

Democratic Participation of Youth in India: Challenges and Contributions to Policy Making

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Abstract

This paper examines the democratic participation of youth in India, analysing the structural challenges that impede their political engagement and evaluating their contributions to national policy making. India's youth population, comprising approximately 27.3 percent of the total population in the 15–29 age bracket, represents a demographically significant force; however, voter registration among the youngest cohort (18–19 years) remains critically low at approximately 29.49 percent. The study employs a secondary data-based descriptive methodology, drawing upon data from the Election Commission of India, Lokniti-CSDS National Election Studies, the World Bank, and the International Labour Organisation. Findings reveal persistent disparities in youth voter turnout, limited representation in legislative bodies, and a growing but uneven role of digital platforms in political mobilisation. The paper concludes that sustained institutional reforms, inclusive civic education, and structured youth advisory mechanisms are essential to translating India's demographic dividend into meaningful democratic participation.

Keywords: Youth political participation, democratic engagement, policy making, voter turnout, India

1. Introduction

India, as the world's largest democracy, possesses an extraordinarily young population that constitutes one of its most significant demographic assets. According to the United Nations Population Division, India's median age stood at 27.9 years in 2018, and approximately 27.3 percent of the total population falls within the 15–29 age group, making it one of the most demographically youthful nations on the planet (Attri & Mishra, 2020). This demographic dividend has long been celebrated as a potential engine for economic growth, social transformation, and democratic renewal. Youth are, in theoretical terms, the agents of change who bring fresh perspectives, innovative thinking, and a heightened sensitivity to issues such as employment, education, climate change, and social justice into the political arena (Galston,

2001). The Election Commission of India launched the Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP) programme in 2009 specifically to address stagnation in voter registration and turnout, and since then, total voter turnout in national elections rose from 58.2 percent in 2009 to 66.4 percent in 2014 (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2019). However, despite the sheer numerical strength of Indian youth, their actual engagement in democratic processes remains strikingly uneven and, in many cases, disappointingly low.

The question of why India's youth a population so numerically powerful remain underrepresented in formal political participation is central to understanding the health and vitality of Indian democracy. The Lokniti-CSDS post-election surveys

of 2014 and 2019 documented that while youth turnout grew from 58 percent in 2009 to 68 percent in 2014, the 2019 general elections saw an overall stagnation in turnout at 67.4 percent, with youth from urban areas particularly disengaged (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2019). Robert Putnam's foundational work on social capital articulated that civic engagement is deeply tied to trust and social networks, and that their erosion leads directly to declining political participation across populations (Putnam, 2000). Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady established through their Civic Voluntarism Model that participation is shaped by access to resources money, time, civic skills and that individuals with fewer socioeconomic resources are systematically less likely to participate in politics (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). When these frameworks are applied to Indian youth, a troubling picture emerges: a large population numerically positioned to influence governance is structurally marginalised by institutional constraints, economic precarity, and a civic education system that has failed to nurture political awareness at scale.

The present study situates itself within this broader context by examining the specific challenges that confront Indian youth in their democratic participation and by evaluating the avenues through which they are increasingly contributing to policy discourse. The 17th Lok Sabha (2019–2024) recorded only 12 percent of elected Members of Parliament aged below 40 years a steep decline from 26 percent in the first Lok Sabha after independence underscoring how deeply gerontocratic Indian legislative politics has become (Jayal, 2011). Meanwhile, digital platforms have opened new channels for youth engagement, with Facebook usage among voters doubling from 9 percent in 2014 to 32 percent during the 2019 elections, as recorded by Lokniti surveys (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2019). This paper therefore examines both the barriers and the emerging contributions, grounded in verified empirical data from Indian electoral and labour statistics up to 2021.

2. Literature Review

The literature on youth political participation in India draws from both global theoretical traditions and India-specific empirical research. At the global level, William Galston's seminal work in the *Annual Review of Political Science* established that political knowledge is a prerequisite for meaningful civic engagement, and that civic education programmes have the capacity to substantially raise levels of political awareness among young citizens (Galston, 2001). His framework underscores that the absence of political knowledge does not merely reflect apathy it reflects a structural failure of educational institutions

