



REVIEW ARTICLE

Age Inequalities in Political Representation: A Review Article

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Abstract

People in political decision-making across the globe tend to be much older than the average voter. As such, parliaments and cabinets are unrepresentative of the larger population. This has consequences: it risks favouring policies geared towards the interests of older cohorts, it might alienate youth from voting and could push parties to appeal (even more) to older voters. In this review, we synthesize the growing literature on youth representation. We do so by: (1) delineating the group of young politicians, (2) discussing why youth ought to be present in politics, (3) empirically depicting the state of youth representation, and (4) illustrating the factors that help or harm youth to enter politics. This synthesis shows the degree to which young people are absent from decision-making bodies across the national, subnational and supra-national levels and attempts to make sense of the reasons why there is such a dearth of youth as candidates and representatives. We conclude by discussing gaps in research and suggesting several avenues for future work.

Keywords: youth; representation; parliaments; groups; inequality; voting

Okay, I know that clip [viral video of Finnish Prime Minister Marin dancing] is extremely confusing to many Americans so let me try to explain: some countries have leaders who don't have osteoporosis [bone fragility]. (Trevor Noah, *The Daily Show*, August 2022)

The contrast could not be larger. On the one hand, the film of the 36-year-old Finnish prime minister partying late into the night and, on the other, the video of President Biden at 79, slowly falling off his bike during a trip in Delaware the same summer. While the TV host intended to mock older leaders with this joke – with a tone of ageism more fitting for a talk show than for this review – it does point to a problem: people in the US and elsewhere very rarely witness

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politicians in their 30s reaching the pinnacle of power. Rather, it seems senior citizens almost exclusively occupy such positions. The US is a prime example of this phenomenon. To illustrate, five of the most influential US political figures as of winter 2023 – President Joe Biden, former President Donald Trump, former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, Senate majority leader Chuck Schumer and Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell – are all in their 70s or even in their 80s. Equally telling, the average American was approximately 20 years younger than the average member of the House of Representatives was at the time of the swearing in of Congress in 2021.

The US is not an anomaly. Rather, this age discrepancy between the voting-age population and the members of parliaments and other political bodies is a feature of many democracies, including Japan, India and the United Kingdom, as well as non-democracies such as Egypt or Pakistan. Globally, people under 30 years of age represent half of the world's population, but only 2% of legislators. Looking at young adults (18 to 35 years), we can see that this group faces under-representation in legislatures by a factor of three, relative to their share in the population, and by a factor of ten in cabinets (IPU 2021; Magni-Berton and Panel 2021; Sundström and Stockemer 2021).

Despite the glaring mismatch in congruence between the age of those in positions of political power and the populations in many countries, there is still a rather small literature that discusses the implications of youth under-representation in office. For example, while other 'outgroups' in politics – such as women or ethnic minorities – are the focus of a large body of research (Caul 1999; Funk et al. 2022), attention on youth representation has only recently grown. Another contrast is that when it comes to research on young adults, a large literature discusses age inequalities in participation,¹ but there is much less work on age inequalities in representation – how different age cohorts (especially youth) are descriptively and substantively represented in political assemblies – and, to date, no comprehensive state-of-the-art article.² This review article is the first comprehensive overview of the budding literature on the political representation of young adults.

Our review is organized around four questions, discussed in the following order:

1. How do we define youth and determine whether this group faces under-representation?
2. Why does youth representation matter?
3. How is the state of youth representation in legislatures fairing today?
4. What helps or harms youth presence in decision-making bodies?

We summarize the state of the art for each of these points and conclude by illustrating gaps or points of contention in the literature.

How do we define youth and determine whether this group faces under-representation?

Age is a malleable concept, with no objective threshold separating young from middle-aged or old individuals. There are at least four points of contention that

render young adults difficult to define. First, individuals might perceive themselves differently at the same numerical age. For example, somebody at the age of 50 could self-identify as young, middle-aged or old. Second, the meaning of age is context-specific. For instance, being 30 years old might have a different connotation in an urban setting of a high-income country as compared to the rural countryside in a low-income country. In the former, the average life expectancy might well hover over 80 years, whereas in the latter it might be substantially lower. Third, age is a temporary state of an individual's life. This is in contrast to features of many other groups – for example, having a womb or an ethnic lineage – which rarely change as persons mature. Fourth, and relatedly, it is not set in stone what are the upper or lower boundaries of the age-span that defines the group 'youth', or other age groups such as the middle-aged or elderly (see Hainz 2015).

