



Understanding Young People's Political and Civic Engagement as a Counter to Democratic Backsliding

An IFES Learning Agenda
Evidence Report

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About IFES

IFES advances democracy for a better future. We collaborate with civil society, public institutions and the private sector to build resilient democracies that deliver for everyone. As a global leader in the promotion and protection of democracy, our technical assistance and applied research develops trusted electoral bodies capable of conducting credible elections; effective and accountable governing institutions; civic and political processes in which all people can safely and equally participate; and innovative ways in which technology and data can positively serve elections and democracy. Since 1987, IFES has worked in more than 145 countries, from developing to mature democracies. IFES is a global, nonpartisan organization based in Arlington, Virginia, USA, and registered as a non-profit organization [501(c)(3)] under the United States tax code.

The 2023 - 2026 IFES Learning Agenda



Trusted electoral institutions deliver credible elections

- 3 How does EMB collaboration and coordination in election operations with public, private, and civil society actors and institutions impact its ability to carry out its mandate? How does this collaboration and coordination affect public perception of EMB effectiveness and institutional independence?
- 4 How can EMB support be more effective at building resilience, ensuring continuity of election operations in face of crisis, and creating sustainable, locally led institutional progress regardless of leadership changes? What approaches have proven effective in building resilience and how can they inform new programs?

Recognizing that rigorous self-reflection and evidence building are crucial to maximizing both policy success and the effectiveness and sustainability of democracy programs, the IFES 2023-2026 Learning Agenda leverages valuable data from IFES global programs and informs new, practical research. The questions were developed through extensive consultation and review of evidence gaps in the democracy and governance field, reflect current global trends, and anticipate emerging issues that are likely to impact democracy in the near and medium term.



Cross-cutting questions

- 1 How can civil society function effectively in the face of government repression and create internal pressures toward (re)democratization? How can democracy assistance providers more effectively promote resilience and bring together diverse civil society actors to join efforts and catalyze change?
- 2 How can Social and Behavioral Change (SBC) considerations contribute to more effective interventions to combat corruption?



All people safely participate in civic and political life on an equal basis

- 7 With numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) soaring due to conflict and natural and climate disasters, what are good practices to remove legal, operational, and intersectional barriers to IDP participation in elections and political processes? What kind of advocacy and programming best facilitates the adoption and implementation of these practices?
- 8 What types of informal civic engagement can lead to greater and/or more formal political and civic engagement among youth? How can these types of engagement be harnessed to fight back against authoritarianism?
- 9 How do authoritarian actors exploit or aggravate harmful gender norms to further erode democracy? How can understanding these tactics inform programs to better address threats to democracy and human rights posed by these actors?
- 10 What lessons can be learned from the approaches used by disability rights advocates that may apply to broader democracy reform advocacy? In what ways can the democracy promotion and disability rights movements be mutually reinforcing?
- 11 To what extent does increasing political inclusion and participation among minorities help address grievances and mitigate potential conflict? What strategies and approaches have been proven to promote the meaningful inclusion of minority groups in electoral and political processes?



Technology, information, and data positively serve elections and democracy

- 12 How can the international community best reframe cybersecurity from exclusively a national security problem to a democratic development challenge? What specific tools can democracy practitioners use to shape the community's response?
- 13 How can democratic actors build resilience against malign narratives and present factual and ethical messaging around elections and democracy in a way that resonates with diverse audiences?
- 14 As democracies embrace the use of artificial intelligence and data analytics to address the day's most pressing issues, what guardrails need to be established to ensure local actors can apply these tools ethically, transparently, and rigorously?



Effective governing institutions accountable to the people they serve

- 5 What steps can be taken to insulate or bolster independent institutions (including their role in preventing transnational corruption) in countries that are actively de-democratizing? What steps can donors, international assistance providers, CSOs, journalists, and other independent institutions take to support them effectively?
- 6 How does the expanding use of digital tools affect political finance oversight and access to electoral justice, two key elements of the overall fairness and transparency of the electoral process?

