

**A Report from the SNF Agora Institute at
Johns Hopkins and International Republican Institute**

Understanding Youth Perceptions Towards Authoritarianism

Authored by:

Meryl Miner

Senior Manager, Youth and Inclusion,
Center for Global Impact, International Republican Institute

Scott Warren

Fellow, SNF Agora Institute, Johns Hopkins University

The [SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins](#) and the [International Republican Institute \(IRI\)](#) wrote this report to examine whether young people are turning toward authoritarianism as a valid and potentially preferred form of government, and its potential ramifications. [Democracy Moves](#) and [Generation Democracy](#) members assisted in making this report possible, including providing qualitative data information through surveys and interviews with young people.



ABOUT GENERATION DEMOCRACY:

To promote the meaningful participation of young people in decision-making processes, Generation Democracy connects members to gain skills for political and civic engagement learned through network-facilitated trainings on effective communication, advocacy, leadership and program management; are given opportunities to exercise their political and civic engagement skills through member-led activities, trainings and consultations; and are empowered to connect, collaborate and co-develop solutions with other democratically minded young people through youth-led and youth-serving opportunities. Generation Democracy is a network of over 300 young leaders from across 88 plus countries. Members are on the front lines of policymaking, serving in parliaments in Mexico, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), and Montenegro, amongst others. Throughout the world, they are key players in ensuring youth voices in politics and civic life are heard on the community, national and international level, hailing from places as diverse as Malawi, to Taiwan, and Jamaica.

Generation Democracy members who contributed to collecting interview data include:

Mateo Sebastián Flores Calderón, Ecuador

Mercy Wayua John, Kenya

Ojooluwa Ibiloye, Nigeria

Yosra Knaz, Tunisia



ABOUT DEMOCRACY MOVES:

Democracy Moves is a growing global network of young leaders who fight for democracy, human rights, and social justice in their home countries, primarily Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East/ North Africa region. Democracy Moves was originally incubated at the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins, and now collaborates as a formal project of Restless Development.

Democracy Moves strives to connect young people from different parts of the world fighting for a just society and a healthy democracy to learn from each other across cultural and geographic boundaries. This collaborative network shares and learns across contexts, in real-time – creating and implementing solutions to pressing challenges, ranging from armed conflict to corruption to gender discrimination to voter apathy.

The overall goals of Democracy Moves are to increase national, regional, and international cooperation between youth activists and organizations focused on creating more democratic communities and countries, strengthen the institutional capacity and impact of our members, contribute research and ideas to the global conversation on democracy, and to advocate to governments for increased access to youth civics education and opportunities for young people.

Democracy Moves members who contributed to collecting interview data include:

Olasupo Abideen, Nigeria

Shamim Juma, Kenya

Daniel Orogó, Kenya

Wandy Peaspan, Venezuela

Overview

It is perhaps cliché to note that across the world, democracy, as a global governance concept, is at risk. Authoritarianism is on the rise, as citizens across the world increasingly doubt that democracy can deliver economic prosperity, and autocrats develop new mechanisms to use democratic means to erode democracy itself. While various studies and researchers debate whether this democratic erosion is occurring at historically high rates, the future of democracy is a live question.

At this pivotal global inflection point, the role of young people in the future of democracy is front and center, and one which needs to be further explored and understood. Are young people uniquely positioned to engage on the front lines, pushing for new forms of democratic consolidation? Or are they so frustrated with the perception of their understanding of the false promises of democracy that they are inclined to turn towards more authoritarian types of rule? Are young people part of the democratic problem or part of a potential solution?

Democracy at Risk

The global trend away from democracy and toward more authoritarian government is increasingly well documented through prevalent studies and indices. According to the [Varieties of Democracy Institute \(V-Dem\)](#), the share of the world's population living in democracies has plummeted in just the last decade- from 54 percent to 28 percent. Put more starkly, [according to V-Dem](#), 72 percent of the world's population now lives in autocracies- with more than 35 years of democratic consolidation having been wiped out in the last decade. Only 13 percent of the world's population live in liberal democracies.

The same report notes that the trend lines are moving in the wrong direction- there are 42 countries in the process of becoming autocracies, up from 33 last year. There are only 14 countries in the process of democratization. These trends are manifesting in all regions of the world: autocratization is occurring throughout Latin America, Africa, Southeast Asia, and even North America.

The reasons for the weakening of democracy itself are multi-faceted, and a full explanation is beyond the scope of this report. In an age of [unprecedented economic inequality](#), individuals are [skeptical](#) that democracy can provide real economic returns to help them support their livelihood and their families. A deep [frustration with institutions](#), which has only been exacerbated by increasing globalization, has lent itself to a political climate in which populists, from across the ideological spectrum, [have come to power](#) promising radical change and criticizing political elites. In the midst of all of this frustration, alternate governance models, seen through the People's Republic of China (PRC) most explicitly, have promised economic gains without the perceived messiness and inefficiency of democracy.

YOUTH FRUSTRATION

Irrespective of the causes of the current global trend towards authoritarianism and away from democracy, it is imperative to understand the role of young people in this narrative. Are young people supporting a shift toward autocratization or are they fighting back, hopeful for a freer, democratic future?

The answer is complicated. Undoubtedly, young people are demonstrating similar sentiments towards democracy as the rest of the population. Based on the research cited throughout this report, although challenges vary across different contexts, youth are exhibiting increasing frustration with growing economic and social inequality, lack of access to quality education, inaction on issues like climate change and environmental degradation, and aging governmental leaders who often do not effectively represent the issues they care about.

This frustration manifests itself through political behavior. Research demonstrates that young people are voting in lower numbers and broadly rejecting participation in formal political parties. For example, voter turnout among young people has decreased in all democracies since the 1980s. Amongst EU member states, [only approximately 40 percent of eligible voters](#) between 16 or 18 and 24 years old opted to vote in their country's most recent national election. In Asia, the youth turnout rate in the region is generally [15 to 30 percent lower than that of people older than 35](#). In Africa, [youth are about twice as likely \(34 percent\)](#) to have skipped voting in their last national election as older citizens.

These sentiments are occurring alongside an increasingly bleak economic backdrop: the [World Bank estimates](#) that more than 15 percent of young people are currently unemployed, which are historically high numbers (slightly lower than during the pandemic) and up from just over 10 percent in 1991.

There is a growing risk that this frustration will manifest itself as distrust towards democratic institutions. This has the potential to lead young people to turn away from representative democracy and toward strong-armed authoritarianism as a form of government that can cut through bureaucracy and deliver results. This is not a purely hypothetical concern. Data demonstrates that despite varied experiences with the democratic process, overall, youth [satisfaction with democracy](#) itself is statistically lower than how older generations felt at the same stages in their life.

Many reports, including [one](#) previously co-written by the co-authors of this paper, *Walking the Walk*, argue that young people are not turning away from democracy itself, but rather, the form of democracy and governance they experience. The thesis that youth are fighting back against the democracy they are experiencing rather than democracy itself focuses on the reality that young people are frustrated with institutional politics, but that they are exhibiting different forms of engagement outside of the system itself. This [new form of creative political participation](#) includes engagement in online spaces, focusing on more artistic methods of political expression, and more participatory modes of governance, including mutual aid work.

The idealism of young people has been exhibited and needed throughout history for progress to occur. However, a deeper analysis is needed to understand the reality of the current contours and motivation of youth. Are young people participating outside of the system indeed believing in democracy itself? Are they representative of most young people? Perhaps most importantly, and concerningly, are young people open to different forms of government, including authoritarianism, in a time of increasing economic despair and global tumult?

YOUTH AND AUTHORITARIANISM

This report will attempt to respond to these questions while recognizing, unsurprisingly, that there is no singular answer. Research and polling do not seem to point to young people en masse turning towards more autocratic types of leadership. Additionally, it is important to note that youth are not a monolith- they possess diverse views throughout the world, and many are in fact, disengaged from politics. This paper does not mean to paint a broad brush, but rather, begin to explore the narrative of youth and authoritarianism. It is also increasingly evident that many young people are deeply, and in many cases logically, frustrated with governing institutions. The corresponding solution to this growing dissatisfaction should be recognizing the foundations of the frustration, so that young people's concerns are listened to, meaningfully addressed, and harnessed, meaningfully addressed, and harnessed.