Grappling with the difficulty to delineate young adults from other age groups, the literature agrees that people's self-identification as young, middle-aged or old is not very helpful analytically (see Barrett and Pachi 2019), because it makes comparisons at the individual and aggregate levels difficult, if not impossible. Therefore, most studies agree that the number of years a person has lived is a reasonable and pragmatic way of measuring age for most people. Yet, there is disagreement on the actual age range. A common assumption in the literature is that the lower bar of being an adult is 18 years, which in most countries throughout the world coincides with the age of majority or the threshold of adulthood as recognized by law.³ However, there is disagreement on the upper threshold. Should this group include adults below 30, 35, 40 or 45 years?⁴ Work on youth representation has defined 'young politicians' as those below the age of 35 years (Norris and Franklin 1997), 36 years (Eshima and Smith 2022), 40 years (Curry and Haydon 2018; Joshi 2013; Joshi and Och 2021), as well as 45 years (IPU 2021). Because there is no agreed-upon definition, some studies include several of the upper benchmarks (see IPU 2021; Kissau et al. 2012; Stockemer and Sundström 2022a, 2022b).

Regardless of the upper benchmark, what all these operationalizations have in common is that they are conservative. When focusing on people in office, they tend to measure the share of young adults at all of these age limits at the beginning of a parliamentary term. For example, this implies that at the end of a parliament's term (i.e. four or five years after its inauguration), representatives are generally four or five years older. This also entails not only that the mean and median age have increased by this amount, but also that the share of young adults any of the aforementioned age brackets is likely much lower than at the beginning of a term.

There is also an emerging discussion on whether we should operationalize youth representation as the percentage of politicians in a certain age bracket or whether we should compare the share of young adults in an assembly to the share of young adults in the population (see Sundström and Stockemer 2021). Given that the share of adults below the ages of 35, 40 or 45 years, respectively, can fluctuate significantly between countries, it is important that the literature takes a position whether we should measure the under-representation of age groups in absolute or relative terms. We deem a relative measurement slightly superior, even if a minority of studies at present use such a measure (see, e.g. Sundström and Stockemer 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). We illustrate this judgement call with an empirical example; that is, the 18- to 35-year-old population cohort comprises about 20% of

the voting-age population in countries such as Japan, but over 60% in some African countries, including Uganda or Zambia. This implies that the relative standing of youth in society is not the same in Uganda as compared to Japan. The following example highlights this. Let us assume that both Uganda and Japan have a share of 10% of adults aged 35 or under in their national parliament. If we were to use this absolute percentage, both Japan and Uganda would be on equal terms concerning youth's (under-)representation. However, if we were to compare the ratio of young people in parliament to the ratio of young people in the population, Ugandan youth would face an under-representation in parliament that is three times as pronounced as the under-representation of youth in Japan.⁵

Not only is this debate about measurement conceptually important, it also has concrete empirical repercussions. It entails that the magnitude of young adults' under-representation will in part depend on how we operationalize youth representation as a concept. Moving forward, the literature should determine criteria for one or the other operationalization. It is likely that if we settle for the relative figure, youth under-representation in parliaments and other political bodies will even be more significant than if we just look at the absolute figures of presence.

Why does youth representation matter?

Works normatively supporting higher youth representation tend to build on research on social group representation (see Norris and Franklin 1997). The argument rests on the theory of a 'politics of presence' (Phillips 1995) according to which specific social groups have a claim for descriptive representation because they have been systematically disadvantaged (Kymlicka 1995). Are young adults such a group? A counterargument to the proposition that youth should have such a claim is that we should not pay attention to a group with whom individuals only have a temporary identification. Such reasoning suggests that the exclusion from politics that younger people might face during their earlier years could be compensated by the advantages they enjoy later in life (see Bidadanure 2015; Phillips 1998). However, others object to this view. For example, Stockemer and Sundström (2022a, 2022b) suggest that this view misses out the potential tension that arises when assemblies populated by older generations decide on laws that inflict costs primarily on younger generations, including policies for conscription to military service or policies on student loans.⁶ In fact, the literature provides a well-motivated claim for youth representation in politics, which we can distil into three components: (1) youth have specific interests, which are not represented in the political realm, (2) there is a bias towards elderly people in electoral politics, and (3) low levels of youth political representation feed into a circle of youth alienation.

