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Beyond the Echo Chamber: Rethinking Youth Political Engagement in the Digital Era

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Beyond the Echo Chamber: Rethinking Youth Political Engagement in the Digital Era

Patrice Kelsey Villaruz

Today, social media, due to its popularity and accessibility, has emerged as the primary platform for political persuasion, engagement, and discourse. This is especially true in the case of the Philippines, often referred to as the “social media capital of the world,” as social media platforms have had a pronounced influence and role on the conduct of the country’s politics. Filipinos spend an average of 3 hours and 32 minutes on social media daily, which is over an hour more than the global average,¹ with 63.1% of users falling within the 18 to 34 age range.² As such, the youth’s political participation holds significant weight in society, and their deep engagement with social media has transformed these spaces into primary sources of political news, as well as key arenas for political engagement and mobilization.³

However, social media also poses major challenges to political discourse—most notably the spread of misinformation and disinformation, the creation of echo chambers driven by selective exposure through algorithm-curated news feeds,⁴ and the rising “unfriending culture” reflected in comments like, “If you believe in X, unfriend me.”⁵ These dynamics further entrench polarization and hinder critical discourse.⁶ For the Filipino youth who are highly active online and constitute a large part of the voting population, engaging in meaningful political dialogue within online and offline spaces marked by polarization, disengagement, and disinformation is becoming increasingly difficult and complex. Yet, persuasion is crucial in politics and electoral victories, and the ability to drive change amidst policy conflicts depends on which side can convince and mobilize greater public support.⁷ Therefore, the crucial question remains: how can we sustain and foster the youth’s political engagement in this evolving digital and political landscape?

The youth's democratic dilemma

Today's youth are digital natives who tend to possess high levels of digital literacy. Still, they are not immune to the polarizing tendencies that characterize political discourse. In the Philippine context, young people have not only participated in but also contributed to the construction of ideological echo chambers, particularly within digital platforms. This deliberate effort to filter out opposing perspectives, also known as selective avoidance, has been increasingly prevalent among the youth and in digital political spaces, reinforcing echo chambers and diminishing opportunities for constructive dialogue both online and offline.⁸

One salient manifestation of this is the growing practice of “unfriending” or “unfollowing” friends who identify with a different political camp. This tendency, closely tied to political intolerance or a limited capacity to engage with differing viewpoints, is often intensified by the unchecked use of targeted and algorithm-driven social media campaigns that cater to specific political groups. It not only reflects an individual's attempt to shield themselves from opposing views by severing social ties, but also a broader phenomenon in which affective polarization reinforces political tribalism, even among digitally literate and civically engaged youth.

Individuals have also developed roundabout ways of responding to messages that challenge their social and political views, especially during significant political events such as national elections. This is seen through many who resist engagement by invoking the phrase “respect my opinion”—a rhetorical device that, while framed as a call for civility, often signals a closure to meaningful deliberation.⁹ This climate of disengagement and defensiveness was particularly evident during the 2022 and 2025 Philippine Elections, when questions such as “Why are you voting for X?” were frequently met not with reasoned responses but with reductive and derogatory narratives such as “*bobotante*” (stupid voter), highlighting the affective polarization that continues to shape political expression among the Filipino youth in the digital era.

In the context of social media—which is characterized by numerous weak or casual ties, and heterogenous connections¹⁰—it becomes much easier to unfriend, unfollow, or mute others without much consequence.¹¹ Such behavior reduces cognitive dissonance, leading individuals to feel more confident and less conflicted about their beliefs, which in turn makes it easier for them to engage in political participation without challenge.¹² Additionally, the algorithmic structure of social media platforms reinforces self-created echo chambers by curating content that aligns with users' existing preferences and behaviors.¹³ This leads to the formation of so-called “filter bubbles,” in which individuals are systematically protected from dissenting views. As a result, netizens are less likely to encounter perspectives that challenge their own, lessening the opportunities for deliberative engagement and further exacerbating political polarization.¹⁴

While unfriending or the avoidance of cross-cutting information may not be as widespread as often perceived, it would be erroneous to assume that it lacks societal impact. Even limited exposure to homogeneous perspectives can perpetuate division and hinder critical dialogue. As such, selective avoidance, particularly in social media, risks flattening the diversity of discourse and limits the development of more critical and reflective engagement with politics both online and offline. However, social media algorithms are designed to prioritize content that corresponds with user preferences, making it difficult to eradicate algorithm-induced echo chambers. Furthermore, this phenomenon extends beyond the algorithm-induced echo chambers. It also encompasses self-created echo chambers, where individuals actively choose to engage only in actual social interactions that align with and reinforce their pre-existing beliefs, driven by a culture of unfriending and the causal mechanisms of self-selection.¹⁵

Moreover, youth political engagement is further complicated by the intergenerational divide and societal narratives and norms that dismiss the political agency of the youth, especially within the Philippine context where respect for hierarchy and vertical social relationships is deeply ingrained. This is frequently encapsulated in remarks like “*Bata ka pa; wala kang alam*” (You are still a child; you know nothing), “*Anong*

ambag mo?" (What's your contribution?), or the condescending directive, *"Mag-aral ka na lang"* (Just focus on studying),¹⁶ which functions as criticisms and subtle tools of political exclusion, delegitimizing youth participation in public discourse.