Young people cannot be simply told to participate in existing structures that they feel do not work for them. Accordingly, democracy reformers, advocates, and government leaders themselves need to take seriously the possibility that alternate forms of government, and populist leaders, will inspire young people who feel like they have been left out for far too long. This is potentially even more urgent and pressing when alternative governmental realities, such as a more authoritarian form of government instituted by countries like China and Russia, intentionally attempt to export their philosophy externally and view young people as eager and fruitful audiences.

This report will use a variety of surveys and interviews to attempt to provide a nuanced perspective on these questions. We do not purport to provide declarative answers, but we do hope to contribute to a needed conversation on the role of young people in both democratic consolidation and the growing surge of autocratization and provide concrete recommendations based on feedback from young political and civic leaders on ways to involve youth in the solution.

Frustration with Politics? Or a Disbelief in Democracy?

There have been several recent studies, datasets, and reports that have made the explicit case that in countries that have experienced the onset of democracy, many young people are turning away from the concept of democracy in itself. These reports have compared public opinion surveys now and historically to suggest that younger generations are becoming disenchanted with the concept of democracy as a governance system, and becoming open to exploring alternative methods, like military rule or other forms of authoritarianism. Although young people's perception of democracy will naturally have correlations to the contexts of their lived experience, these reports remain alarming.

However, there is a potential distinction between young people becoming frustrated with the form of governance they are experiencing, which may be democracy in name only, and the overall concept of democracy itself. Attempting to understand this distinction would lead to different solutions.

The question of whether young people are frustrated with the democracy they are experiencing or tired of democracy itself has thus become a live debate amongst political theorists. We do not wish or claim an ability to answer or moderate this debate in this report, but rather, summarize the sides, and then add more qualitative data through surveys and interviews that provide a more nuanced understanding of the situation.



As an example, the Bennet Institute for Public Policy at the University of Cambridge [released a report in 2020](#) that attempted to explore youth satisfaction in democracy by utilizing a large data set, combining data from over 4.8 million respondents, 43 sources, and 160 countries between 1973 and 2020. This historical dataset demonstrates that around the world, younger generations are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with democracy. Importantly, this is occurring not only in absolute terms but also relative to older generations at similar stages of development. This is true in virtually every region across the world.

The dataset, however, is limited by the reality that the questions focused on satisfaction with democracy in a given country. For example, one question asked was, “In general, would you say you are very satisfied, unsatisfied, or very unsatisfied with the way democracy works in your [Country]?” As such, the dataset does not necessarily correlate to overall youth perspectives of liberal democratic values, or democracy itself, but rather to the experience that young people are having with governance. Given the fact that a democratic decline is occurring throughout the world, interspersed with unprecedented economic inequality, young people may be exhibiting a deep frustration with this democratic decay and erosion, rather than the governance concept itself.

Several theorists have pushed back on the criticism that young people are answering vaguely worded statements about governance in their own country. For example, scholars Yascha Mounk and Roberto Foa are adamant that [younger generations have less faith](#) in the democratic system and are more likely to express hostile views toward democratic values. Mounk and Foa explore the distinction between democratic apathy, which indicated general youth lack of interest in politics, versus democratic antipathy, which involves the active embrace of more autocratic and illiberal regimes. They find that, “in societies where youth do not face economic and social discrimination, democratic apathy is the more common trend, whereas in parts of continental Europe where youth face systematic social exclusion, apathy has become active antipathy.” This antipathy is new. To support this point, Mounk and Foa note that young people are not only giving less importance to living in a democracy but openly rejecting democratic institutions and being more open to autocratic rule as a type of rule they would be interested in experiencing.

A recent report by the [Open Societies Foundation](#) seemingly corroborates Mounk and Foa’s thesis. The 2023 Open Society Barometer, which included polling from 30 different countries, found that 86 percent of respondents indicated that they want to live in a democracy, with only 20 percent of respondents indicating that they believe that “authoritarian countries can deliver what citizens want.” These results, however, did vary by age. While 71 percent of older respondents indicated that democracy is preferable to any other form of government, only 57 percent of young people answered affirmatively to the statement. Similarly, 42 percent of young people

Younger generations have less faith in the democratic system

upwards of
50 %
of American young people expressed approval for a “strong leader”

35%
of young people expressed enthusiasm for a strong leader who does away with parliaments and elections (compared to 26 percent of those aged 56 or above).

expressed support for army rule (compared to 20 percent of those aged 56 or above) and 35 percent of young people expressed enthusiasm for a strong leader who, for example, gets rid of parliaments and elections (compared to 26 percent of those aged 56 or above).

A recent [Afrobarometer report](#) found largely similar findings. The 34-country survey found that 60 percent of young people express dissatisfaction with democracy, compared to 55 percent of those 56 or older. However, the report also demonstrated that young people are slightly less likely to reject military rule and a one-party state in favor of elections and multi-party competition to select leaders. Notably, when looking at the report on a country-by-country basis, there is a wide discrepancy. In countries like South Africa, Uganda, and Namibia, there is a 15-point gap between the oldest and youngest age cohorts in support of democracy, with older people much more likely to indicate support for the governance concept. Conversely, in countries like Sudan and Eswatini, potentially shaped by recent protests, young people are substantially more likely to favor democracy by an average of 19 percentage points. The data, undoubtedly, shows complication and nuance.

Mouk and Foa's interpretation that young people are distrustful of democracy and more open to autocratic rule has led to pushback. Pippa Norris, a comparative

political scholar at Harvard University, [argued](#) that Mouk and Foa cherry-picked specific cases that demonstrated their argument. Norris notes that dissatisfaction amongst youth with democracy is not a widespread pattern worldwide, with several countries, such as Poland, Estonia, and France, actually seeing upward trends in terms of youth perceptions toward democracy. Norris also argues that, potentially counter to popular opinion, older generations have expressed disproportionately high voting support for populist-authoritarian parties in leaders in countries in Europe and the United States. Norris hypothesizes that older generations are embracing populists as a way to push back against new cultural trends, which ostensibly threaten their more traditional ways of life.

Irrespective of the conclusions of this debate, it is clear that this argument is happening in a time of two potentially perilous and related realities: democracy eroding across the globe and autocratic powers like the governments of China and Russia looking to provide an alternative governance system. Again, it is beyond the scope of this report to make a definitive case on whether support for democracy amongst youth is fading, and whether support for authoritarianism is rising. Rather, we see this as an issue that can and must be addressed.



Why Are Young People Frustrated?

To fully appreciate whether young people are turning away from democracy and towards authoritarianism, it is necessary to attempt to understand the causes of their growing discontent. Young people are disheartened by the inability of their government, which they are often systematically excluded from, to solve their priority issues, which range from lack of access to jobs, inequality, and climate in diverse countries throughout the world.

First, and potentially most importantly, young people are increasingly frustrated with what they perceive as an inability of governments to achieve real change and deliver results. After crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, young people around the world are largely predicted to be worse off financially than their parent's generation.

This economic reality shows up concretely in the employment markets. According to a recent [African Development Bank](#) report, one-third of Africa's 420 million young people (between the ages of 15-35) are unemployed and another third are vulnerably employed, with only 1 in 6 employed in the formal sector. The aforementioned Afrobarometer report found that 37 percent of young people indicate that unemployment is the most pressing public problem - the highest priority area for any age group.



Beyond economic realities, young people are also frustrated with the inability of the government to tackle intractable problems like climate change. A [global study](#) conducted by the University of Bath, which surveyed 10,000 young people in 10 countries, found that almost half of young people (45 percent) indicated that climate anxiety and distress are affecting their daily lives. Additionally, 75 percent of young people found the future frightening and 64 percent of young people indicated that governments are not doing enough to avoid a climate disaster.

Research points to young people's frustration with institutions stemming from the reality that young people are not represented in government itself. According to a [United Nations \(UN\) Youth survey](#), although young people aged 15 to 24 make up one-sixth of the world's population, in a third of countries, young people are not eligible to be in their parliament until the age of 25. Additionally, only 1.6 percent of parliamentarians worldwide are younger than 30. To that end, a recent [Global Shapers Survey](#) of more than 25,000 young people between the ages of 18 and 35 from 186 countries found that almost 56 percent of respondents found that their views are not taken into account for important decisions.

