Kun: Theatre as socio-political commentary," *Global-is-asian*, August 2, 2018, https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/gia/article/remembering-kuo-pao-kun-theatre-as-socio-political-commentary

37 Ibid.

criticism, drawing on a form of popular culture that numerous young people were already familiar with and had access to. Protesters brought K-pop light sticks to demonstrations while singing and dancing to K-pop songs adapted to the political context. Notably, 69.2 percent of participants were in their 20s, suggesting that the use of familiar pop-cultural forms helped lower barriers to young people's political participation.[38] This form of political participation through popular culture transformed groups that had previously engaged primarily as consumers of popular cultural content into participants in the public sphere, whereby they could collectively voice concerns regarding the problems facing society and contribute to efforts towards meaningful social change.[39]

Singapore: How Art Outplays Censorship

Currently, Singapore practices gestural politics whereby the government utilises the rhetoric of becoming a 'more open' and 'inclusive' society to give citizens the impression that they can make a difference, even if ultimately authority remains strictly top-down.[40] For example, the NYC has a youth panel wherein youths and the government can co-create policies together.[41] However, the government still has the final say in whether the policy should be implemented. Additionally, participation in Singapore is usually described as 'pseudo' (whereby citizens merely endorse a pre-determined decision) or 'partial' (whereby opinions are heard, but the elite retain absolute final power).[42]

Currently, NYC has a Young ChangeMakers grant, which has vague restrictions regarding what projects cannot be funded.[43] For example, projects with a 'religious or socio-political agenda' cannot be funded. However, arts production companies in Singapore are currently funded by the National Arts Council Singapore; specifically, Pangdemonium Theatre Company Ltd, T.H.E Dance Company Ltd, and Wild Rice Ltd have created political productions before.[44] These production companies have showcased productions with political undertones in Singapore, such as A mirror,[45] Elusive—A Double Bill,[46,47] and The

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38 Hyeong-Yeon Jeon, "From Affect to Value: The Generative Trajectory of K-Pop Fan Practices and Democratic Meaning," *Signs and Society* (2026): 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2026.10063.

39 Melissa M. Brough and Sangita Shresthova, "Fandom Meets Activism: Rethinking Civic and Political Participation," *Transformative Works and Cultures* (2012): 10. https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2012.0303.

40 Terence Lee, "Gestural Politics: Civil Society in 'New' Singapore," *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 20, no. 2 (2005): 132–54. https://doi.org/10.1355/SJ20-2B.

41 National Youth Council Singapore, "Youth Panels," July 30, 2025, https://www.nyc.gov.sg/key-initiatives/youth-panels/.

42 Lee, "Gestural Politics: Civil Society in 'New' Singapore."

43 National Youth Council Singapore, *Young ChangeMakers (YCM) Factsheet*, (2024): 1–44, https://www.nyc.gov.sg/programmes-grants/grants/young-changemakers/

43 National Arts Council Singapore, FY2027 Major Company Scheme, (2026): 1–15.

45 Pangdemonium!, "A Mirror," https://pangdemonium.com/whats-on-details/a-mirror.

46 bakchormeeboy, "Dance Review: Elusive—a Double Bill by T.H.E Dance Company," June 21, 2026. https://bakchormeeboy.com/2026/06/21/%E2%98%85%E2%98%85%E2%98%85%E2%98%85%E2%98%8 6-dance-review-elusive-a-double-bill-by-t-h-e-dance-company/.

47 Cheryl Sekkappan, "A Fake Wedding, a Real Interrogation: Pangdemonium's a Mirror Hits Hard," *Time Out Singapore*, July 5, 2026, https://www.timeout.com/singapore/news/a-fake-wedding-a-real-interrogation-pangdemoniums-a-mirror-hits-hard-070526

Emperor's New Clothes, respectively.[48,49] This apparent contradiction raises an interesting question: How are established arts organisations nevertheless able to produce politically engaged works within this funding environment?