Youth interest in the political realm and their substantive representation

Baskaran et al. (2021: 1) recently posed the fundamental question, 'Can we expect an overwhelmingly old political class to take the preferences of the young sufficiently into account?' The assumption behind this question is that young adults tend to hold different values and views on a range of themes compared to more

senior citizens, which then translate into contrasting policies. These range from salient social issues, such as abortion rights, to issues about environmental protection and public spending priorities. For example, opinions about LGBTQ+ rights differ by age, with younger citizens being more open and supportive towards issues such as same-sex marriages, and older citizens more opposed to it (McEvoy 2016; Sevi 2021). Another topic where youth tend to display different views is that of climate change. As noted by Ross and Rouse (2022), individuals from the Millennial Generation and Generation Z tend to be more convinced than older adults of the existence of anthropogenic climate change and have greater concern for this issue (see also Lorenzini et al. 2021; Stokes et al. 2015). In yet another field, public spending preferences, there are several studies suggesting that younger cohorts prefer spending of public funds in the education sector, whereas older individuals prefer a priority on increased pensions (see Busemeyer and Lober 2019; Cattaneo and Wolter 2009; Furlong and Cartmel 2012; Sorensen 2013).

Not only is there some evidence that youth as a group have distinct preferences, there is also growing evidence that young legislators substantively represent the interest of the younger cohorts of the population. As Wattenberg (2015: 150) notes, this is not only about having different views on issues discussed: 'a significant aspect of the political bias in favor of the elderly involves the issues that make it to the political agenda'. For example, recent work also suggests that the age of a legislator affects how and about which themes a legislator talks in the legislative chamber. For instance, Curry and Haydon (2018) document how older Representatives in the US are spokespersons of elderly people, whereas McClean (2021) – focusing on mayors in Japan – states that, compared to older politicians, young politicians are more likely to actively support issues important for youth, such as specific public spending priorities on education. Relatedly, Fiva et al. (2023) suggest that young Members of Parliament (MPs), besides speaking slightly more than elderly MPs, talk more about issues related to childcare, whereas older legislators are more likely to talk about healthcare. Moreover, Bailer et al. (2022) document that young MPs are more active on youth-oriented issues such as the environment than their older counterparts, at least during their first term in office.⁷ Finally, Baskaran et al. (2021) illustrate that young politicians in office are significantly better at allocating resources in municipal budgets to sectors in which young adults have a higher stake, such as social spending on schools.

Altogether, these studies conclude that the under-representation of the young in elected assemblies is detrimental to this group's interests. In short, if youth sit in insufficient numbers at the decision-making table, they see their interests sidelined or pushed to the side. In Mansbridge's (1999, 2015) terms, young adults tend to have some 'uncrystallized substantive interests' that the system does not sufficiently represent. This applies even more so considering that youth interests seem to be secondary in the calculation of parties and politicians.

Electoral politics: an uneven playing field

Because an individual's propensity to vote increases with age, political parties, as vote maximizers, more often target the vote of senior citizens than those of younger ones (Binstock 2012; Davidson 2012). As stated by Bennion (2005: 134), 'Parties

usually concentrate on higher-turnout age groups in their quest for a cost-effective mobilization strategy. ... To conserve resources, parties often target easy-to-reach likely voters and purge young people from the mobilization lists.’ According to Blais (2000), age is, alongside education, the most important individual predictor to explain a citizen’s propensity to vote. In support of this stipulation, research in many parts of the world illustrates that the participation gap between those aged 25 or 30 and under, and those in their 50s and 60s often reaches 25 or 30 percentage points (Achen and Wang 2019; Grasso 2014; Holbein and Hillygus 2016). We find this trend in countries as diverse as Australia (Hannan-Morrow and Roden 2014), Greece (Sloam 2013) and South Africa (Scott et al. 2011).