Additionally, while the dangers and potential for social media use among young people have been extensively chronicled, the reality is that the uptick of technology has allowed youth to connect with other peers around the world, and recognize their relative discrepancy in economic and political situations. [Polling demonstrates](#) that young people overwhelmingly feel that social media is a benefit for democracy in its ability to raise public awareness, change people's minds about issues, and get elected officials to pay attention to issues.

According to a UN Youth survey,

despite the fact that young people aged 15 to 24 make up one-sixth of the world's populations, in a third of countries, young people are not eligible to be in their parliament until the age of 25.

A survey of 10,000 young people in ten countries, found that

45%

indicate that climate anxiety and distress is affecting their daily lives

75%

indicate that climate anxiety and distress is affecting their daily lives

Approximately

64%

indicated that governments are not doing enough to avoid a climate disaster

And more than

50%

indicated that governments are not doing enough to avoid a climate disaster

A combination of deteriorating societal and economic conditions, frustration in aging and slow-functioning institutions, a lack of representation in formal governance, and the prevalence of technology have all contributed to the increased frustration of young people toward their governments. Whether this metastasizes into historically high levels of disillusionment with democracy itself is up for debate, but the reality and causes of the deep frustration are indisputable.

Analysis of Additional Research Data

In addition to the extant research analyzed for this report, we engaged in three other data-gathering projects to further analyze the question of whether young people are turning away from democracy and towards authoritarianism:

- 1. Quantitative Survey Data:** We reviewed IRI's Center for Insights in Survey Research (CISR) data from 39 surveys conducted across 29 countries. Research and qualitative and quantitative public opinion data are a cornerstone of IRI's approach to programming. To date, IRI has conducted more than 1,000 polls in over 100 countries, surveying more than 1.5 million people and measuring community attitudes on a wide range of issues.
- 2. Existing Quantitative Research:** We consolidated data from IRI's Countering Foreign Authoritarian Influence (CFAI) programming, which equips democracies to push back against growing authoritarianism through cutting-edge research, global convening, and equipping on-the-ground actors with resources to creatively demand accountability and transparency from their governments.
- 3. New Qualitative Data:** We distributed surveys to young people in multiple networks, including IRI's Generation Democracy network and Restless Development's Democracy Moves network. Both networks comprise youth leaders throughout the world pushing for democracy and leading movements within their own countries. These surveys included the following questions:
 - a. Why do your peers participate or not participate in democracy?
 - b. Do you think you/your peers are drawn towards authoritarianism/more strong rule? Why or why not?
 - c. Do you think that policy results are more important than democratic processes? In other words, is it more important for a government to promote a healthy economy and strong jobs (or other policy priority) versus democracy itself? Why or why not?
 - d. Are you aware of any efforts by the Chinese or Russian government to engage young people in your country?
 - e. What strategies have you seen to combat authoritarianism? Were they effective? What strategies do you think would be effective?
- 4. New In-Depth Interview Data:** Using respondents from the surveys, young people in GenDem and Democracy Moves also engaged in 1-1 interviews to further assess youth attitudes towards democracy and authoritarianism. The questions asked in these interviews and focus groups are available in the appendix.

We found that these four approaches provided new data and insights while largely affirming the thesis of this report:

- » Young people are frustrated with the form of democracy they are receiving;
- » There is a risk that they are turning towards authoritarianism now; and
- » There is a need to urgently focus on addressing their concerns.

Quantitative Survey Data:

We assessed 39 different surveys, taken between 2019 and 2023. The surveys focused on the following countries: Albania, Argentina, Armenia (from May and December of 2021), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Burma, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Georgia, Iraq (from 2020 and 2021), Jordan (from 2022 and 2023), Kosovo (from 2022 and 2023), Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Malaysia (from 2020, 2021, and 2022), the Maldives (from 2019 and 2022), Moldova (from 2021 and 2023), Mongolia (from 2020 and 2022), Montenegro, Niger, North Macedonia (from February and October 2022), Panama, Serbia, Sierra Leone, the Gambia, Timor Leste, Tunisia, and Ukraine. We analyzed relevant questions focused on belief in the influence of citizens, satisfaction with democracy, governing interest, youth future, and democracy development. We defined youth as ages 18-35 for this analysis.

INFLUENCE OF CITIZENRY

Twenty-two relevant surveys asked the question, “How likely or unlikely are ordinary people to influence decisions made in our country?” This question can serve as a proxy for whether citizens feel that their voices matter, which is requisite in a functioning democracy.

The results differed by country. For example, 80 percent of young people in Malaysia (2021 poll), 71 percent of young people in Timor Leste, and 70 percent of young people in Armenia (December 2021 poll) felt either very likely or somewhat likely that ordinary people can influence decisions. Alternatively, only 19 percent of young people in Latvia, 20 percent of young people in Jordan (2023 poll), and 22 percent of young people in Mongolia (2022 poll) felt similarly.

Importantly, however, in almost every single survey, a higher percentage of young people felt that their voices could influence decisions than the general population. The only exceptions were Niger (59 percent of young people versus 60 percent of the general population), the Democratic Republic of Congo (54 percent of young people versus 56 percent of the general population), and Argentina (40 percent of young people versus 40 percent of the general population). Perhaps going against the grain of research such as the Global Shapers Survey that found young people did not see their views taken into account for important decisions, these surveys found that in many countries, young people are more idealistic about their ability to influence change than their older peers.

DEMOCRACY AS THE BEST FORM OF GOVERNMENT

Thirty-one surveys asked the question “Do you believe that democracy is the best possible form of government for our country or not?” Respondents varied in their answer to this question across different countries.

In five surveys, a plurality of youth answered in the negative (that democracy is not the best possible form of government) while in 25 surveys, the majority of youth answered in the affirmative (that democracy is the best form of government). Countries whose youth most strongly approve of democracy include Sierra Leone (85 percent), Timor Leste (80 percent), Georgia (77 percent), Kosovo (83 percent in the 2023 poll), and Niger (74 percent). Countries whose youth are least likely to endorse democracy as the best form of government include Iraq (32 percent in the June 2021 poll) and Panama (34 percent).

In contrast to the question asked about citizen influence in government, in 19 of 30 surveys, young people were less likely than the general population to believe democracy is the best form of government, making a clear trend line, marking a clear trend line. The most stark differences included Argentina (74 percent of youth favor democracy compared to

80 percent of the general population), the Gambia (58 percent of youth compared to 66 percent of the general population), the Dominican Republic (49 percent of youth compared to 56 percent of the general population), and Panama (34 percent of youth compared to 41 percent of the general population). The subsequent question, as previously explored, is whether this disapproval is the historical norm as highlighted by the Bennet Institute for Public Policy's historical dataset, or more indicative of a trend of youth becoming increasingly frustrated with the form of democracy they are receiving.

DEVELOPMENT OF DEMOCRACY

Focusing on the concept of emerging democracies, 18 surveys in 13 countries asked whether respondents were satisfied with the way that democracy was developing in their country. In 12 of 18 surveys, more than 50 percent of young people indicated that they were very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the way that democracy was developing. The highest percentage of respondents were in Kyrgyzstan (71 percent), Kosovo (66 percent in the 2023 poll), and Malaysia (61 percent in 2022). The lowest rates took place in Mongolia (38 percent in the 2022 poll) and North Macedonia (30 percent in the February 2022 poll). Only five of 17 surveys demonstrated that young people were less satisfied with the rate of democratic development when compared with older populations. This roughly tracks with approval of democracy questions, as well as trend lines between young people and the overall population highlighted by scholars like Mounk and Foa who attest to younger generations having less faith in the democratic system.

ASSESSING SENSE OF THE FUTURE

In an attempt to understand the general frustration that young people hold, we also looked at data from the question, "Do you think that today's generation of young people has a good future in our country or not?" We analyzed 18 different surveys covering 16 countries that asked a version of the question.

In all but five surveys, more than 50 percent of young people answered negatively, believing that young people do not have a good future in their country. The most stark responses came from Jordan (23 percent of young people in the 2022 survey felt that they have a positive future) and the Balkan states of North Macedonia (20 percent in the February 2022 poll) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (15 percent). Potential reasons for young people's pessimism about the future may include economic instability, as indicated by the analysis of both Jordan and North Macedonia's poll results. Young people were more optimistic in Ukraine (88 percent of youth felt they had a positive future)* and the Democratic Republic of Congo (50 percent).