2. Policy Recommendations

2.1 Reshaping the Boundaries

South Korea

The Constitution of South Korea guarantees freedom of expression, including political expression, as a fundamental right. Article 21(1) of the Constitution states that all citizens shall enjoy freedom of speech and the press, as well as freedom of assembly and association, while Article 21(2) prohibits licensing or censorship of speech and the press.[50] According to a survey administered by the Pew Research Center in 2023, 83 percent of South Koreans reported that citizens who disagree with government policies or actions should have the right to publicly criticise the government.[51]

Today, political polarisation is recognised as a critical social issue in South Korea. Based on the Korea Institute of Public Administration's 2025 Social Integration Survey: 80.7 percent of respondents perceived the conflict between conservatives and progressives as serious.[52] According to a study published by the East Asia Institute in 2025, 31.2 percent of survey respondents reported that they had experienced serious conflict owing to differences in political views in online group chats in which they participated; meanwhile, 24.3 percent responded that they had experienced strained relationships with close friends or colleagues because of differences in political opinions.[53] Koo Se-jin (2026) analysed survey data collected from South Korean voters and found that approximately one in three adult respondents frequently concealed their political views. Specifically, experiences of political conflict in close interpersonal relationships and the perception that society is seriously divided were identified as the most pivotal predictors of political self-censorship.[54]

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48 Ang Shao-wen, "MUSICAL REVIEW: The Emperor's New Clothes," *Bandwagon*, December 4, 2015, https://www.bandwagon.asia/articles/review-the-emperor-s-new-clothes.

49 Wild Rice, "The Emperor's New Clothes," https://www.wildrice.com.sg/event/303448-the-emperors-new-clothes-2/.

50 Republic of Korea, *Constitution of the Republic of Korea*, art. 21, amended October 29, 1987, National Law Information Center, Ministry of Government Legislation, https://www.law.go.kr/LSW/lsInfoP.do?lsiSeq=61603&urlMode=engLs&viewCls=engLsInfoR.

51 Evans, Starr, Corichi, and Miner, "7. Religion and Politics."

52 Korean Institute of Public Administration, "Perceptions of Social Conflict," *e-Nara Indicators (National Indicator System),* n.d., https://www.index.go.kr/unity/potal/eNara/sub/showStblGams3.do?freq=Y&idx_cd=F0259&period=N&stts_cd=F025901.

53 Jun Han, "Everyday Communication, SNS, and Affective Polarization," *Polarization and Korean Democracy Series*, no. 8 (working paper, East Asia Institute, February 19, 2025), https://www.eai.or.kr/press/press_01_view.php?no=10798.

54 Sejin Koo, "Silence Is Not Even: Political Self-Censorship in Post-Martial Law Korea," *Korea and World Politics* 42 no. 2 (2026): 181–223, https://doi.org/10.17331/kwp.2026.42.2.006.

Singapore: These Boundaries…Are Too Much

Artists have managed to guesstimate where the OB markers lie only after painstaking trials and errors. A famous case was The Necessary Stage's sex.violence.blood.gore (1999), which received three cuts before its production day; hence, the production incorporated the censorship order directly into the show by having actors read the Public Entertainment Licensing Unit's official letter aloud on stage as part of the performance and handed out physical copies of the censored script passages to the audience. Additionally, over the years, numerous artists have faced censorship in the form of having parts of the art cut, or denied from a licensing and showcasing; these include Wong Zunzi (Caricaturist, 1998), Simon Fujiwara (Japanese-British Artist, 2011), Royston Tan (Filmmaker, 2003–2004), Suzann Victor (5th Passage, 1994), Loo Zihan (Performance Artist, 2012), Wild Rice (Theatre Company), and Drama Box's VaginaLOGUE (2000).[55]

Although artists who can manipulate the system in the pushback against censorship must be commended, the referees and the legitimacy of their OB markers must also be questioned. Moreover, why should artists have to navigate these complex political boundaries simply to exercise their freedom of artistic expression? OB Markers are justified on the grounds of preventing social instability and preserving harmony. However, excessive regulation of art through censorship risks undermining artistic agency, authenticity, and freedom of expression.