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	6
List of Figures	6
List of Tables	6
Acronym List.....	7
Key Terms	7
Executive Summary.....	9
Introduction.....	12
Methodology	14
Key Concepts	15
“Youth” versus “Young People”.....	15
Formal and Nonformal Civic and Political Engagement.....	16
Literature Review.....	18
Participation Habits: Present-Day Trends.....	18
Youth Agency and Enabling Factors.....	19
Fighting Authoritarianism and Democratic Backsliding through Youth Participation	21
Evidence from IFES Programs.....	24
IFES Case Study 1: Youth Supporting Participation, Action, and Civic Engagement (Youth SPACE).....	24
IFES Case Study 2: The Students Against Violence Everywhere (SAVE) Program	28
IFES Case Study 3: Strengthening Engagement through Education for Democracy (SEED).....	31
Overview of Findings and Recommendations	34
Key Findings	34
Programmatic Conclusions and Recommendations	38
Policy Conclusions and Recommendations	39
Final Considerations.....	40
Works Cited	41

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List of Figures

Figure 1: Map of IFES Program Alumni Surveyed	15
Figure 2: Geographic Distribution of SAVE Network Students Across Bangladesh.....	28
Figure 3: SAVE Alumni Reflection of Increased Skills Following SAVE Trainings	29
Figure 4: DemMap, IFES Ukraine’s Mapping of Action Projects Conducted by SEED Alumni	32
Figure 5: Activities Started by Participants After Training, by Category	35
Figure 6: Program Alumni Perceptions of Skills Post-training	36
Figure 7: Ready-to-Use Strategies for Countering Risks to Democracy	37
Figure 8: Perceived Threats to Democracy	38
Figure 9: Potentially Effective vs. Observed Strategies.....	38

List of Tables

Table 1: List of IFES Trainings Discussed in the Report	14
Table 2: Official Age Ranges of “Youth” in Select Countries.....	16
Table 3: Examples of Formal and Nonformal Political and Civic Engagement	17
Table 4: Threats to Democracy	22
Table 5: Youth SPACE Thematic Tracks	25
Table 6: SAVE Structure and Module Topics	29

Acronym List

Acronym	Definition
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DRG	Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance
IFES	International Foundation for Electoral Systems
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex +
PYD	Positive Youth Development
SAVE	Students Against Violence Everywhere
SEED	Strengthening Engagement through Education for Democracy
ToT	Training of Trainers
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
Youth SPACE	Youth Supporting Participation, Action, and Civic Engagement
YODA	Youth Democratic Association

Key Terms

Term	Definition
Accessible	A site, facility, work environment, service, or program that is easy to approach, enter, operate, participate in, and/or use safely, independently, and with dignity.
Authoritarianism	A political system in which power is centralized and subject to the whims of an executive who is generally not elected through a free and fair process, with very limited political pluralism. The system may be maintained through repression and emotional appeals and lacks a singular ideology. ¹
Civic Education	Curricula in school or non-school settings that seek to foster an individual's democratic attitudes, values, and behaviors, equipping learners with the knowledge and skills to support their active and informed participation in civic and political processes.
Civic Engagement	"Working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes." ²
Democratic Backsliding	"State-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy." ³

¹ Linz, J. (1964). See also European Center for Populism Studies.

² The Policy Circle.

³ Bermeo, N. (2016). IFES adopted definition.