OVERALL ANALYSIS

It is important to note that these surveys only represent so many countries and the questions asked, while important, are not comprehensive. That said, a few important learnings emerge. First, it seems that the data on the approval of democracy is mixed. Young people do exhibit less satisfaction with democracy but remain hopeful in terms of the development of democracy. Perhaps as Norris notes, this is context specific.

Secondly, young people, perhaps due to a natural sense of idealism, demonstrate more optimism in terms of the government listening to the voices of its citizens. This is a positive result that governments should lean into as they look to productively engage with young people.

Thirdly, and potentially most importantly, despite potential positive results, young people are frustrated with the current state of governance, mirroring much of the previous research on youth satisfaction with democracy. There is a risk that young people will begin to associate the lack of progress addressing concerns critical to youth interests with a distrust in democracy itself.

Qualitative Survey Data

To dive deeper into the questions explored in this research and explore whether young people are gravitating towards authoritarianism and away from democracy, we also engaged in extensive qualitative research. This took place through a combination of online surveys and interviews.

We focused the data collection on young people predominantly from IRI's Generation Democracy program, IRI's flagship youth network, which comprises more than 300 members from 80 countries; and Democracy Moves, a network of hundreds of young leaders pushing for democratic change, housed in the organization Restless Development. Thus, it is important to note that the majority of respondents are proponents and supporters of democracy as a governance concept. These young people, however, as experts and leaders in their community, are largely able to express why their peers either support or are skeptical of different political and governance structures.

The online survey was filled out by a total of 121 young people from 43 countries. The spread of the surveys included 17 filled out from the Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region, five from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), 12 from Europe and Eurasia, six from Asia, and 80 from Africa. According to the Freedom House Freedom of the World rankings, 88 respondents were from partly free countries, 24 were from not free countries, and eight were from free countries.

In addition to the survey data, members of Generation Democracy and Democracy Moves conducted interviews with young people in their communities. Interviews were conducted by individuals in Nigeria, Ecuador, Tunisia, and Kenya. The interviews asked similar questions to the surveys, but importantly were conducted with individuals outside of the aforementioned youth networks. This allowed for additional data to be collected from young people who may not necessarily be supporters of democracy and the ideals the networks uphold.*

Several patterns emerged from the data, which are noted below. We also included illustrative quotes from the surveys and interviews, noting the country of origin of the respondent and the corresponding Freedom House Freedom of the World rating. It is important to note that we purposefully defined democracy broadly, inclusive of different, context-relevant civic and political engagement activities, so the responses from the young people are subjective to their own definition of democracy.

*Please note that the survey and interview data presented herein were collected for research purposes and do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of the paper's authors. While efforts have been made to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information provided, IRI does not endorse or take responsibility for the findings, interpretations, or conclusions drawn from this data. Any reliance on this information is at the discretion of the reader.

Why do Young People Not Participate in Democracy?

The young people interviewed and surveyed cited five main reasons that young people may not actively participate in their democracy.



1. There is a Lack of Information on Political Participation:

Young people noted a lack of information and resources available on how to participate. This may manifest through a lack of civics education or general information from the government on how basic governmental structures work and the role of youth in government.

“ Many of my peers are not well informed about the political process and the importance of participating in democracy. They may not understand how their vote can make a difference or how they can be involved in decision-making.

(South Sudan, Not Free)

“ The availability of information and quality education plays a crucial role in shaping young people’s understanding of democracy. Limited access to such resources can hinder their ability to make informed decisions and actively engage in democratic processes.

(Cameroon, Not Free)

“ We do not have a clear idea of the ideologies of political parties. We vote only for a character and that is wrong. So, I think that in terms of democracy, we should be much more informed, and much more active. It is also essential that all these issues can be translated into communication and language easier to understand for all people, not only those that study social sciences but in general so that they can understand why it is good to be active at a political and democratic level.

(Ecuador, Partly Free)

2. Democratic Governments are Not Solving Problems:

Young people noted that they feel that the government is not actively or adequately solving key problems through the democratic system, like economic inequality, security, or climate change. There is a general frustration about the inability of democracy to deliver real results to young people that are felt by citizens immediately and are communicated effectively, and whether the promise of democracy itself is sufficient as opposed to a government that can quickly produce outcomes.

“ For more than 30 years, Argentina has been mired in an endless inflationary cycle. Young people associate democracy with economic chaos because it has never been able to solve the basic problems of young people. This situation generates disbelief in democracy and is the basis for the emergence of a populist leader.

(Argentina, Free)

“ They tend to not participate in democracy because of their perception that the democratic process is slow, complicated, and inefficient in tackling the challenges at hand.

(Lebanon, Partly Free)

“ There are no possible improvements to their lived experiences that can be traced to democracy.

(Nigeria, Partly Free)

“ Peers concluded that democratic processes do not bring forth socio-economic reforms, nor do they provide for their daily life struggles by providing better conditions for themselves and their future.

(Tunisia, Partly Free)

“ Participating has been futile so far. Nothing of what people my age expected from the new government (formed in 2017) was implemented. To make matters even worse, the people who were charged with serious crimes such as corruption are now free and did not serve punishment.

(North Macedonia, Partly Free)

3. Government and Political Leaders Do Not Listen to Young People:

Young people expressed that they do not feel that the government and politicians actively listen to youth or address their needs. There is a perception that governmental actors are older, and as such, do not prioritize young people in their policies or decision-making.

“ If my peers feel marginalized and excluded from decision-making processes, they may perceive democracy as irrelevant to their lives. The absence of youth voices in political institutions can discourage them from actively participating.

(Cameroon, Not Free)

“ There is a lack of access to structured, ongoing platforms to engage on governance issues with elected leaders and amongst young people themselves. Most feel their contributions to national and community issues do not matter due to a concerted ratio of power amongst a few leaders.

(Zimbabwe, Not Free)

“ Most do not participate in democracy because they feel their voices do not matter - as if the results were predetermined. In my country, it was seen that the elderly had more participation in the primaries (as part of the opposition movement) than the young.

(Venezuela, Not Free)

“ In my experience, peers tend to not participate in democracy because influence is held by senior people who do not listen to youth voices. Young people are encouraged to engage, but their opinions are often not taken into account. It seems they are just invited to tick a box.

(Zambia, Partly Free)

“ To increase my engagement, I would require more tangible evidence demonstrating the potential impact of individual efforts on addressing the issues that matter to me.

(Tunisia, Partly Free)

“ If we don't know the mechanisms that can activate our voice within the decision-making spaces, no one listens to us. The mechanisms of citizen participation that we have are very complex - they put you in a lot of traps.

(Ecuador, Partly Free)

“ The probability that ordinary people influence the decisions made in our country can vary depending on the political context and the level of citizen participation. In our case, it is quite complicated to access the mechanisms of citizen participation if you do not have the support of a political party, collective, or authority. This means that ordinary people are not interested and do not know that they can expose their needs and problems, as well as give their opinion on proposals that influence their city or country.

(Ecuador, Partly Free)

4. Politicians and Governments are Bad Actors:

Young people generally cited a belief that governmental actors are corrupt, bad actors and that it is not worth the time to participate in a system so fundamentally flawed. Young people are cynical about their ability to affect real change

“ Some people harbor skepticism or mistrust towards the democratic process. They perceive corruption, favoritism, or a lack of accountability among politicians and institutions, which can discourage them from participating.

(Kenya, Partly Free)

“ My peers do not participate in democracy because my country has a deeply ingrained corrupt nature that significantly discourages their desire to engage in the democratic process and advocate for change. The pervasive and systemic corruption within our nation has created a climate where individuals often feel disillusioned, disenfranchised, and disheartened by the very system that is meant to represent their interests. This corruption manifests itself in various forms, from political leaders embezzling public funds to bribery and cronyism influencing key decisions.

(Kenya, Partly Free)

“ Distrust in political institutions, corruption, and a history of electoral irregularities can deter young Nigerians from participating in democracy.

(Nigeria, Partly Free)

“ My peers may have low trust in political institutions and believe that the system is rigged. They may feel that their vote will not make a difference or that politicians are corrupt.