A closer examination of the guidelines governing local art—including the Infocomm Media Development Authority's *Arts Entertainment Classification Code*,[56] the National Arts Council's *A Guide to Commissioning Public Art*,[57] and Section 5 of the *FY2027 Major Company Scheme*[58] funding guidelines—reveals a similar ambiguity to that of Singapore's OB markers. The absence of clearly delineated boundaries bestows the government considerable discretion in determining whether an artwork has violated an OB marker, thereby leaving artists uncertain regarding what constitutes a violation.

Rather than utilising vague OB markers to determine whether an artwork will cause 'misunderstanding in our multicultural and multi-religious society'[59] or 'undermine[s] public order, national security and/or stability',[60] this policy alternative proposes clearer guidelines grounded in shared ethical principles in place of subjective interpretations of political sensitivity. These principles could

55 June Yap, "Singapore: Censorship, Institutions, and Alternatives" (research paper, National University of Singapore, 2016).

56 Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA), *Arts Entertainment Classification Code*. *Licence for The Provision of Arts Entertainment* (2014), 1–7.

57 National Arts Council Singapore, *A Guide to Commissioning Public Art in Singapore*, (2022): 1–72

58 National Arts Council Singapore, *FY2027 Major Company Scheme*, (2026): 1–15

59 National Arts Council Singapore, *FY2027 Major Company Scheme* (2026), 1–15.

60 Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA), *Arts Entertainment Classification Code*. *Licence for The Provision of Arts Entertainment*, (2014): 1–7.

include beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, and justice,[61] which could provide a framework for assessing whether political artworks cause identifiable harm to others and whether existing laws adequately address that harm. Generally, an artwork should be permitted unless it violates a clearly established law protecting against identifiable harm.

2.2 Artivism as a Pathway to Participation

South Korea and Singapore: Civic Arts Dialogue

This policy seeks to extend the experience of attending performing arts that address political and social issues into an opportunity for civic dialogue and opinion formation. We propose additional avenues that allow youths to attend artistic performances, exhibitions, and arts spaces that explore a range of social issues, including social inequality, democracy, and human rights, and subsequently participate in post-performance/activity discussion programs where they can share their views on the issues raised by the work. As mentioned in section II, artivism may exist in both active and passive forms. This recommendation focuses on watching or observing art and participatory art both as a medium for political participation that manifests through dialogue during or after experiencing political art.

Participants may examine different perspectives and connect the themes presented in the performance to social and policy issues. For example, research on post-performance discussions has demonstrated that theatre can facilitate the exchange of personal experiences, critical engagement with social issues, and the co-production of knowledge among audience members and experts[62] Furthermore, the views and ideas generated through these discussions can be communicated to relevant policymakers, linking the artistic experience to public expression and policy engagement. To strengthen youths' belief that their interest and participation can foster meaningful change, clear channels should exist through which their voices can be heard and conveyed to decision-makers.[63]

2.3 Artivism as Political Participation

South Korea: Politics in Everyday Media Spaces

According to the Korea Press Foundation's 2025 Media Audience Survey, 50.5% of people in their 20s responded that online platforms perform the media's role, indicating that media-based information consumption significantly influences young people.[64] The media young people consume in everyday life can shape how they perceive politics and which issues draw their attention.

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61 Basil Varkey, "Principles of Clinical Ethics and Their Application to Practice," *Medical Principles and Practice: International Journal of the Kuwait University, Health Science Centre* 30, no. 1 (2021): 17–28. https://doi.org/10.1159/000509119

62 Gillian Lewando Hundt, Maria Clasina Stuttaford, Claudette Bryanston, and Christine Harrison, "'Research Usually Sits on Shelves, Through the Play It Was Shared': Co-Producing Knowledge Through Post-Show Discussions of Research-Based Theatre," *Frontiers in Sociology* 4 (2019): 48. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2019.00048.

63 OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), *OECD Guidelines for Citizen Participation Processes*, OECD Public Governance Reviews (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1787/f765caf6-en.