This participation gap matters if we consider that in electoral politics there is often a clear distinction between voters’ choice. While there is certainly individual variation, in the aggregate, younger voters tend to prefer more left-wing and progressive parties, whereas older voters tend to favour parties that are more conservative. The differences in voter preferences have also shown up at major recent referenda. For example, Rekker (2022) illustrates that in the UK in 2016 about two-thirds of those aged over 65 years voted for ‘Brexit’, whereas among those under 25 years nearly 70% voted for ‘remain’. Rekker also notes that in the ensuing 2017 election, the vote support for the Conservative Party among those older than 70 years was about 50 percentage points higher than among those under 20 years (see also Norris 2018; Sloam and Henn 2019).

The fact that the pool of older voters is much larger makes most parties cater more to the preferences of senior citizens as compared to young voters (Bannon 2004; Berry 2008; Parijs 1998). In the words of Vlandas et al. (2021), the numerical superiority of the senior group as well as their increased socioeconomic resources and networks is likely to give them distinct political preferences and behaviours (see Binstock 2012). Davidson and Binstock (2012: 26) aptly describe this phenomenon as the ‘sleeping giant’ of angry older voters. The phenomena have also been called the ‘grey vote’ (Davidson 2012). These terms illustrate that in election campaigns most parties, at least in the Western world, go to great lengths to win the senior vote. In the US, for instance, Ansolabehere states that ‘both parties [the Democrats and Republicans] have to do well with the senior vote if they are going to do well in the general election’ (quoted in Bunis 2018). The two major US parties frequently also use special ‘senior desks’ to attract older voters. To our knowledge, similar desks do not generally exist for young voters.

The vicious circle of youth alienation

Youth’s relative absence in parliament and their diminished participation in elections lead to an even larger circle of political alienation (see our stylized illustration of this process in Figure 1) (see Stockemer and Sundström 2018, 2022a, 2022b). The starting point of this vicious circle is youth’s meagre presence in the political process (Dahl et al. 2018; Wallace 2003). Youth are not the majority in the voting arena and are a small minority in parliament (Weiss 2020). As such, many issues important to them – such as action against climate change, gun control or higher education spending – either do not make it on the political agenda, or if they make it, do not get enough support to be implemented. An illustration is gun control in