(South Sudan, Not Free)

“ I think that due to various forms of corruption and helplessness, a lot of people in my region have lost faith in democracy. Therefore, they seem to be more hesitant when it comes to democratic systems.

(Iraq, Not Free)

“ I can not trust the politicians and parties because of their background or their political orientation. There is no credibility. They use politics for their benefit or others, not for the public interest. They use youth for their purposes, acting like they care about our opinions but they use us for their image.

(Tunisia, Partly Free)

“ Most politicians are liars, and even when the elected “good” ones want to make it a better country, other parties around these good politicians would not allow them to do any work, since they are drowning in corruption.

(Tunisia, Partly Free)

“ The concept of democracy is stained with politicking and they allow themselves to buy the vote with any campaign that gives things away or promises that you will be employed in the civil service. This does not allow us to have an optimal democracy.

(Ecuador, Partly Free)

5. Young People Have Other Needs and Priorities:

Given the general hierarchy of needs that young people face, including a need to gain meaningful employment, protect their physical security, and support their families in different capacities, politics and democracy is not seen as a priority. Participating in democracy is seen by some young people as a luxury and not something they should actively spend time on.

“ Economic hardships, lack of resources, or competing priorities can limit individuals’ ability to engage in political activities. Active participation in democracy can require a significant investment of time and effort. Some individuals feel they don’t have the necessary time to educate themselves, attend town hall meetings, volunteer for campaigns, or participate in protests or demonstrations.

(Kenya, Partly Free)

“ Politics in the country is so draining and uninspiring.

(Kenya, Partly Free)

“ Many individuals are occupied with their daily work and cannot relate to the fancy language often used by democracy defenders during campaigns. Democracy needs to be made relevant to the youth.

(Indonesia, Partly Free)

“ Economic hardships, unemployment, and poverty can hinder young people’s participation in democracy. When they struggle to meet their basic needs, engaging in political activities may not be their priority.

(Cameroon, Not Free)

“ If the time I invest in being politically active would be financially rewarding, I will engage. If not, then I’m not interested

(Tunisia, Partly Free)

Why do Young People Participate in Democracy?

Young people shared numerous reasons that they continue to participate in their democracies and strive to make a difference. There were four main reasons that young people cited that led to their active democratic participation, all of which focused on their duties, responsibilities, and belief that they could make a positive impact in their communities.



1. Young People's Voices Matter:

Some young people indicated that they felt that their leaders did care about their voices. Therefore, they sought to express their opinions and organize their peers to ensure that they were represented at the governing table.

“ We participate in politics since this is enshrined in the Kenyan Constitution and it is our right to give opinions through elections and lawmaking to shape how the country is being run.

(Kenya, Partly Free)

“ Many young Nigerians are motivated to participate in democracy by a desire for political and social change. They may see democratic engagement as a means to bring about improvements in governance and address pressing issues.

(Nigeria, Partly Free)

“ My peers participate in democracy to partake in decision-making processes to make their voices heard and to contribute towards determining how their affairs are managed.

(The Gambia, Partly Free)

“ Those who participate do so because they believe in the system and think that their involvement can make a difference.

(Argentina, Free)

2. The Legacy of Authoritarianism Continues:

Some young people actively noted the history of authoritarianism in their country, and a recognition of what those dictatorial times meant for citizens' civil liberties and overall well-being, as the main factors for participating in their country's democratic processes. These young people expressed a desire to make sure that these autocratic leaders did not return.

With an understanding of the country's historical context, many of my peers actively participate in democracy because we recognize the value of the freedoms we enjoy.

(Ecuador, Partly Free)

“ My peers are not drawn to authoritarian rule due to the terrible experience we had as a country during the 22 years of the dictatorship of Jammeh.

(The Gambia, Party Free)

“ Most young people have expressed an anti-authoritarian stance and expressed a strong dislike for governance similar to the previous one-party rule experienced for 60 years.

(Malaysia, Partly Free)

“ Argentina has a low tendency toward supporting authoritarianism because of its history. The last military dictatorship managed the economy very poorly and killed many people for political reasons, so there were very few people wanting to go back to that.

(Argentina, Free)

“ Tunisia underwent a long-lasting rule of authoritarianism and dictatorship, which impoverished and deconstructed its society's fabric. The only way to remediate these casualties is by resorting to a more inclusive form of government that guarantees a just representation of the people.

(Tunisia, Partly Free)

3. Young People are Eager to Fight for Change in their Country:

Other young people noted that they desperately wanted change in their country and to hold their leaders accountable. They did not believe that they lived in a perfect democracy, but saw participation in their government as an opportunity to push for better and more equitable policies, as difficult as it may be to achieve those results.

“ My peers are actively participating in democracy because they have a sense of ownership of their country and they recognize the importance of youth political participation.

(Malawi, Partly Free)

“ Some young people may believe that by participating, they can improve their socio-economic status or secure resources for their community.

(South Sudan, Not Free)

“ It is hard not to participate when your relatives, friends, and colleagues are unjustly imprisoned. After the 2020 protests in Belarus, even apolitical Belarusian youth got engaged in one way or another - whether it was donating, participating in the protests, or volunteering.

(Belarus, Not Free)

“ I believe in youth leadership and the acquisition of our political rights after the Tunisian revolution. These rights are an asset that should be preserved for us and for the generations that are yet to come. Youth understand the power of democracy in creating a positive, desired change that could bring forth prosperity and equality, in addition to preserving human rights that are undermined in other forms of government.

(Tunisia, Partly Free)

“ If we don't influence these decisions, someone else will. And that could harm us at some point. If, for example, the social security system collapses in a few years, who must deal with that? It is going to be our generation.

(Ecuador, Partly Free)

4. Young People Feel a Sense of Civic Duty:

Young people noted that they see participating in their democracy and the political process as a fundamental civic duty. They recognize the privileges of living in a democracy, do not wish to take that for granted and participate because it is their right and obligation.

“ My peers participate in democracy because they are patriots and law-abiding citizens who respect the rule of law.

(Kenya, Partly Free)

“ Some of my peers and I participate in democracy because we believe in inclusion, accountability, transparency, non-discrimination, equality, civic engagement, human rights, and peace building.

(Sierra Leone, Partly Free)

“ In Cameroon, a limited number of youth actively participate in democratic activities because they are driven by a sense of civic duty, a desire to influence positive change, the need for representation, and a profound love for their homeland.

(Cameroon, Not Free)

Young People are Being Drawn Toward Authoritarianism and Strong Rule

In addition to exploring whether young people are participating in democracy or are turning away from political participation, we explored whether young people were more drawn to alternate forms of governance, specifically authoritarianism. This does not statistically demonstrate whether young people are actively more drawn toward more autocratic forms of governance, but the surveys and interviews did illustrate several rationales that young people noted in which they or their peers were considering turning away from democracy.



1. Young People Wonder if Authoritarianism is More Efficient:

In turbulent and challenging times, with increasing inequality and depressed economic conditions, some young people do not believe that democracy is delivering for them. They are tired of fealty toward a system that focuses more on processes than results, and feel that authoritarianism might lead to better economic and social outcomes.

“ It is not that young Argentines are attracted to an authoritarian government. The problem is that since democracy has never been able to solve the country’s problems, whether economic or social, young people have no incentive to believe in it or value it. The discussion about the dictatorship of the 70’s is long gone and young people under 30 years old do not know what it is to live without freedom.

(Argentina, Free)

“ I am from the minority group of the Southwest region of Cameroon and in many cases, youth in my region may express frustrations with certain aspects of governance, such as corruption, socio-economic inequalities, or lack of opportunities. These frustrations can potentially lead to some individuals advocating for a stronger rule or an authoritarian approach.

(Cameroon, Not Free)

“ Authoritarianism is associated with “doing” rather than “talking.” Many young people have acute social and other problems that they want to be solved and addressed promptly.

(Georgia, Partly Free)

“ Some of my peers may view democratic systems as slow and ineffective in addressing pressing issues. They become frustrated with the gridlock, bureaucracy, and frequent political infighting that can occur in democratic governments. In contrast, authoritarian systems are often perceived as more capable of making swift and decisive decisions, which can be appealing, particularly in crises.