64 Korea Press Foundation, *Media Users in Korea, 2025* (2025), https://www.kpf.or.kr/front/research/selfDetail.do?seq=600224.

However, political expression in South Korean media is often treated as a sensitive topic. Celebrities and entertainment agencies frequently exercise caution regarding public statements, social media activity, and even symbolic gestures that could be interpreted as partisan endorsements, reflecting concerns regarding public backlash and reputational consequences.[65] For younger audiences, these norms may contribute to the perception that openly expressing political views carries social risks, potentially discouraging political discussion and participation.[66]

This policy aims to support young media creators in interpreting political and social issues from their own perspectives and generating political content in formats such as comedy (satire), talk shows, and web entertainment. Youths would receive production grants, mentoring from media professionals, access to filming and editing facilities, and fact-checking or legal consultation when addressing political issues. Content themes would be selected directly by the participating youths, while editorial independence would be guaranteed such that they could freely discuss politics. In the United States, political comedy has become established as one of the media genres, enabling the public to engage with relatively complex topics in a more interesting and accessible way. Representative American political satire programs such as <*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*> and <*The Colbert Report*> have addressed social and political issues by combining news formats with comedy. According to a study analysing data from the 2012 U.S. presidential election, regular viewers of these in-depth political satire programs exhibited a significantly higher probability of actual voter turnout.[67]

Singapore

This paper proposes an Art Mentorship Programme that helps connect young people with playwrights, directors, and artists experienced in creating politically engaged theatre, equipping them with the skills and knowledge to develop their own socio-politically engaged works.

3. Operationalising the Policy Alternatives

South Korea

The Civic Arts Dialogue initiative would be implemented through a two-year pilot programme in three municipalities. During the first six months, ARKO and local cultural foundations would establish partnerships with local governments and recruit six theatres or performing arts organisations. From months 7–12, the participating theatres would organise 12 post-performance discussions involving approximately 300 young people, with their policy recommendations submitted to relevant local governments. During months 13–21, an interim evaluation would assess participants' political efficacy and engagement, followed by programme improvements and another 12 discussions. In the final three months,

65 Kyung-min Pyo, "Celebrities Stay Neutral; Innovative Voting Proof Trends Emerge," *The Korea Times*, April 10, 2024, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/southkorea/society/20240410/election-celebrities-stay-neutral-innovative-voting-proof-trends-emerge.

66 Brian E. Weeks, Audrey Halversen, and German Neubaum, "Too Scared to Share? Fear of Social Sanctions for Political Expression on Social Media," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 29 no. 1 (2024): zmad041. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmad041.

67 Jody C. Baumgartner and Brad Lockerbie, "Maybe It Is More Than a Joke: Satire, Mobilization, and Political Participation," *Social Science Quarterly* 99 no. 3 (2018): 1060–74, https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12501.

an independent evaluation would assess the programme's impact on youth political participation and inform potential expansion through existing cultural and youth institutions.

The *Politics in Everyday Media Spaces* initiative would be implemented through a two-year pilot programme. During the first three months, MCST and KOCCA would establish a dedicated funding programme and independent selection committees. From months 4–6, KOCCA would recruit approximately 15 youth media production teams and provide grants, mentoring, and production facilities. During months 7–12, the teams would independently produce and distribute 15 political and social media outputs through online platforms. From months 13–21, an interim evaluation would assess audience engagement and creators' confidence in political expression, followed by additional support to produce another 15 outputs. In the final three months, an independent evaluation would assess the programme's impact on youth political expression and public discussion, thereby informing potential expansion and continued funding.