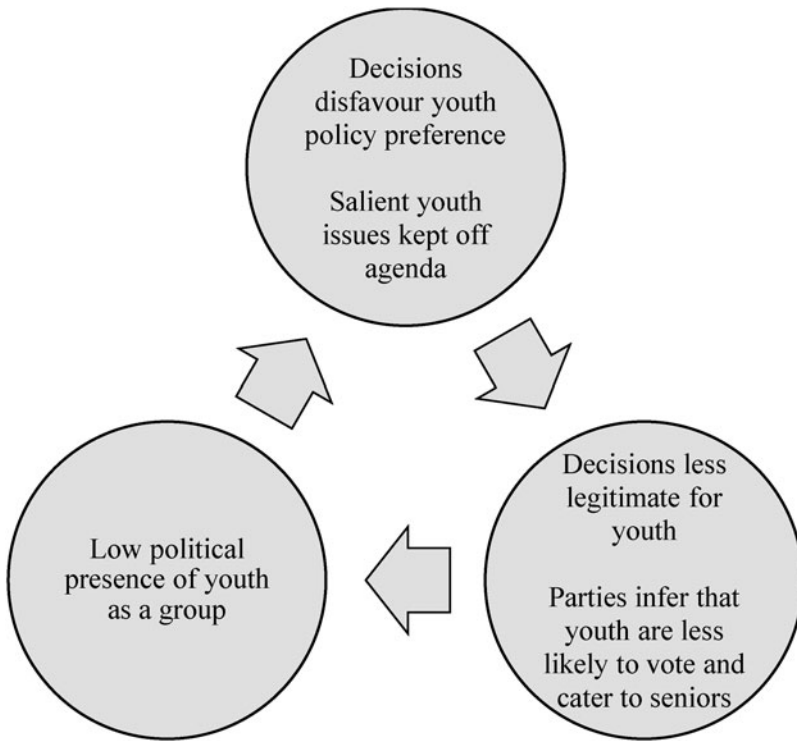


Figure 1. The Vicious Circle of Youth Alienation

the US. For example, a Harvard Poll (2018) finds that two-thirds of American voters under the age of 30 favour stricter gun laws and the complete ban of assault weapons. Despite multiple school shootings between then and now, and youth's strong activism to halt these massacres, very little has changed regarding gun laws in the country. Hence, this illustrates how youth in the US and elsewhere could face a situation where decisions disfavouring their preferences and salient issues might not make it onto the political agenda. In other words, the generation of 'Boomers' has more substantive influence on policy than younger generations and one reason is that this lack of descriptive presence directly leads youth to have less power in politics (see Munger 2022).⁸

Briggs (2017) and Coleman (2007) suggest that increasing the share of young legislators could be one way to break the vicious circle of youth's political alienation. While yet to be tested empirically, this argument also holds that, besides the possibility to change the political culture in parliament, the presence of young legislators could also lead to the symbolic representation of youth, giving them the feeling of fair representation, with relevant issues on the agenda; this, in turn, might then encourage youth to be more engaged in formal types of politics.

Youth's lack of representation can also have negative consequences on how youth perceive the legitimacy of the political system, further reinforcing this circle

of alienation. For instance, Mansbridge's (1999, 2015) theory on groups' claims for representation suggests that 'significant descriptive under-representation of certain groups in the national legislature undermines the legitimacy of the regime in the eyes of those less well represented' (Mansbridge 2015: 265). There are also signs that many youth are appalled by the political system. For instance, using the example of US politics, the study by Lawless and Fox (2015) summarizes youth's disgust with the system as follows: 'Washington's dreadful performance over the past two decades has taken a toll on the young Americans who have come to know politics through this spectacle. They see politics as pointless and unpleasant. They see political leaders as corrupt and selfish' (Lawless and Fox 2015: 8).

What is the state of youth representation in parliament?

Notions of 'rule of the elderly' have a long standing in practice – examples include councils in Sparta where members had to be 60 years or older (see Palmore 1999: 39) – or more philosophical ideas according to which only older leaders are mature enough to rule.⁹ Despite the fact that the literature has clearly laid out the normative arguments in favour of more youth representation, the numerical presence of legislators in most parliaments across the globe has not changed.¹⁰ New datasets, such as the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU) Parline dataset and even more so the Worldwide Age Representation in Parliaments (WARP) dataset (see Stockemer and Sundström 2022b), allow us to retrace youth representation over the past decades. Regardless of which dataset we use, we still find that the age group adults aged 35 or lower still makes up 10% or less of parliamentarians in most national legislatures across the globe. In some countries, youth representation has even deteriorated. The prime example is the US. Data from the WARP dataset for this country illustrates that the average age of a House Member at the inauguration of Congress has increased from 50 years in 1980 to around 58 years in 2020. The share of House Members aged 35 or under has decreased from 5% to 2% in the same time span (see also Stockemer et al. 2023). If we look at other countries with long time series of data such as Canada, Germany, the UK or France, we also see no significant decrease in the average age of parliamentarians or increase in young MPs aged 35 or under, as well as 40 years or under.¹¹

Currently, young adults at the age of 35 years or under at the time of a parliament's inauguration make up about 10% of MPs worldwide. This compares to roughly one-third of the voting-age population and 50% of the global population. Even if we look at MPs aged 40 or under, this group still makes up less than 20% of all MPs, despite making up some 40% of the world's voting-age population. Hence, many of today's parliaments are still what Maddox (1987: 287) labels a gerontocracy, a system that is ruled by leaders who are older than most of the adult population.

What are the determinants of youth representation in parliament?

Most studies either use or indirectly refer to a supply-and-demand framework to explain youth's lack of parliamentary representation or variation in the presence

of young adults in parliaments (see Lovenduski 2016; Norris and Lovenduski 1995). According to the framework, the precise number of young legislators depends on two supply-side factors – the willingness of young adults to run, and parties’ and political actors’ willingness to nominate them – as well as the demand for young candidates in the electorate.