Democratic Resilience	“The ability to maintain democratic governance functions and principles, despite attempts by illiberal actors to damage or diminish vertical, horizontal, or diagonal accountability mechanisms that are core to democracy.” ⁴
Do No Harm	A programmatic approach that aims to ensure interventions do not cause harm because of actions or omissions by government and civil society partners, project beneficiaries, staff, consultants, or the wider communities and societies in which we work.
Election	An organized process in which eligible individuals vote to choose candidates for public office.
Formal Civic Education	Civic education that takes place in formal, school-based settings.
Inclusion	An approach that ensures that traditionally underrepresented and marginalized groups, including young people, can access and participate in civic and political life.
Intersectionality	The idea that individuals face experiences of discrimination resulting from the interconnected nature of multiple social identities, such as age, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, class, religion, socio-economic status, and others.
Nonformal Civic Education	Civic education that occurs without mediation from organizations or institutions.
Political Engagement	“The participation of citizens in selecting and sanctioning the leaders who wield power in government, including by entering themselves as contenders for leadership. Political engagement includes citizen actions as voters, as actual and potential challengers for leadership positions in government, and in organized groups that pressure elected politicians and appointed public officials through civil society action and public protests.” ⁵
Positive Youth Development	Fostering youth leadership by supporting and strengthening young people’s assets, agency, and contributions, and the enabling environment in which they operate. ⁶
Safeguarding	The organizational duty of care to keep all people safe and put measures in place to prevent and respond to risk of harm to staff, consultants, or partners
Youth or Young People	Generally, people between the ages of 10 and 40 (see the Literature Review for more on this concept). IFES does not adhere to a strict age range, instead following donor, regional, and country-level policies and definitions.
Youth, Peace, and Security Agenda	Established by United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250, a global initiative to recognize young people as decision-makers and leaders in promoting peace and serving as peacebuilders. ⁷

⁴ Shein, E., & Emmons, C., with Lemargie, K., & Buriel, F. (November 2023).

⁵ Khemani, S. (n.d.).

⁶ United States Agency for International Development. (2022).

⁷ Youth4Peace. (n.d.).

Executive Summary

Incorporating young people’s voices into political and civic decision-making is fundamentally important in an era marked by democratic declines and rising authoritarianism around the globe.⁸ A large cohort of motivated and engaged young people who participate in efforts to build communal trust, generate social cohesion, and promote political inclusion of diverse populations could help tip the scales in favor of democracy.

This report seeks to address the efforts needed to engage young people to support democratic resilience by answering the following questions from the IFES 2023-2026 Learning Agenda:

What types of informal civic engagement can lead to greater or more formal political and civic engagement among youth?

How can these types of engagement be harnessed to fight against authoritarianism?

This research and its findings and recommendations are intended for a broad audience. Answers to the questions will be useful for democracy and governance practitioners, donors, and policymakers, as well as others who engage with young people across the development and education sectors.

As explored throughout the report, individuals and groups engage in the political and civic life of their communities in many ways. To start, we need to understand this nuance. In this report, we classify activities based on two dimensions: *goal*, meaning whether an individual endeavors to influence political or civic outcomes, and *procedure*, capturing whether an engagement effort is formal or nonformal. Activities fall into four main categories along the two dimensions: **formal political engagement** (voting, joining a political party); **formal civic engagement** (taking a civic education course in school, participating in a club or association); **nonformal political engagement** (attending a protest, following political leaders on social media); and **nonformal civic engagement** (engaging with peers or community members on social issues of importance).

Defining “Young People”

The term “young people” encompasses diverse and heterogenous identity groups. The definitions and age bands used by national, regional, and international bodies vary widely.

Recognizing the variations across contexts, the authors use “young person” or “young people” throughout this report and do not rely on a fixed age range. This enables us to capture programming targeting young people in different contexts.

Through analysis of extant literature, IFES programming experience, and feedback from IFES program alumni, the authors identified four main findings:

- **Finding 1:** Civic and political engagement do not necessarily progress from nonformal to formal. Young people engage in nonformal and formal civic and political activities *simultaneously*.

⁸ Varieties of Democracy Annual Democracy Report 2024.

- **Finding 2:** Civic education programming can accelerate engagement across civic and political life. Civic education can generate new and increased interest in participating in civic and political life, especially in closed and closing societies where other forms of engagement are systematically discouraged.
- **Finding 3:** A positive youth development (PYD) approach, combined with flexible training modalities, encourages the formal political and civic participation of young people. PYD approaches recognize the need for young people to have agency, facilitated by strong enabling environments, to make contributions as leaders and engaged democratic actors. Successful interventions target both factors.
- **Finding 4:** Youth engagement programs that integrate community action projects and network-building support the work of protecting democracy. Such activities extend learning beyond trainings or courses by giving young people opportunities to put their newly acquired knowledge and skills into practice. These experiences can lead to more sustained engagement in civic and political life, including direct engagement with – or demanding the engagement of – their government in the longer term. All these experiences prepare young people to hold their leaders to their commitments in a democratic society, become leaders themselves, and to identify and challenge anti-democratic tendencies if they emerge.