Nevertheless, the youth and their vote show promise in both online and offline spaces. In the recent 2025 Philippine Midterm Elections, National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) National Chairperson Lito Averia Jr. noted that the youth are not only eager to participate but want to be part of the solutions to the problems they see in society, underscoring the need for targeted training and support.¹⁷ Senator Bam Aquino also stated that the many young people who supported him and Senator Kiko Pangilinan was another reason why they came out as the second-ranking and fifth-ranking senators despite not topping any pre-election poll.¹⁸ Commission on Elections (COMELEC) Chairman George Erwin Garcia echoed these statements saying that the "youth vote" had been a major factor in voter turnout, despite the lack of exit polls.

To date, while the influence of the "Filipino youth vote" is often credited for these electoral outcomes, there remains no definitive data to support such claims. Pulse Asia President Ronald Holmes, for instance, acknowledged that their current sampling methodology does not randomly select respondents based on age.¹⁹ This disconnect between perception and data highlights a critical issue in understanding the "youth vote" especially in the digital era.

Youth political engagement: a force for change

Nonetheless, evidence suggests that efforts to engage are not futile. Even in the absence of data and research on the effects and influence of the Filipino youth vote or their political participation, there are strong indications that when the youth are able to navigate the perils of contemporary political discourse, their collective action is capable of reshaping narratives and asserting their position in the future of Philippine democracy. Youth political participation is especially vital in the digital age, especially because their active engagement on social media has established them as influential voices in shaping political discourse. This significance is supported by the fact that the youth comprise a large part of Philippine social media users and 63% of the voting population.²⁰ Thus, the Filipino youth possess a dual capacity for political engagement, connecting online advocacy with offline action. This duality enables young people to move seamlessly between the online and offline space, strengthening the impact of their political participation and engagement by increasing its visibility and momentum, as well as their capacity to mobilize support on a broader and more rapid scale.

Today, Filipino youth leaders are increasingly breaking barriers despite the challenges posed by echo chambers, political dynasties, and societal biases. One inspiring example is Kelly Denn Tomas, a fellow of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's (KAS) Adenauer Young Leaders Program, who was recently elected as Councilor of Atok, Benguet, during the 2025 Midterm Elections. She explained that her motivation to run for public office stemmed from the absence of government officials, especially during times of crisis, and the issues surrounding the lack of transparency in local governance in their municipality.²¹ As the first individual from their municipality to run for this position at the young age of 29, she faced skepticism, with many questioning her capability due to her age and identity as a transwoman. Undeterred, she focused her campaign on transparency, sustainable tourism, and empowering marginalized sectors, particularly women and youth. To amplify her message, she leveraged word-of-mouth support from trusted community members both offline and online. Believing that early advocacy builds credibility and competence, she encourages young leaders to get involved as soon as possible. Starting her public service as a Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) Member, Councilor Tomas now represents the Municipality of Atok, Benguet as one of its newly elected councilors, exemplifying the potential of youth to address political challenges.

Still, the significance of the youth's influence in Philippine politics, especially at the national level, remains a topic of debate. During the "Manila Calling: How to Win (or Lose) an Election" event organized by KAS

Philippines on May 16, Ms. Bianca Lacaba of *Kaya Natin!* Movement emphasized the notable increase in youth engagement during Senator Bam Aquino's campaign for the 2025 elections, further noting that youth involvement has evolved from mere tokenism to active political engagement. At the same event, Dr. Julio Teehankee from De La Salle University also remarked that while the influence of the so-called "youth vote" as a "game changer" remains debated, there is no denying that the youth clearly pose a significant influence on how the political landscape is shaping up.

As such, in light of this discussion and drawing from the lessons of the past, the following recommendations aim to ensure the continued growth of youth political engagement in today's dynamic digital and political environment.