In line with the vicious circle of political alienation, there is preliminary evidence that the proportion of youth who run as candidates is smaller than their proportion in the population. According to the second version of the Comparative Candidate Survey (CCS), a joint multinational project that collects data on candidates that run for legislative office in their national legislatures (see CCS 2019), the share of candidates in 18 elections in 14 countries from 2012 to 2017 aged 35 years or under was roughly 25%.¹² This compares to roughly 30% that these young adults make up of the voting-age population.

However, even more so than a lack of young candidates, low youth representation hinges on parties’ unwillingness to put young adults in winnable list-positions in proportional representation systems or competitive seats in single-member districts. The 18 elections in the CCS triggered a share of roughly 13% elected youth representatives, implying that the ratio between the number of youth in the candidate pool compared to youth among representatives is nearly two to one. There are two possibilities for this electoral disadvantage: (1) voters systematically favour older candidates, and (2) there are systematic hurdles in the nomination process that render young candidates less successful. There is relatively little support for the first proposition. While some survey research points towards an indirect bias in favour of older candidates due to name recognition, incumbency and experience, the few experimental studies actually point to different directions. For one, Eshima and Smith’s (2022) meta-analysis of 16 conjoint design-based candidate-choice experiments documents that older hypothetical candidates are somewhat less likely to be favoured by respondents.¹³ In contrast, Lees and Praino (2022) find that voters, including young voters, are significantly more likely to favour older candidates.

There might also be a process of ‘affinity voting’ (see Sevi 2021) where people on average prefer candidates of their own age (see also McClean and Ono 2022). Nevertheless, we cannot make a strong demand-side argument. At least from the current literature, there is no clear-cut evidence that voters, on average, prefer older candidates. Hence, as of now, we cannot establish the connection between voting preferences and the gerontocracy we observe in most parliaments across countries. This also implies that we can conclude with relative certainty that voter bias is not the main driver for the shortage of youth in politics.

Rather, the main explanatory factor is more likely some sort of bias in the electorate of parties towards older candidates. For example, Bjarnegård (2013) documents that homosocial networks form over time within parties. In such networks, those with connections, resources and influence will prevail. In the overall majority, these individuals are already senior politicians. Focusing directly on candidate nominations, Cirone et al. (2021) as well as Rehmert (2022) confirm this assessment. According to them, party gatekeepers – who in the grand majority are senior party figures – support candidates who are of similar age to themselves.

Strategically, these influential party figures are unlikely to sideline young candidates completely. Rather, they would place them on less electable list positions and in constituencies that the party is unlikely to win.

Beyond these general observations, the literature has also identified factors that could (moderately) boost the presence of young adults. At the macro level, these factors are: (1) proportional representation (PR) electoral systems, (2) legal age barriers to run for office, and (3) term limits. For PR systems, Stockemer and Sundström (2018, 2022a) suggest that party-centred systems lead to a more diverse pool of candidates increasing the share of young legislators aged 35 years or under by about four percentage points (see also Joshi 2013, 2015). When it comes to age requirements, the legal barriers for candidacy age differ quite a lot across the globe, from 18 years for countries like Portugal or South Korea, 21 for countries such as Venezuela or Brazil, 25 years to be an MP in the Philippines or the US, to 28 years for Iraq. Stockemer and Sundström (2018) as well as Krook and Nugent (2018) report that for every year these legal age requirements increase, the share of young legislators tends to decrease between a half and a full percentage point. Finally, there is some indirect evidence that term limits would lead to greater turnover, which would benefit younger politicians (Casellas 2011; Hansen and Clark 2020). Interestingly enough, the literature has so far not detected a systematic positive effect from youth quotas on young adults' presence in parliaments (see Dobbs 2020, 2022; Garcia de Paredes and Desrues 2021). In the few countries they exist or have existed, such as Tunisia or Sri Lanka, these quotas have not been effective in their design. According to Belschner (2021) they are a case of window-dressing or an attempt to co-opt youth into the political system without real reform, rather than a serious attempt to empower youth (see Gyampo 2015).¹⁴