Based on these findings, the authors propose the following programmatic conclusions and recommendations:

- **Adapt trainings and courses to their audiences.** To contribute positively to young people's civic and political participation, workshops, trainings, and courses should be responsive to and reflect their lived realities. Leadership opportunities should also be available for young people both during and after the training to advance their engagement in their communities and in public life beyond the classroom.
- **Create opportunities for young people to develop and lead activities directly.** Giving young leaders opportunities to design and implement their own activities encourages their civic and political participation. Furthermore, creating peer-to-peer connections across countries and regions and providing continuous learning opportunities through conferences, regional or international events, and study trips are ways to create broad networks of youth leaders.
- **Utilize PYD approaches.** The content and format of workshops, trainings, and courses should be adaptable and flexible to align with shifting sociopolitical conditions, what young people care about most, and the support they need as leaders. Integrating mental health and wellbeing support across programming and adapting activities so they are appropriate for different ages and developmental stages is a requirement for successful programming.
- **Pursue cross-sectoral approaches.** Programming should engage young people across sectors (for example, health, education, business, technology), not just those already engaged in Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) spaces. Since human rights are relevant to everyone, programming that meets young people where they are, in seemingly unrelated sectors, stands to have a broader impact on overall engagement.
- **Mainstream safeguarding and Do No Harm principles across all programming.** Using tools such as risk assessment and mitigation, programs can prepare for risks and put safeguarding processes in place. Consider the unique experiences and circumstances of young people with intersectional identities, such as young people with disabilities or young Indigenous people, and their lived experiences, when designing inclusive and accessible curriculum and safe training modalities.

- **Integrate effective strategies used to counter democratic backsliding into programming.** Doing so contributes to participants' knowledge gain and supports community-based initiatives that bolster democratic resilience. Strategies include providing opportunities for young people to network with their peers and apply what they learn in trainings to their own lives and communities. They can also promote democratic processes from the local to the national level through youth-led civic engagement activities such as community clean-ups, dialogue sessions that reach diverse populations across the community, and voter education campaigns that can encourage young people and first-time voters to vote.

The following policy conclusions and recommendations were also derived from the research:

- **Invest broadly in all kinds of civic education.** To support young people's nonformal and formal participation, program design should take a holistic approach to civic education programming and include activities that engage young people in different spaces and using different approaches that support their engagement in public life.
- **Learn about successful youth engagement across sectors.** Donors and practitioners from different sectors should share lessons learned to strengthen work done in DRG spaces, add further nuance and context to programming, and better engage young people with diverse backgrounds and interests. Such relationships also create opportunities for two-way knowledge sharing, as DRG programming can also suggest ways to integrate human rights, civic engagement, and political participation into youth programming in other sectors.
- **Require young people's meaningful engagement across activities.** To avoid tokenistic youth engagement, donors and practitioners must ensure that young people are more directly involved in program design. Beyond designing activities for young people, changes to proposal evaluations (e.g., higher scores for programs developed with young people's input) and to program evaluation plans (e.g., disaggregation of indicators by age) should be required as a matter of policy.
- **Embed monitoring and evaluation mechanisms into program investments that go beyond outputs to capture the long-term effects of youth engagement.** Donors should support practitioners in developing robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks that effectively capture not only outputs from youth programming as well as longer-term outcomes and impacts achieved by program alumni to better assess the efficacy of the intervention. Donors and practitioners should also identify new ways to measure the impacts of digital and social media activities.

Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations Security Council recognized that young people – a growing global population that currently numbers 1.2 billion – have important roles to play in advancing and sustaining democracy.⁹ The groundbreaking United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 established the Youth, Peace, and Security Agenda, which ushered in a conceptual shift in the democracy community: Instead of considering young people as a population in need of protection, they would be viewed as partners in change in every area, from mitigating conflict to addressing climate change.¹⁰ In the ensuing decade, research has increasingly found that young people are critical actors in advancing and sustaining democracy globally.¹¹ Incorporating their voices in political and civic decision-making is fundamentally important in the current era of global democratic decline and rising authoritarianism.¹² A large cohort of motivated and engaged young people could feasibly tip the scales in favor of democracy.