to transmit democratic values and procedural understanding. This insight is directly applicable to the Indian context, where the National Youth Policy, 2014 itself acknowledged that coordinated efforts to promote youth engagement in politics and governance remained severely lacking (Government of India, 2014). Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's Civic Voluntarism Model further extended this understanding by demonstrating that social and economic resources education, income, and organisational membership are the strongest predictors of political participation, and that these resources are unevenly distributed across populations (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Robert Putnam's work on social capital added a complementary dimension, arguing that the collapse of civic associations and trust networks in modern societies directly erodes the likelihood of political engagement among all demographic groups, including youth (Putnam, 2000). In the Indian context, the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies and its Lokniti programme have produced the most authoritative longitudinal data on electoral behaviour. The Lokniti National Election Studies, conducted continuously since 1996, have systematically tracked youth voting patterns across successive Lok Sabha elections and documented the widening gap between youth's numerical significance and their actual electoral contribution (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2019). Vibha Attri and Jyoti Mishra, both researchers at Lokniti-CSDS, analysed the 2019 National Election Study data and found that while the BJP secured 41 percent of the youth vote seven percentage points higher than in 2014 this concentration of youth support within a single party indicated the fragility of youth political engagement rather than its depth (Attri & Mishra, 2020). Niraja Gopal Jayal, Professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University, has written extensively on the paradoxes of citizenship and representation in India, arguing that the gap between formal constitutional equality and substantive political inclusion remains one of the defining features of Indian democracy (Jayal, 2011). Her analysis of the declining proportion of young Members of Parliament is particularly relevant to understanding how institutional structures actively discourage youth entry into politics. Mandakini Paruthi and colleagues examined the role of social media in the political engagement of young citizens during the 2014 and 2019 general elections and concluded that while digital platforms have substantially increased access to political information, they have not proportionally translated into increased formal political participation or policy influence. The International Labour Organisation's data on India's youth unemployment which stood at 20.82 percent in 2021 according to World Bank estimates further

contextualises the economic precarity that underlies youth political disengagement, as employment anxieties dominate the concerns of young Indians and crowd out civic engagement (World Bank, 2021).

3. Objectives

1. To analyse the key structural, institutional, and socioeconomic challenges that inhibit the democratic participation of youth in India's political and governance processes up to 2021.
2. To evaluate the nature and extent of youth contributions to policy making in India through electoral participation, digital activism, and civil society engagement, and to identify actionable reforms for enhancing these contributions.

4. Methodology

The present study adopts a descriptive research design relying entirely on secondary data sources. This design was selected because the objective of the study is to analyse and synthesise existing empirical evidence on youth democratic participation in India rather than to generate new primary survey data. The population of interest comprises Indian youth aged 15–29 years across rural and urban settings, and the time frame of

analysis extends from 2009 to 2021 to capture meaningful longitudinal trends in voter registration, turnout, youth unemployment, and digital engagement. The principal data sources used include the Election Commission of India's official electoral roll statistics and voter turnout reports for the 2009, 2014, and 2019 Lok Sabha elections; the Lokniti-CSDS National Election Studies, which provide post-election survey data disaggregated by age, gender, and region; World Bank development indicators for youth unemployment rates from 2017 to 2021; International Labour Organisation global employment reports; and the Government of India's Periodic Labour Force Survey data. All data were accessed through verified institutional repositories and official government portals. The analytical technique employed is descriptive statistical analysis: data were organised into structured tables, and each table was followed by a written interpretation examining trends, disparities, and policy-relevant patterns. No inferential or predictive statistical modelling was applied, as the study's scope is confined to description and synthesis. Ethical considerations were minimal given the reliance on publicly available, anonymised, aggregate-level data. The limitations of this approach include the inability to establish causal relationships and the dependence on the accuracy of the source datasets, particularly given the well-documented challenges in India's employment data collection systems.

5. Results

Table 1: Youth Voter Registration Rate in India (18–19 Age Group), 2014–2019

Year	Estimated Population (18–19 yrs, in crore)	Registered Voters (in crore)	Registration Rate (%)
2014	4.20	1.43	34.05
2018 (pre-2019 election)	4.85	1.43	29.49
2019 (final roll)	4.50	1.50	33.33

Source: Election Commission of India (2019); Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (2019).

Table 1 presents the voter registration trends among the youngest eligible cohort in India. Despite population growth in this age bracket, the registration rate declined sharply between 2014 and 2018, falling from 34.05 percent to 29.49 percent. The modest recovery by 2019 to 33.33 percent indicates that

registration drives conducted by the Election Commission had limited sustained impact on long-term enrolment among first-time voters (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2019; Attri & Mishra, 2020).

Table 2: Youth Voter Turnout vs. Overall Turnout in Lok Sabha Elections, 2009–2019

Election Year	Overall Voter Turnout (%)	Youth Turnout (18–25 yrs) (%)	Gap (Percentage Points)
2009	58.2	58.0	0.2
2014	66.4	68.0	–1.6
2019	67.4	66.0	1.4

Source: Lokniti-CSDS National Election Study (2014, 2019); Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (2019).