At the party level, three factors seem to moderately matter for youth: (1) the age of the party, (2) the age of the party leader, and (3) party ideology. For the former two, there is some evidence that younger parties tend to nominate younger representatives, and the same applies to younger party leaders. For party ideology, there seems to be a moderate correlation between a left-wing ideology and increased youth representation, with the caveat that this association might not apply for communist parties (see Stockemer and Sundström 2022a). At the individual level, young candidates who have already amassed political experience fare better in elections, on average, than youth without such experience. Again, the caveat for youth is that because of their age, few young adults have such experience (Stockemer et al. 2023). Another factor that could matter for young politicians to stand a chance of winning a seat in parliament are 'familial connection', 'dynastic links' or 'legacies' (see Schwindt-Bayer et al. 2022). Name recognition, socialization, trustworthiness and networks are mechanisms that could explain why dynastic ties could help young candidates. Yet, empirically, there is so far no study that looks at such family connections and their link towards youth representation.

Conclusion

There are first signs that young adults in civil society are slowly awakening. Activists in diverse settings – such as in the Arab Spring uprisings, or among climate change protesters in Europe – have pointed out that young adults start to question the older generation's dominance in policymaking. There are also budding attempts, such as non-partisan campaigns in the US or the #NotTooYoungToRun movement in African countries, which support young candidates to win elections. Similarly, the academic literature is slowly taking notice of youth under-representation in parliaments and other decision-making bodies. However, the literature draws a dire picture of young adults' under-representation in parliaments. In contrast to other outgroups such as women or minorities, who have made significant gains in representation over the past decades, youth have not made similar progress. If anything, their representation levels have decreased over the past 40 or 50 years despite a growing youth population worldwide.

In this article, we have tried to shed some light on this dearth of youth representation. In fact, despite strong normative arguments in favour of adequate youth representation, young adults remain one of the most under-represented groups in parliament. Worldwide, those who are 35 years or under make up only 10% of MPs as of 2022 and there are still countries with less than 2% of MPs aged 35 years or younger. Examples are Israel, Ghana or the Ivory Coast, among others. The literature has also established factors that moderately increase youth representation. Examples are PR electoral systems, age requirements to run for office set at 18 years at the macro level, a young party or party leader at the meso or party level, and political experience at the individual level for candidates (something most youth do not have).

Youth representation in elected bodies is a budding research area and there are still many unresolved questions in the literature. Two such questions revolve around the definition of young politicians: should we define young adults differently in various parts of the world with differing life expectancies, such as Western Europe or sub-Saharan Africa? Should we conceptualize youth's presence as the share of an age cohort, such as 18 to 35 years, in a legislature, or should we use a relative measure that compares the ratio of youth in parliament to their share in the general population?

Another question that is unresolved pertains to how young representatives are spokespersons for young adults. As identified by Kissau et al. (2012) a decade ago, there are still very few studies examining aspects of ideological congruence and policy congruence in relation to young adults, to see how well the views of those relatively absent from decision-making are represented by parliament (see Golder and Stramski 2010; Kroeber 2018). We believe there is a need for future systematic inquiry in this matter.

We have suggested that family ties and connections could help young candidates, and future research should systematically look into this area. A related topic that merits investigation is the role of economic resources and young candidates. We believe that it is likely that youth on average have fewer economic resources than more senior candidates. It would be interesting to see if campaign expenditure limits would benefit young candidates to run and to win elections.

Another important avenue for future research revolves around the interesting finding from experimental studies that suggest that voters do not have a clear tendency to favour older voters. However, if this was the case, why is there no pressure to include more youth as list candidates and for direct seats? Also why is there no boost in the vote for young candidates?

A further area of research tackles the level of analysis. While there are studies on the low presence of youth in supra-national assemblies such as the European Parliament (Stockemer and Sundström 2019c) in subnational assemblies (e.g. Baskaran et al. 2021; McClean 2021) or in cabinets and between minister portfolios (Stockemer and Sundström 2021), the majority of the empirical literature is on national legislatures. There are considerable knowledge gaps on how young adults fare in assemblies at the municipal and regional levels, whether such posts are a springboard for national office and if the same type of barriers to office exist at all levels. Finally, future research should look at nominations and decipher the mechanisms that sideline young adults. While the literature on youth representation is still full of gaps, we hope that this review article offers a starting point regarding what we know about youth representation in politics. We also hope that our work is a stepping stone for many studies to come.