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism could provide financial and institutional support through existing public institutions. *The Arts Council Korea* and local cultural foundations could establish partnerships with theatres to implement *Civic Arts Dialogue*. For *Politics in Everyday Media Spaces*, the *Korea Creative Content Agency* could establish a dedicated funding programme for youth-led political media production, building on its existing creative talent development initiatives. Both initiatives should adopt the arm's-length principle, under which the government provides financial and institutional support without directly interfering in artistic content or individual funding decisions.[68]

Singapore

For policy option 1, operationalising it would require discussions between the governmental bodies, such as the artists, the public, the National Arts Council, IMDA, and the legislature to come up with a more detailed framework of what limits should be allowed to be placed on artivism. Suppose an artwork is deeply offensive to a religious community but does not violate any criminal law; should that artwork still be permitted? Although this question cannot be fully addressed within the scope of this paper, it emphasises the need for public deliberation on the legitimate boundaries of government intervention in artistic expression. Such deliberation could inform the development of clearer regulatory principles, potentially through public consultations or other participatory decision-making mechanisms.

For policy option 2, while being exposed to more political art is a form of political participation, participatory arts proceed one step further by purposefully blurring the traditional dichotomies of 'performer and audience',[69] and transform the audience from 'Spectators' into 'Spect-actors'.[70] By contrast, for Policy Option 3, the creation of political art is itself a form of political participation.

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68 UNESCO, *Re|Shaping Policies for Creativity: Addressing Culture as a Global Public Good* (Paris: UNESCO, 2022), https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380474.

69 Stephanie Gillibrand, Paul Hine, Rob Conyers, Jason Gravestock, Cole Walsh, Aneela McAvoy, and Caroline Sanders, "'Take a Walk in Someone Else's Shoes': The Role of Participatory Arts for Health Research Development and Training," *Research Involvement and Engagement (London)* 9, no. 1 (2023): 40, https://doi.org/10.1186/s40900-023-00441-6.

70 Lillian Comas-Díaz, *Liberation Psychology: Theory, Method, Practice, and Social Justice* (American Psychological Association, 2020).

We propose a combined three-year implementation plan for both policy options. The first three months would involve consultations between youth groups and independent civil society organisations (CSOs) to identify the social issues they wish to address and determine the artistic mediums they would like to use. The actor responsible for operationalising this policy option would be the independent CSOs. Government involvement could undermine the independence that makes the policy option valuable in the first place. Funding for this policy will have to be administered by an independent intermediary like universities or foundations. Subsequently, months 4–6 would focus on selecting partner CSOs, arts organisations, and practitioners to collaborate with youths on storyboarding their projects and providing mentorship. Marketing efforts for these art projects would run concurrently during this period. During months 7–12, youths would present their political art projects and encourage other young people to attend and engage with them. These projects would also incorporate post-performance or post-activity dialogues and participatory arts elements. Drawing inspiration from existing cultural initiatives such as the SG Culture Pass, we propose organising fundraising efforts to finance a Youth Arts Pass, which would enable youths to attend multiple productions created by their peers. The Youth Arts Pass would also have a lower minimum eligibility age of 15, compared to 18 for the SG Culture Pass, allowing youths to be exposed to political art at a younger age. The second year would focus on evaluating the projects and gathering feedback from participants. In the third year, the programme would be expanded based on the findings of the evaluation. This plan aims to create a self-sustaining youth community where youth-created political art is supported by youths as well.

4. Conclusion

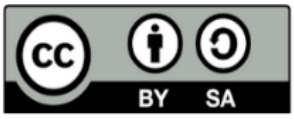
Who draws the line? On what grounds? Finally, who gets to challenge it?

Ultimately, implementing the policy alternatives is not as straightforward as it appears. Their effectiveness depends on addressing the political and cultural contexts wherein they operate, as well as the preconditions in each country necessary for their implementation. Moreover, expanding opportunities for youth artivism must involve critically examining the existing boundaries on political expression. If we never question why these boundaries have been established and who sets them, we risk standing behind the bars of the gatekeepers' gates forever. We must question why a regulator's interpretation of political sensitivity should automatically justify restricting it. The rules governing political expression should be developed through accountable and inclusive processes while protecting the right to express dissenting views. Ordinary citizens should have a say in where these boundaries are drawn, and young people have a crucial role to play in carrying forward the legacies of the artivists who came before them.

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