Table 2 compares youth turnout against overall national turnout across three consecutive general elections. The youth vote surged dramatically in 2014, exceeding the national average by 1.6 percentage points in a politically charged electoral cycle. However, by 2019, youth turnout slipped marginally

below the national average, reflecting the growing disillusionment among young urban voters that the Election Commission itself identified as a concern (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2019; Attri & Mishra, 2020).

Table 3: Representation of Youth in the Lok Sabha (Members of Parliament aged below 40), 1952–2019

Lok Sabha (Year)	Total MPs	MPs Below 40 Years	Percentage (%)
1st Lok Sabha (1952)	489	127	25.97
10th Lok Sabha (1991)	511	82	16.05
15th Lok Sabha (2009)	543	65	11.97
17th Lok Sabha (2019)	543	65	11.97

Source: Association for Democratic Reforms; Jayal (2011); Election Commission of India.

Table 3 reveals a stark and sustained decline in the representation of younger members within India's Parliament over seven decades. From nearly one-quarter of all MPs in 1952, the share of those below 40 fell to approximately 12 percent by 2009 and remained stagnant through 2019. This gerontocratic trend indicates that institutional and structural barriers —

including the minimum age requirement of 25 for Lok Sabha candidacy, the dominance of political dynasties, and the high cost of electoral campaigns — have systematically excluded younger candidates from legislative politics (Jayal, 2011; Attri & Mishra, 2020).

Table 4: India's Youth Unemployment Rate (Ages 15–24), 2017–2021

Year	Youth Unemployment Rate (%)	Overall Unemployment Rate (%)
2017	17.90	5.01
2018	18.54	5.22
2019	21.49	5.86
2020	24.66	7.86
2021	20.82	6.38

Source: World Bank Development Indicators (2021); International Labour Organisation (2021).

Table 4 documents the trajectory of youth unemployment in India from 2017 to 2021. The rate escalated from 17.90 percent in 2017 to a peak of 24.66 percent in 2020 a year heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic before declining to 20.82 percent in 2021. Youth unemployment remained

consistently three to four times higher than the overall national rate throughout this period, representing a structural economic barrier that directly undermines the capacity and motivation of young Indians to engage in civic and political life (World Bank, 2021; International Labour Organisation, 2021).

Table 5: Social Media Usage Among Indian Voters During Lok Sabha Elections, 2014–2019

Platform	Usage in 2014 (%)	Usage in 2017 (%)	Usage in 2019 (%)
Facebook	9.0	20.0	32.0
WhatsApp	—	22.0	34.0
YouTube	—	15.0	29.0
Twitter	—	14.0	12.0

Source: Lokniti-CSDS Social Media and Political Behaviour Report (2019); Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (2019).

Table 5 tracks the rapid expansion of social media platforms as channels for political information and engagement among Indian voters, with particular significance for youth. Facebook usage among voters more than tripled between 2014 and 2019, while WhatsApp emerged as a dominant platform for

political communication. Twitter, however, showed a slight decline, indicating platform-specific patterns in political engagement. This data underscores the growing role of digital infrastructure in shaping youth's political awareness and mobilisation, even as

it simultaneously creates risks of misinformation (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2019).

Table 6: State-Wise Youth (18–19) Voter Registration Rate, 2019 Lok Sabha Elections

State	Estimated Youth Population (18–19, in lakh)	Registered Youth Voters (in lakh)	Registration Rate (%)
Telangana	12.0	8.0	66.70
Himachal Pradesh	2.8	1.82	65.00
Bihar	54.0	9.3	17.22
Delhi	9.5	2.0	21.05
Uttar Pradesh	48.0	11.04	23.00

Source: Election Commission of India (2019); Association for Democratic Reforms (2019).

Table 6 exposes the severe interstate disparities in youth voter registration. Telangana achieved a registration rate of 66.70 percent the highest nationally while Bihar, despite possessing one of the largest youth populations, registered only 17.22 percent. Delhi and Uttar Pradesh also recorded dismal enrolment figures. These disparities reflect uneven civic infrastructure, variations in educational access, and differing levels of institutional outreach across states, indicating that youth participation is not a uniform national problem but a geographically fragmented one (Election Commission of India, 2019; Attri & Mishra, 2020).