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Notes

1 For a seminal work, see Verba and Nie (1972). For more recent studies, see Bhatti et al. (2012); Nemcock and Wass (2021).

2 Earlier reviews on youth in politics have different foci; Fisher (2012) focuses on the relationship between social movements and electoral politics, Weiss (2020) on understanding young adults' political participation and Vlandas et al. (2021) on political consequences of ageing societies and generational differences in electoral behaviour and preferences for social policy and public spending. The dearth of research into youth representation is surprising because the issue of youth exclusion is not ignored in policy discussion. For instance, the use of informal as well as formalized youth quotas (e.g. in the largest political party in Sweden (the Social Democrats) and reserved seats for youth in parliaments (e.g. in Sri Lanka, Uganda and Rwanda)) is a testament to the saliency of youth representation.

3 In this overview, we are not engaging with the more normative debate on whether those younger than 18 should be franchised (but see, e.g. Chan and Clayton 2006; Umbers 2020). Rather, we follow the dominant tradition in political philosophy, which dismisses the idea that children should have the same political rights as adults (see Pitkin 1972). As noted by Josefsson and Sandin (2022: 337), 'Children and young people, in their capacity as minors, have preferentially been regarded as "future citizens" or as standing outside the political sphere.'

4 To illustrate, various other fields also use different age limits ranging from 25 to 45 years. For example, if we do a Google Scholar search with the term 'young adult years' and look at the first page of results, it is evident that studies use anything from 25 years to 34, 39, or 45 years, as the upper age limit of this group (see https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=young+adults+years&btnG=).

5 A related argument in measuring groups' political presence holds that the size of an ethnic minority group in relation to the population matters for how we understand the 'appropriate' presence of this group in parliament (Hughes 2011).

6 The 'draft' in the US – with active conscription in the years 1940–1973 – is perhaps the most studied example (Chambers 1987). A more recent practice of state-mandated enlistment of youth is Thailand, where men over the age of 21 years must register and appear in a lottery (Bjarnegård et al. 2023). A related example – discussed by Baskaran et al. (2021) – is policies to protect older people during the COVID-19 crisis, although the costs and benefits of these measures were likely more distributed across generations.

- 7 Yet, the study by Bailer et al. (2022) also cautions us to note that with seniority, enthusiasm and activity in favour of youth issues might decline.
- 8 The concept of Baby Boomers generally refers to people born from 1946 to 1964 (Colby and Ortman 2014).
- 9 For instance, Plato believed that individuals reached philosophical maturity only after having reached the age of 50 (McKee and Barber 2001; see also Magni-Berton and Panel 2021).
- 10 Related, a literature on legislative behaviour finds that young legislators tend to behave differently from their senior colleagues. For instance, younger MPs are more successful in attracting public funds from central government before elections (see Alesina et al. 2019), more active in terms of legislative activities (Ono 2015; but see Hájek 2019 for a contrasting suggestion), as well as more likely to rebel against party policy positions (see Meserve et al. 2009; Nemoto et al. 2008).
- 11 There is also some research that discusses the representation of youth from an intersectionality perspective, also including layers of gender (see Belschner 2023; Erikson and Josefsson 2021). These studies come to nuanced findings. For one, they assert that the presence of young women in today's legislatures is even smaller than that of young men (see Belschner and Garcia de Paredes 2020; Joshi and Och 2021). On the other hand, this finding comes with the caveat that the gender gap in representation might actually be the smallest among young parliamentarians aged 35 years or under of all age groups (see Stockemer and Sundström 2019a, 2019b, 2020; Stockemer et al. 2020).
- 12 These elections are: Switzerland (2015), Iceland (2013, 2016, 2017), Montenegro (2012, 2016), Belgium (2014), Germany (2013, 2017), Hungary (2014), Albania (2013), Romania (2016), Portugal (2015), Greece (2015), Finland (2015), Norway (2013), Chile (2017) and Sweden (2014).
- 13 The studies they analyse are rarely interested in age per se (but see Horiuchi et al. 2020).
- 14 Belschner (2022) also report considerable variation in how well Tunisian parties comply with their youth quotas.

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