IFES's Global Youth Engagement Programming

IFES promotes youth participation in democratic processes worldwide and believes that democracy flourishes when all people have the knowledge, skills, and opportunities to participate in democratic life. IFES program design is rooted in respect for young people's agency and aims to support them to exercise their human rights as partners in building and sustaining democracy. Working with networks of young leaders worldwide, IFES employs a PYD approach at the individual, organizational, and institutional level, facilitating a more enabling environment for young people to participate throughout the electoral cycle and in other democratic processes.

Young people engage in civic and political life in both formal and nonformal ways. For the purposes of this report, **formal** engagement relates to civic or political activities that are led by, affiliated with, or occur in physical spaces owned or run by established organizations or institutions such as schools, civil society organizations (CSOs), election management bodies, or governments. **Nonformal** engagement occurs without mediation from organizations or institutions, either at the individual level or in social settings among family, friends, or peers. According to research, young people tend to demonstrate a preference for nonformal means of participation,¹³ often using social media to amplify their engagement. Young emerging leaders have utilized these nonformal tactics as entry points into formal civic and political conversations, with efforts ranging from Greta Thunberg's climate change advocacy¹⁴ to the young leaders of the March for Our Lives movement in the United States to end gun violence.¹⁵ As will be explored in this report, young people's civic and political engagement, whether formal or nonformal, contributes to building and sustaining a strong democratic culture.

⁹ United Nations. *Youth*. (n.d.).

¹⁰ Rogan, J. (January 2016).

¹¹ See the Literature Review section.

¹² Varieties of Democracy Annual Democracy Report 2024.

¹³ Law, A., Timreck, S., and Emmons, C. (2023, May 15).

¹⁴ Thunberg, G. (n.d.).

¹⁵ See: March for Our Lives. (n.d.).

There is much more to understand about what domestic conditions and international interventions best support young people's engagement in formal political, civic, and democratic processes, and how this engagement contributes to the fight against authoritarianism. IFES seeks to better understand the enabling factors and the impact of young people's engagement in political and civic life by exploring the following questions:

What types of informal civic engagement can lead to greater and/or more formal political and civic engagement among youth?

How can these types of engagement be harnessed to fight against authoritarianism?¹⁶

To address these questions systematically, this report includes a literature review that details extant academic and practitioner research on youth engagement, civic education practices, and authoritarianism. It then summarizes evidence from program reports and alumni feedback from three of IFES's flagship youth engagement programs: Students Against Violence Everywhere (SAVE), Youth Supporting Participation, Action, and Civic Engagement (Youth SPACE), and Strengthening Engagement through Education for Democracy (SEED). The assembled evidence also builds on our recent global research effort, featured in the publication [In Their Words: A Practical Guide for Engaging Young People in Civic Education](#). Among other goals, IFES seeks to understand how such civic education programming for young people can lead to civic and political engagement that bolsters democratic resilience and counters backsliding. The final section of this report outlines findings and program and policy recommendations for the global community of practitioners working with young people – educators, development professionals, and donors. It also identifies gaps and opportunities for continued research and future programming to advance understanding of and support for greater engagement of young people.

Answers to these questions will be useful for practitioners in the DRG space as well as those who engage with young people across the development and education sectors. The findings in this report can inform programming that facilitates and sustains young people's engagement in civic and political life. The report also provides concrete examples of how various types of civic education and young people's leadership can be foundational to broader efforts at countering democratic backsliding, creating opportunities and demand for democratic exchanges. While young people comprise a heterogeneous group with varied interests and diverse identities, their political power has been pivotal in several so-called democratic bounce-backs that may be replicable elsewhere.¹⁷ As such, engaging young people in all the spaces in which they live and work requires a more tailored and multi-faceted approach that reflects their diversity and lived experiences. Doing so is imperative to the successful pursuit of democracy.