(Kenya, Partly Free)

“ My peers are drawn to authoritarianism because of the economic hardships they experience and they feel that a powerful, brave, and dominant person will be able to change the situation.

(Kenya, Partly Free)

“ First, they are frustrated by the unstable political situation of the country where frequent changes

in the government and the capturing of state resources by the political cadres and elites are creating a hopeless situation for energetic youth who dreamt of contributing to the development of the country. Second, frustrated with the current system of governance, Nepali youth are increasingly supportive of quick-fix policy solutions promised by authoritarian and populist leaders.

(Nepal, Partly Free)

“ Many Tunisians, disillusioned with previous leaders’ failures, now see a strong ruler as a means to achieve broader national goals, despite potential democratic setbacks.

(Tunisia, Partly Free)

“ Because of the lack of employment after the revolution, such as the hardships that the country’s economy is facing, the pandemic, and the rise of crime, most youth think that an authoritarian regime would put an end to all of that. The democratic reform in Tunisia has failed to sustain their expectations and needs.

(Tunisia, Partly Free)

“ Most people oppose authoritarianism. However, I think due to helplessness and past leaders (paired with the current failure of the present leaders), some seem to believe that authoritarian rule would bring more justice since democracy would simply fail.

(Iraq, Not Free)

“ I think they are drawn to authoritarianism for survival – if you can not beat them, join them. Youth fear alienation from revolutionary parties and they feel the opposition is too weak to bring change so they support authoritarianism for survival.

(Zimbabwe, Not Free)

2. Young People Want Stability and Order:

In a tumultuous world, replete with new wars and coups, young people crave stability, which authoritarians promise to provide.

“ I think they see stability in authoritarianism. They make the argument that they look at the situation in Syria and Iraq, and how Iraq turned to be a breeding ground for terrorism.

(Libya, Not Free)

“ In Tunisia, there’s a growing attraction towards stronger, more authoritarian leadership. This stems from a belief in the need for a leader who can effectively combat corruption and enact significant changes. Many Tunisians, disillusioned with previous leaders’ failures, now see a strong ruler as a means to achieve broader national goals, despite potential democratic setbacks.

(Tunisia, Partly Free)

“ I think that Tunisia requires a good dictatorship because the Tunisian population lacks awareness and knowledge. If they are allowed to make decisions in a democracy it would do more harm than good.

(Tunisia, Partly Free)

“ Most young people are currently influenced by strong rule because they see efficient delivery of promises (no matter their righteousness), which resembles the fast world that we live in and where technology is providing quick services that they do not see in conventional democracies.

(Lebanon, Partly Free)

“ Authoritarians and autocrats are more efficient. They enforce their decisions without too much prior deliberation.

(North Macedonia, Partly Free)

“ Because of what we have experienced as a country since 2021 with prison riots, increased insecurity, and drug trafficking, and the authorities have not been able to end it, democracy has failed in terms of governance. Authoritarianism has become a possible option for the government in the country.

(Ecuador, Partly Free)

3. Authoritarianism Offers Attractive Narratives:

Many autocratic leaders, especially in an age of technology, are becoming experts at using misinformation to produce narratives that may appeal to young people. Youth recognize that some of these narratives are more appealing than a democracy that seems outdated, western, and not targeted towards youth.

“ They have been drawn in, especially when authoritarianism is sold as a “cool” trend because authoritarian actors have implemented communication strategies that influence the youth.

(Venezuela, Not Free)

“ Authoritarians appeal to people’s emotions. If you are poor, you are poor because of the (ethnic) minorities (which, of course, is not true). If you live in a polluted city, you live in such a city because of the corrupt businesses (yet, they do nothing against the corrupt businesses).

(North Macedonia, Partly Free)

“ The youth of Kenya find themselves falling for authoritarian leadership not by choice, but by conditioning of manipulative politicians whose aim is to mislead the youth and diminish their voice of reason while amplifying his/her ideologies. The majority of the youth do not fully understand the concept of democratic leadership and, hence, are vulnerable to misinformation and disempowerment by preying on politicians. This has gone too far and needs to stop.

(Kenya, Partly Free)

“ The allure of authoritarian countries to be developing and orderly that is promoted on different media platforms inclines youth to appeal to authoritarianism even if that means sacrificing their freedoms for the sake of economic development.

(Tunisia, Partly Free)

Young People are Rejecting Authoritarianism and Turning toward Democracy

Many young people indicated that they are rejecting authoritarianism. These young people recognize that democracy is eroding across the world and that there is a necessity to fight back against the possibility of a tilt toward authoritarianism. There were two main reasons that young people indicated for this, which include a recognition that fundamentally, democracy is meant to protect civil liberties and rights, as well as past dictators demonstrating the pitfalls of oppressive, authoritarian regimes.



1. Democracy is an Ideal System that can Guarantee Basic Civil Liberties and Rights:

Despite the challenges in delivering real results, young people recognize the importance of civil rights and the ability to engage in actions like free speech, which are germane to a democracy and may be lost during authoritarian rule. Young people noted the importance of being able to use their voices and fight for real change in line with their interests. They also noted that changes in their community and country made through democratic processes are more sustainable and equitable than change that occurs under authoritarian rule.

“ Most of my peers are against authoritarianism because that type of government violates the human and political rights of local citizens in the country. However, young people in my community/country are geared to promote and defend democracy and its values. Democracy ensures that public resources are used appropriately and that young people’s efforts are also involved in the advocacy process.

(Malawi, Partly Free)

“ The best form of government is that which allows universal participation in the planning, execution, and evaluation. This way, citizens get to own the process and outcomes, and will positively participate in choosing the future they want.

(Uganda, Not Free)

“ We do not believe that authoritarianism or a stronger form of government is optimal for any country, given that in this type of government, the human rights of people are not respected or promoted.

(Partly Free, Ecuador)

“ I do not believe I or my peers are drawn towards authoritarianism or more stringent rules. We value the principles of democracy, emphasizing individual freedoms, representation, and participatory governance. The preference lies in fostering inclusivity, diversity of opinions, and checks and balances. Moreover, an appreciation for open dialogue, respect for human rights, and the ability to adapt to evolving societal needs reinforce our commitment to democratic values. In essence, the rejection of authoritarianism stems from a collective belief in the strength and resilience of democratic systems to address challenges while upholding fundamental rights and liberties. *(Cameroon, Not Free)*

2. A Recognition of the Past:

Young people recognize that past military dictatorships promised similarly robust economic results, but largely led to instability and harsh conditions. Young people do not want to return to the past, but instead, desire a new, more equitable form of democracy.

“ The experience of military rule that oppressed people is not an option.

(Nigeria, Partly Free)

“ My peers are not drawn towards authoritarianism. They seem to lean more towards favoring decentralization and greater input from all. Zambia had an era of authoritarianism and we do not want to go back to it.

(Zambia, Partly Free)

“ Argentina has a low tendency toward authoritarianism because of its history. The last military dictatorship managed the economy very discretionary and killed many people for political reasons, so there were very few people wanting to go back to that.

(Argentina, Free)

Potential People's Republic of China and Russia Influence

Through our research, we also attempted to understand whether the PRC and Russia have an explicit influence on young people's perception of democracy. The PRC has been significantly economically investing in developing democracies, often as an entry point to heighten its political influence throughout the world. Parallel to this investment, the Chinese government has been implementing programs aimed at influencing young people to have a positive perception of China and its style of governance.

For example, a Communist Party of China (CCP) strategy has encouraged Malaysians to study in China, offering financially subsidized scholarships and educational opportunities. They have pursued similar strategies in countries like Kazakhstan, where the number of young people studying in China has doubled in the last decade. The CCP has furthered this strategy in countries ranging from Kenya to Panama, demonstrating the widespread use of this tool to engage youth globally. In Kenya, the Chinese government has focused on developing its reach and exposure economically, concretely demonstrating its attempts to build up the country's infrastructure. In Panama, the PRC has worked to ensure that young Chinese Panamanians know their roots and indicate more fealty towards the country.