6. Discussion

The findings presented in this study reveal a complex and multi-layered picture of youth democratic participation in India, one characterised simultaneously by untapped potential and persistent structural barriers. The data across Tables 1 through 6 collectively demonstrate that Indian youth, despite forming a numerically dominant segment of the electorate, remain significantly underrepresented in both voter registration and legislative politics. The decline in the proportion of Members of Parliament aged below 40 from 26 percent in 1952 to approximately 12 percent in 2019 is perhaps the most striking indicator of how deeply institutional barriers have marginalised youth in formal democratic processes. The minimum age requirement of 25 for contesting Lok Sabha elections, the financial burden of electoral campaigns, and the dominance of established political dynasties collectively function as gatekeeping mechanisms that systematically exclude younger citizens from positions of legislative influence (Jayal, 2011). This finding aligns with the broader theoretical argument advanced by Verba, Scholzman, and Brady that political participation is

fundamentally shaped by access to resources to which young and economically precarious Indians have disproportionately limited access (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). The youth unemployment data recorded by the World Bank and the International Labour Organisation further contextualise the challenge. With youth unemployment reaching 24.66 percent in 2020 and remaining above 20 percent in 2021, a substantial proportion of Indian youth are consumed by the immediate pressures of economic survival. As Galston argued, political engagement requires not only knowledge but also a sense of efficacy and investment in the political system; when a young person's primary concern is whether they will find employment, civic participation is rationally deprioritised (Galston, 2001). This economic precarity also intersects with Putnam's framework on social capital: youth who are economically marginalised are less likely to be embedded in the civic networks associations, clubs, community organisations through which political awareness and participation are cultivated (Putnam, 2000).

However, the study also identifies meaningful avenues of contribution and emerging channels of engagement that deserve serious policy attention. The dramatic expansion of social media usage among Indian voters particularly the tripling of Facebook usage from 9 percent in 2014 to 32 percent in 2019 indicates that digital platforms are rapidly becoming the primary space through which younger Indians encounter, discuss, and engage with political issues. The Lokniti-CSDS report on social media and political behaviour documented that social media usage for political purposes has a statistically positive association with political engagement among younger voters in India, and that youth are not merely consumers of political content but increasingly producers of it through blogs, short-form videos, and online campaigns (Centre for

the Study of Developing Societies, 2019). Paruthi, Mendiratta, and Gupta observed that political parties, particularly the BJP and INC, invested heavily in digital outreach targeting first-time voters during both the 2014 and 2019 elections, and that this shift fundamentally altered the landscape of political mobilisation in India. Youth-led movements from the India Against Corruption movement of 2011 to the anti-CAA protests of 2019–2020 have further demonstrated that Indian youth are capable of sustained, visible political action when issues resonating with their lived experiences intersect with the political agenda. The interstate disparities in youth voter registration, however, caution against overgeneralising the role of digital platforms: states like Bihar, with lower digital literacy and civic infrastructure, continue to record registration rates below 20 percent, indicating that digital engagement cannot substitute for systematic, ground-level civic education and institutional support (Election Commission of India, 2019). The National Youth Policy of 2014 acknowledged these gaps, and its successor drafts have sought to integrate youth participation into five priority domains education, employment, health, leadership, and social justice but implementation has remained uneven. For youth contributions to policy making to become meaningful and sustained, the government must move beyond rhetorical acknowledgement and towards concrete mechanisms: youth advisory boards at local and national levels, structured consultation processes before policy formulation, and mandatory civic education curricula in schools and universities that go beyond textbook knowledge to include experiential and participatory learning.

7. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the democratic participation of Indian youth is constrained by a convergence of structural, economic, and institutional barriers that must be addressed simultaneously for meaningful change. Youth voter registration among the 18–19 age group remains below one-third nationally, legislative representation of those below 40 has declined steadily over seven decades, and youth unemployment consistently three to four times higher than the national rate continues to divert the energies and aspirations of young Indians away from civic engagement. At the same time, the rapid expansion of digital platforms and the visibility of youth-led social movements indicate that the capacity and willingness of Indian youth to participate in democratic processes are far greater than current metrics suggest. The challenge, therefore, is not one of youth apathy but of institutional failure to create the pathways, incentives, and infrastructure through which youth participation

can be translated into policy influence. Reforms in civic education, reduction of financial and age-based barriers to electoral contestation, investment in youth advisory mechanisms, and targeted digital literacy programmes particularly in states with low registration rates represent the most urgent priorities. India's demographic dividend will remain an untapped asset unless the democratic system is redesigned to actively welcome, accommodate, and amplify the voices of its youngest citizens.

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