1. Encourage practicing political self-regulation in the age of polarization.

To effectively challenge the influence of echo chambers, the youth can make a deliberate effort to diversify their news sources, actively seek meaningful engagement with individuals who hold different viewpoints, and apply this openness in both digital and real-world interactions. In the evolving landscape of digital politics, self-regulation must become a conscious and deliberate practice among the youth, not just in terms of what information they consume, but also in how they interact with those who think differently from them. As a form of soft governance, self-regulation proves to be a promising governance mechanism to influence political behavior.²²

It is crucial to recognize that self-imposed echo chambers, often formed through the act of "unfriending" or "unfollowing" people with opposing beliefs, only exacerbate the algorithmically driven ones that already dominate digital spaces. While cutting ties with those who hold different views may feel satisfying in the short term, it ultimately narrows the discursive space essential for democratic engagement. Rather than severing ties, the youth should maintain and actively connect and dialogue with people who hold differing views, allowing their political narratives to spread out in diverse social circles, subtly challenging preconceptions and fostering critical reflection.

Practicing self-regulation means holding ourselves accountable for how we discourse with other people, both online and offline. By moving away from voter-shaming and political unfriending, the youth will be able to foster a more inclusive and persuasive approach, paving the way for broader democratic participation and more constructive political engagement.

2. Stimulate political dialogue through localized, inclusive youth engagement.

Local Youth Development Councils (LYDCs), established in every province, city, and municipality as mandated by the SK Reform Act of 2015, craft their respective Local Youth Development Plan (LYDP) around key centers of participation, including social inclusion, equity, and governance. These thematic areas provide fertile ground for developing a dialogue-focused program that equips young local leaders with the skills to engage politically across differing viewpoints, especially in a landscape often marked by polarization.

One of the most pressing issues that such a program could address is the trend of labelling voters as "*bobotante*" (stupid voters), which often risks alienating undecided voters or those with a different political belief, hindering efforts to foster inclusive political dialogue. This was evident during the 2022 Philippine National Elections, where some sectors struggled to win over more supporters, in part due to this divisive rhetoric. Interestingly, the relative absence of this narrative in the 2025 midterm elections played a significant role in shifting perceptions, as evidenced by the increased support for candidates like Senator Bam Aquino and Senator Kiko Pangilinan.

Framing political disagreements through condescending language is both unfair and counterproductive. Even if some may seem uninformed, it is important to recognize that these types of voters are often victims of a flawed system rather than the root of the problem. Nothing makes a self-serving politician happier than when people are blamed for their choices, as it shifts accountability away from those who created the problematic conditions in the first place. Instead of adopting a condescending or dismissive tone, focus on demonstrating the real consequences of voting for unfit politicians.

While there are studies which suggest that exposure to opposing views and information can trigger defensive responses and heighten polarization, other research points to its potential to foster participation in confrontational political activities,²³ empathy, and even openness to revising one's beliefs.²⁴ In this light, encouraging exposure to diverse perspectives may help bridge the divides exacerbated by digital echo chambers—offering a crucial opportunity for the youth to deepen their engagement and strengthen their political influence during these pivotal moments. By embedding a dialogue-centered initiative into the implementation of the LYDP, such as community listening forums, local governments and SKs can empower young leaders to learn how to navigate complex political discourses and to persuade without alienating. Moving away from voter shaming will help the youth, starting at the local government level, to foster a more inclusive and persuasive approach.

3. Invest in learning spaces to build long-term youth political leadership.

Political engagement in a democracy is not a one-time effort—it is a long-term commitment that institutions must consistently nurture. With the youth comprising 63% of the voting population,²⁵ it is imperative to create institutionalized programs that expose them to the realities and challenges of governance, helping bridge the gap between political enthusiasm and strategic action.

A compelling example of this is the City Youth Month Program of the Naga City Government, which provides a platform for young people to participate in local governance through structured, meaningful involvement. Programs like this have already proven effective in cultivating emerging leaders such as current Naga City Councilor Jefson Romeo Felix. His leadership journey, anchored in youth engagement, has led to initiatives such as Juan Health PH, a nationwide effort addressing health illiteracy among Filipinos. This outcome shows that when young people are given a space to learn, lead, and serve, their unmatched enthusiasm, combined with the knowledge and exposure they gain, can translate into sustained and strategic political participation. Such investments not only shape individual leaders but also build a pipeline of committed, informed, and effective youth advocates who will continue to strengthen democratic governance in the years to come.

Conclusion

To foster meaningful youth political engagement is to strengthen and enliven Philippine democracy. While social media opens powerful avenues for discourse and mobilization, it also breeds disinformation, echo chambers, and selective engagement. Yet, despite these challenges, the youth persist—upholding their democratic rights and responsibilities, actively participating in socio-political life, and making their presence felt in pivotal moments such as elections. Strengthening democracy means recognizing that the youth are not merely our hope for the future, but active partners in shaping the present. Thus, this hope and influence must be sustained and strategically amplified as the youth, along with those who support them, deserve to be seen, heard, and felt. By embracing proactive narrative-building rather than relying on reactionary discourse, the youth can reclaim digital spaces and redefine political conversations, thus shaping a more informed and engaged electorate in the digital era.

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