It is unclear whether this influence is beginning to have a real influence on youth perspectives towards China. A recent Pew poll, conducted amongst 24 countries, found that in 11 countries, mostly high-income states, younger citizens have a more positive view of China than their older counterparts. For example, in the United Kingdom, 59 percent of citizens 18-39 years old have a negative opinion of China, compared with 76 percent of those ages 40 and older. Similar age differences exist in Canada, Germany, Japan, the United States, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, France, Mexico, and Australia. Similar percentages say that China does not contribute to peace and stability. It is unclear how widespread these sentiments are, but it is clear that the CCP is attempting to shore up youth support.

From the interviews and surveys we conducted, we found three potential distinctive ways that Russia and China are explicitly attempting to shore up their respective influence on youth opinion, which include:

1. Perpetuating an anti-west narrative, making the case that the "West" is made up of bad actors;
2. Providing professional opportunities for young people, developing their skills, and helping to give them jobs;
3. Emphasizing that their countries, and ways of governance, lead to more effective economic development opportunities.

1. Young People are Hearing an Anti-West Narrative:

Young people indicated that they are experiencing an increase in anti-west messages from actors like the Russian and Chinese government. These messages often appear on social media and are especially geared toward young people. Quotes from the interviews and surveys that focused on the perpetuation of an anti-west narrative include:

“ So-called authoritarian governments are virtually not doing anything — at least at the moment - and are currently poised as the better alternative given the backdrop of recent geopolitical conflicts which raise serious doubts and questions of legitimacy and credibility against the United States and its allies. Thus, there are no efforts on the ground to combat authoritarianism except peaceful protests directed at Western governments who are now, in the eyes of many, and the court of public opinion, the most authoritarian governments. They are veiled in democracy, human rights, and freedom, but render these very principles they claim to stand for to be utterly meaningless in the wake of the current geopolitical conflicts around the world.

(The Philippines, Partly Free)

“ Most of the ultra-nationalistic groups have financial ties to Russia. These groups do attempt to radicalize Georgian youth by playing on so-called “Georgian and Christian” identities and “cultural and national values” - conveying anti-European and anti-Western messages. Their goal is not to explain to the population how good Russia is (this kind of narrative will not have a chance due to the occupation and the recent war history), but rather to contrast how bad the West is.

(Georgia, Partly Free)

“ They mainly target young lawyers and human rights activists through covert intimidation tactics. The fact that the Panamanian government did not condemn Russia for its invasion of Ukraine meant that the general public, and also youth, were talking about a war between two countries, and not focusing on the aggressor and its responsibilities, and its impact on the international rules-based order.

(Panama, Free)

2. China and Russia are Providing Young People with Professional Opportunities:

Many young people articulated that they are witnessing an influx of professional development and employment opportunities led by countries such as Russia and China. There seems to be an explicit effort to tie these opportunities into support for those regimes by offering concrete benefits to young people. These opportunities were cited as the most popular strategy used by the Russian and Chinese governments to expand their influence on young people around the world.

“ I have observed an increase in the number of opportunities for young people to train or pursue education in Russia and China, either through formal higher education studies or cultural exchange programs, as well as soft diplomacy training and small grants to mobilize young people and grassroots civil society organizations in implementing community projects in diverse fields. They are by no doubt helpful on many different levels -- from personal and professional development to building foundational ties with young people who are next in line and poised to take on key leadership roles in their respective communities and countries.

(Philippines, Partly Free)

“ I have heard that in Russia a youth festival is being organized for this year, where the goal is to bring together various youth leaders from all over the world to discuss global problems and how they could be addressed.

(Ecuador, Partly Free)

“ I noticed some exchange programs for young people financed by Moscow, especially in the fields like law and security. Those efforts have results that we can see through the division of people’s opinions on Russia. Some people even propose changing the country’s strategy toward Russia.

(Georgia, Partly Free)

“ The Russian embassy was providing scholarships to young people through local municipalities in Lebanon before the war. I was not able to assess whether such an effort was negative, but I am sure it could potentially be used for certain political interests.

(Lebanon, Partly Free)

Interview and survey data demonstrated that China is the most prominent actor in providing concrete professional and educational opportunities to youth. Notably, according to our data, the PRC’s efforts have become far more prevalent than opportunities provided by the United States and other Western governments. Quotes from the interviews and surveys that highlight this include:

“ They provide free schooling and development opportunities (fellowships and visitor programs) on a more frequent note than any Western country. For example, in comparison to the U.S. International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP), the Chinese visitor program is a much more well-known, easily accessible, and recognized opportunity, which makes it a powerful pro-Chinese marketing tool.

(Bosnia and Herzegovina, Partly Free)

“ I am aware of efforts by the Chinese government to engage young people in Cameroon. One initiative I know of is the offering of scholarships for Cameroonian students to study in China. This provides young people with the opportunity to gain a quality education and develop skills that can benefit their country’s development in the long run.

(Cameroon, Not Free)

“ The Chinese government has partnered with the ruling party to construct a leadership academy that will train youth on political engagements. Also, the Chinese Government, through the Chinese Embassy in Kenya is now supporting youth-led NGOs, especially those in informal settlements, to combat Sexual and Gender-Based Violence.

(Kenya, Partly Free)

“ There are some exchange programs available to Georgian citizens to study in Chinese universities, which are funded by their government. I know pro-Western thinking youngsters who, nevertheless, do study there. Generally speaking, China is not perceived in Georgia as a threat, as it has never engaged against our sovereignty and territorial integrity.

(Georgia, Partly Free)

“ I have noticed that some political parties send members of their youth leagues to China for leadership empowerment skills.

(Lesotho, Free)

“ The Chinese government has been investing in scholarships, school programs, and NGOs to influence the young people of Nepal. In growing numbers, Nepali youth visit China as fully funded students, where they catalyze to promote Chinese propaganda in the cities and villages of Nepal. Many private schools in Nepal have made it mandatory to teach Mandarin to primary and secondary students. Teachers of these courses are heavily subsidized by the Chinese government.

(Nepal, Partly Free)

“ China has extensive influence in Panama with all different stakeholders, including young people. They finance a Confucius Center at the National University to influence programs, curriculum, and activities, and in general to promote their values and ideals with university students. The PRC also funds scholarships for short or long-term studies for Panamanian students to go to China to receive certifications or degrees in different areas. They also promote alumni events of those who have gone to these programs.

(Panama, Free)

3. China and Russia are Focusing on Providing Economic Opportunities:

It is also clear that the Chinese government to a large extent, and the Russian government to a lesser extent, are focused on helping countries to develop their economies. This economic development is predicated partially on expanding China and Russia's economic influence, and partially aimed to demonstrate that these countries are invested in the economic success of other countries. Irrespective of the rationale, it is clear that young people are witnessing these economic development opportunities as signs of potential Sino and Russian influence. Quotes from the interviews and surveys that focus on the economic development promoted by China and Russia include:

“ Chinese investment in industries and infrastructure is immense, and thousands of Nepali youths have been employed in projects. Chinese businessmen and the government hold the power to influence youth views toward Chinese policies and systems.

(Nepal, Partly Free)

“ The Chinese are everywhere in Africa. They have gone about it subtly, but maybe not so subtle anymore. There are a lot of Chinese products in the country, for example, they are installing traffic lights.

(Nigeria, Partly Free)

“ In terms of infrastructure development, the Chinese have played a very important role in Nigeria. They offer the Nigerian government things that Western governments do not offer. They do not, or at least say they do not interfere with the government. The Chinese are much more business-oriented. For example, they have been able to get a mass influx of cheap technology into the country, which has then helped the Nigerian economy develop.

(Nigeria, Partly Free)

Conclusion and Recommendations

Whether young people throughout the world lean into strengthening and rebuilding democratic institutions, or whether they begin to gravitate towards autocracy and authoritarianism as a potential venue to address their concerns is becoming an existential question. This paper, as we have noted, does not declaratively say whether the distrust that young people are exhibiting towards democracy is at historically high levels. However, we can declaratively note that research demonstrates that around the world, youth living in countries that are considered to be democracies are becoming increasingly frustrated with their form of government.

Young people are concerned that democratic institutions are not considering youth voices and are unable to address the pressing issues of the day, like economic inequality and climate change. Simultaneously, it is clear that authoritarianism is, in many cases, being either passively or actively pushed, whether by new forms of autocrats who use the government's shortcomings to undermine democracy or by the governments of countries like Russia and China.