¹⁶ While the term "informal engagement" is used in IFES's Learning Agenda question, to remain consistent with previous IFES research, the authors use "nonformal" to describe engagement and programming that takes place outside of institutional settings.

¹⁷ See examples in V-Dem Institute (March 2023).

Methodology

This evidence report draws on three data collection approaches. First, the authors conducted a literature review of reports from practitioner organizations and peer-reviewed academic publications. Specifically, the researchers looked for extant research on the causes and/or trends in young people’s civic and political engagement today; the role of formal and nonformal civic education in promoting sustained participation in public life, particularly throughout adulthood; and the roles young people play in challenging authoritarianism.

Second, the authors reviewed monitoring and evaluation data; quarterly, annual, and final donor reports; and activity summaries for three flagship IFES youth engagement and civic education programs: SAVE, the university curriculum SEED, and Youth SPACE. These training programs apply both formal and nonformal engagement modalities and methodologies. They have been implemented across several regions and countries since 2018, permitting some assessment of the short-, medium-, and long-term impact of IFES programming on participants’ civic and political engagement. While program implementation is customized to each country context, and program leadership can vary (some are led by IFES and others by partners, as summarized in Table 1), the training materials are the same and a consistent core curriculum permits comparison. The descriptive analysis sought to uncover trends within each program across country implementations, such as increases in knowledge and skills evinced by pre- and post-tests.

Table 1: List of IFES Trainings Discussed in the Report

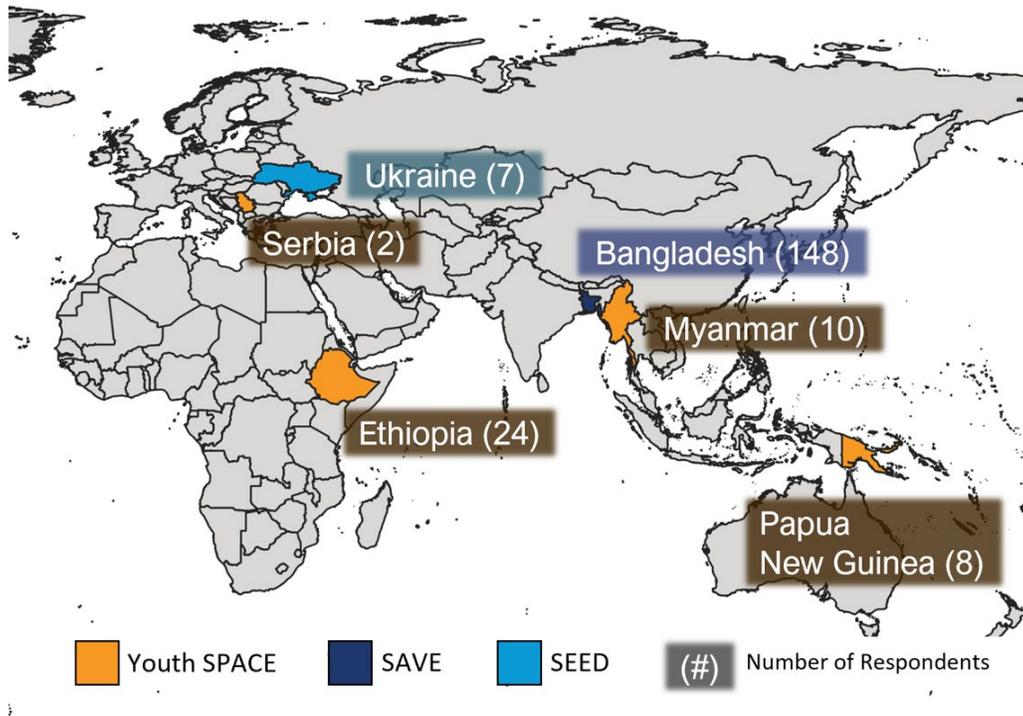
IFES-Led Training	Partner or CSO-Led Training
SAVE trainings in Bangladesh* (2018–present)	SAVE trainings in Bangladesh* (2018–present)
SEED in Ukraine (2018–present)	Youth SPACE training in Ethiopia (2022–2023)
Youth SPACE training in Myanmar (2020)	
Youth SPACE training in Papua New Guinea (2022)	
Youth SPACE training in Serbia (2022–2023)	
Youth SPACE training in Ethiopia (2022–2023)	

* Conducted by both IFES staff and a partner CSO in Bangladesh.

