

YPP Research Network

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What are participatory politics?

Participatory politics are actions through which individuals and groups seek to exert voice and influence on issues of public concern; a set of practices enabled by digital age technology and social connectivity that engage youth in the democratic process.

Q: Who is taking part in participatory politics?

Many people, especially youth, are tapping the power of new digital tools and social networks to connect their cultural interests to politics, to express their voice and ideas, and to protest or in other ways exert influence on issues, such as poverty, food shortages, online censorship, corporate control, police misconduct, and immigrant rights. At times, online acts of participatory politics garner widespread attention, such as the protests that stopped the passing of the Stop Online Piracy Act and Protect IP Act bills or Molly Katchpole's mobilization against Bank of America's increased fees, while at other times they take place locally and impact critical community issues.

Q: What are some examples of participatory politics?

- The Black Youth Project — In the wake of the shooting death of 15-year-old Hadiya Pendleton, the girl who performed at President Barack Obama's second inauguration in 2013, the project mobilized 47,000 people to sign a petition asking the president to address the gun violence crisis in Chicago. Obama responded by going to Chicago and calling on Congress to vote on proposals that make it harder for criminals to acquire guns.
- The DREAMers — Through social media channels, undocumented youth and their supporters have been organizing and staging rallies for immigrant rights and protests against anti-immigrant laws nationwide.
- The Harry Potter Alliance (HPA) — Inspired by the fictional student activist group, Dumbledore's Army, from the Harry Potter book series, HPA was formed in 2005 and inspired 100,000 U.S. fans to work on political and philanthropic issues such as literacy, equality and human rights. Among other campaigns, HPA runs an annual book drive in which members have donated more than \$87,000 and registers voters at Wizard Rock concerts throughout the nation.



Q: What are key practices of participatory politics?

- Investigation — Members of a community collect, and analyze online information from multiple sources, and often provide a check on information circulated by traditional media outlets.



- Dialogue and feedback — Commenting on blogs, or providing feedback to political leaders through digital means is increasingly how young people are joining public dialogues and making their voices heard around civic and political issues.
- Circulation — The flow of information is shaped by many—who do things such as blog, podcast and forward links — in the broader community rather than by a small elite group.
- Production — Young people increasingly create original online digital content, such as YouTube videos, around issues of public concern that potentially reach broader audiences.
- Mobilization — Members of a community mobilize others often through online networks, such as social media, to help accomplish civic or political goals.

Q: Are online politics or digital politics the same as participatory politics?

No. While many elements of political life — how money is raised, how people are mobilized, where people get information, and where people voice concerns — increasingly happen online, use of a particular technology does not necessarily change the political dynamic or require new or different skills. Contributing money online, for example, is not necessarily different than doing so through the mail. The affordances of digital media have facilitated changes in the way individuals and groups participate in several core acts of politics. Participatory politics is the term we use to describe these different ways of engaging in politics.

Q: Are there risks associated with participatory politics and the practice of politics in the digital age?

While participatory politics can empower people to address today’s challenges, we see unique and significant risks in the digital age, most notably the issues of surveillance, hate speech, misinformation, and corporate control of public affairs. These issues demand intervention, highlighted by the need for measures that:

- foster the ability to assess the credibility of online information;
- increase exposure to multiple perspectives;
- promote inclusive, respectful, and quality discourse; and
- cultivate the capacities for strong, healthy democratic engagement.

Q: Do youth need adult support?

An active response is critical—the benefits of participatory politics won’t materialize on their own, nor will the risks that accompany the digital age go away on their own. The practice of politics has changed and, therefore, we must rethink how to support youth to participate effectively and meaningfully in this changing landscape. What’s needed are new platforms and educational efforts, both in schools and in community settings, that support youth, educators, and activists to engage in the new civic and political landscape, as well as ensure equitable access to technology and the skills needed for participation in democratic life.

Q: Why does it matter?

Participatory politics provide a powerful way to build deeper engagement in the democratic process, especially with youth and underrepresented groups, at a time when democratic institutions and organizations are experiencing profound shifts. Evidence suggests that new media are providing new opportunities for political voice and discussion, thus increasing the role of participatory politics in public life.