Therefore, the goal of enlisting young people in the struggle for democracy has never been more urgent. There is no silver-bullet solution that will bring young people into the fold of democracy advocates, but young people surveyed did express multiple strategies to hedge the rise of authoritarian influence. To that end, below are several strategies to proactively work with young people in this effort. These recommendations are geared towards institutions at all levels that work with young people: state governments, NGOs, aid organizations, and civil society leaders alike. Recommendations include:

1. Promote Effective and Relevant Civic Education: Especially in new and emerging democracies, young people must learn how democracy works, why the governance system can work, and how they can participate in the process. Importantly, civics education should not solely focus on knowledge of the parameters of government itself but actively involve young people in developing their ability to engage in society in a way that is relevant to their lives.

This form of civic education should also educate young people on the dangers of authoritarianism, including recent histories in relevant countries and its potential assault on individual freedoms. This should not be alarmist, but rather, provide real insights and stories in terms of how dictatorships and authoritarians have altered and changed societies.

2. Counter Information Manipulation: The prevalence and propagation of misinformation, including that promoted by the Chinese and Russian governments, has played a significant role in eroding trust in democracy itself. There is an urgent need to institutionally combat misinformation by empowering civil society organizations, human rights defenders, grassroots movements, and independent media to challenge authoritarian narratives. In particular, efforts need to be taken to ensure that young people are not falling prey to false narratives of the failures of democratic governments and the potential of authoritarianism.

Combating misinformation should be focused both on supply, in terms of monitoring social media outlets and journalistic forums, and demand, in terms of providing information to young people on how to monitor and spot disinformation. This can also occur through strengthening civil society organizations, including local journalistic outlets, that are working on the ground to monitor and provide accountability to institutions amid threats and intimidation. As a young person from Panama noted, “There needs to be an aggressive counter-narrative strategy. For that, academics and other CSOs need to receive funding to produce reports (and launch) campaigns to highlight the terrible effects of authoritarianism and highlight the importance of transparency, human rights, and democratic values.”

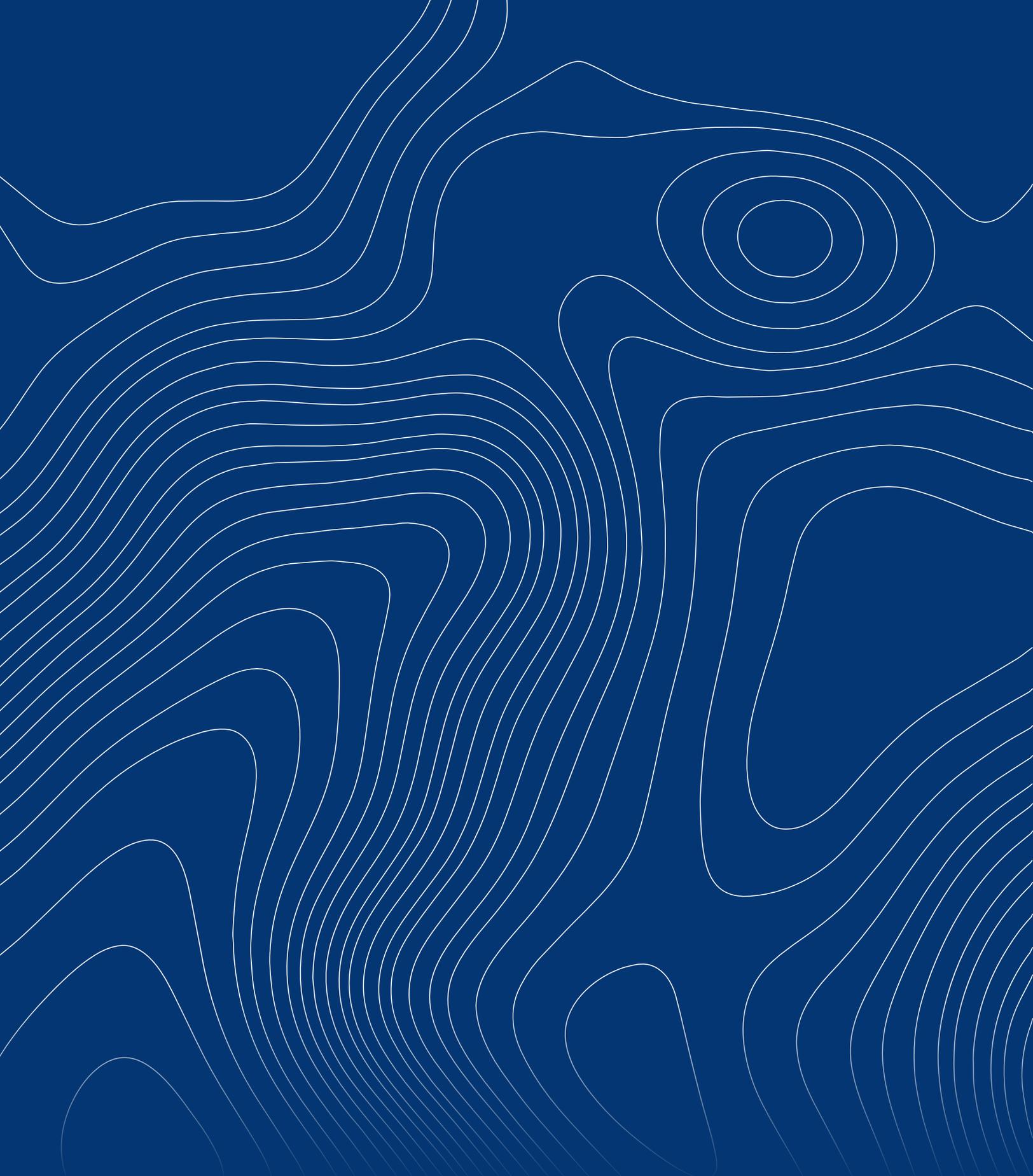
3. Demonstrate that Democracy Works: Additionally, rather than simply dispel rising disinformation on the problems with democracy, it is critical that young people hear a positive vision for democracy itself. This can and should occur through showing that democracy can deliver real economic results, promote young people’s rights, and work for them and their priorities. Young people do not want to hear that democracy is the best form of governance without experiencing how the governance system improves their lives. The international community and governments should take this to heart, and look to take action on issues that young people care about, like employment, economic inequality, and climate change.

Additionally, there is an opportunity, and obligation, to demonstrate that, unlike autocratic regimes, democracies allow for more freedom and the ability for young people to express themselves and advocate for their priorities. Institutions should actively seek out and listen to the perspectives of young people, demonstrating that democracy is not always about young people getting what they want, but is a system that enables their voices to be heard.

4. Work with Young People: Perhaps most importantly, it is critical to actively work with young people and engage them as equal partners in democratic societies. For young people to actively see themselves as part of the solution, they need to see themselves represented: as young parliamentarians, government leaders, and local officials. As our research, surveys, and interviews demonstrated, young people are worried about their futures and are dubious that current governmental institutions can deliver results. The more they see themselves as an active part of these institutions, rather than as passive observers, the more young people can be inspired to help envision a better democracy.

Actively working with young people involves more than just listening to their opinions. The strategy includes investing in youth leadership development and youth-led movements and organizations. For example, one young person from Tanzania noted: “Empowering citizens is essential for fostering resistance to authoritarianism. Providing tools for organizing, communication, and holding governments accountable, such as social media and digital technology, enables individuals to challenge oppressive regimes and advocate for change.”

The state of democracy remains in peril around the world. Especially in 2024 – a year that will be defined by the most elections the world has ever seen – the governance system will be tested. It is important to note that as young people become disenchanted with formal governance institutions, the solution cannot be solely to educate or tell young people how important democracy is for the well-being and development of a country. Rather, the most important recommendation that we can make, which we attempted to live out through this report itself, is to listen to young people and enlist them in the effort to fight for democracy and against authoritarianism. There are few levers in the global toolbox that are more important in restoring and revitalizing democracy around the world than ensuring young people believe in the democratic governance system and are willing to be part of a new, more vibrant, representative, and resilient democracy.



JOHNS HOPKINS
STAVROS NIARCHOS FOUNDATION
SNF AGORA INSTITUTE

IRI INTERNATIONAL
REPUBLICAN
INSTITUTE
Advancing Democracy Worldwide