Finally, as a verification check on its conclusions, the research team contacted IFES program alumni from the SAVE network in Bangladesh; SEED courses in Ukraine; and Youth SPACE trainings held in Ethiopia, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea, and Serbia. This survey (referred to as the Alumni Survey) asked IFES program alumni about their ongoing work, taken as suggestive evidence of continuous application of the skills and knowledge fostered in the programs. Between January and February 2024, 202 alumni from all three programs responded to the survey (see Figure 1). While the pool of respondents is not representative of the alumni population across all three programs (the majority of respondents were SAVE alumni and residents of Bangladesh, for example) the survey data provides suggestive insights about the ways that nonformal civic and political engagement can contribute or lead to formal civic and political engagement, and the skills, knowledge, and strategies these alumni believe are relevant to addressing democratic backsliding.

Taken together, this analysis highlights successes and impact of current programming, gaps, and opportunities for future programming, and policy recommendations.

Figure 1: Map of IFES Program Alumni Surveyed



Key Concepts

Before endeavoring to answer the learning questions, some clarification of terms is required: first, a brief review of the debate over the terms “youth” and “young people” as used in the field; and second, further refinement of the distinction between nonformal and formal civic and political engagement.

“Youth” versus “Young People”

Historical social constructs of youth or youthhood are intertwined not only with age but also sex, race, class, geography, and other demographic factors. In Africa, the word “youth” has been found to be nearly synonymous with young *men*.¹⁸ Deeper cultural implications are reflected in how African societies view married young women compared to married young men. For example, a young woman who is married might not be categorized as part of the “youth” demographic, while a married man of the same age may still be perceived as young.¹⁹ This loaded

¹⁸ Sommers, M. (2015).

¹⁹ Ibid.

conceptualization is not unique to Africa. For instance, in Lebanon, the burgeoning youth movement was identified as “collectively grassroots, urban-based, and dominated by middle-class young men” as far back as the early 1900s.²⁰

While academics and youth development practitioners now use the term “young people” for a more diverse and heterogenous identity group,²¹ there is still no universal definition or age band associated with it. Indeed, the definitions used by national, regional, and international bodies vary widely. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), for example, defines young people by “age” and life “stage,”²² the European Union Youth Strategy recognizes young persons as between 15 and 29 years old,²³ and the United Nations defines young people as between the ages of 15 and 24.²⁴ Table 2 shows the age ranges of young people as defined by the governments of the countries highlighted in this report. Furthermore, while “young people” is the formal term currently in use at the international level, young people themselves may prefer different, more colloquial labels based on domestic interpretations and norms.²⁵

Recognizing the variation across contexts, the authors use “young person” or “young people” in the report to reflect the heterogeneity of the global youth population. The authors also did not assign a fixed age range to young people, preferring to keep it flexible and better capture programming targeting young people in different country contexts. This choice was directly informed by the research process and diverges from the original learning agenda question, which used the term “youth.”

Table 2: Official Age Ranges of “Youth” in Select Countries

Country	Youth Age Range	Source
Bangladesh	18–35	National Youth Policy (2017) ²⁶
Ethiopia	15–29	Ethiopia National Youth Policy (2004) ²⁷
Myanmar	16–35	National Youth Policy (2017) ²⁸
Papua New Guinea	12–30	National Youth Policy 2020 – 2030
Serbia	15–30	Youth Law (2011) ²⁹
Ukraine	14–35	Youth Policy (2021) ³⁰

Formal and Nonformal Civic and Political Engagement

As is well established in the literature, civic and political participation of young people can take both formal and nonformal guises.³¹ In a review of existing typologies of participation, Ekman and Amna propose the term *manifest*

²⁰ Braun, D. (October 2020).

²¹ Wishart, H. (2023, March 13).

²² United States Agency for International Development. (2022).

²³ European Union. (November 2018).

²⁴ United Nations. *Youth*. (n.d.).

²⁵ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (n.d.).

²⁶ Ministry of Youth and Sports, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh. (2017).

²⁷ Ministry of Youth, Sports & Culture of Ethiopia. (2004).

²⁸ Search for Common Ground. (2018, December 18).

²⁹ *Law on Youth*. (2011).

³⁰ Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. (2021).

³¹ See Younnis, J., Bales, S., Christmas-Best, V., Diversi, M., McLaughlin, M., Silbereisen, R. (2002). The authors point out that both formal political engagement and nonformal engagement modalities must be taken into account to understand youth civic engagement in the twenty-first century.

political behavior, which captures public behaviors such as demonstrations and voting that are meant to “influenc[e] governmental decisions and political outcomes.”³² *Latent political participation*, on the other hand, is synonymous in their view with civic participation, referring to private, possibly “pre-political” or “standby” behaviors, such as monitoring an issue or becoming involved in a community club.³³ They and others also recognize that political or pre-political activities can be done collectively or alone.

In this report, we classify activities based on two dimensions: *goal*, meaning whether the individual endeavors to influence political or civic outcomes, and *procedure*, capturing the process or mechanism by which goals are pursued. **Formal engagement** relates to actions conducted through *established procedures* with clear *political or civic end goals*. They often occur through, or are affiliated with, established institutions such as CSOs, election management bodies, political parties, or governments – whether performed individually (voting) or collectively (organizing for a specific candidate). **Nonformal engagement** happens *outside of these institutionalized bodies*, either at the individual level or among family, friends, or peers, and may have an *indirect influence* on formal political or civic life. Table 3 provides illustrative but non-exhaustive examples of formal and nonformal civic and political engagement. The existing literature, reviewed in the next section, identifies trends in young people’s nonformal and formal civic and political engagement and their enabling factors.

Table 3: Examples of Formal and Nonformal Political and Civic Engagement

Political Activities	Civic Activities
Formal Engagement	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voting • Serving as a poll worker or election observer • Joining a political party • Volunteering for a candidate or political party (phone banking, fundraising) • Working as a bureaucrat • Signing petitions • Conducting voter outreach on behalf of a politician 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking a civic education course in school • Participating in a mentorship program • Participating in student government or school-based clubs or organizations • Volunteering • Joining, establishing, or conducting digital or in-person advocacy or outreach on behalf of an established CSO • Participating in activities, such as sports leagues, clubs, and associations
Nonformal Engagement	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attending protests and marches • Conducting political advocacy • Engaging via social media with elected leaders or sharing information about political parties or leaders on social media • Staying informed about political issues • Discussing politics with friends, families, or community members • Displaying political logos or material in support of a political party or leader 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducting digital advocacy for non-political causes on one’s personal social media • Engaging with peers, family, community members through conversations and daily interactions on issues of community importance

³² Ekman, J., Amna, E. (2012). P. 289.

³³ Ekman, J., Amna, E. (2012). Pp. 291–292. “Latent” here means not directly political. The authors do not presuppose that people who engage in civic actions will necessarily become political, a matter they believe deserves further scrutiny.

Literature Review

This section reviews multidisciplinary academic studies and practitioner reports focused on young people's civic and political participation habits, the determinants that motivate their behaviors, and how young people's participation can deter democratic backsliding. These studies provide a starting point for identifying effective youth civic and political engagement strategies and determining how they can be used to counter anti-democratic trends and bridge the formal-nonformal divide.

Participation Habits: Present-Day Trends

When young people today participate collectively or individually in formal **political** activities, they often do so by focusing on single issues they care about and by engaging outside of formal political processes. A 2022 online survey of 858 young people from 71 countries, conducted by IFES and Kimpact Development Initiative (KDI), found that a majority of young people felt only “somewhat engaged” in electoral and governance processes, primarily as voters on Election Day.³⁴ Young people often support issues that mainstream parties have not fully embraced.³⁵ This tendency means they find themselves outside the typical political apparatus. Action on the outskirts of politics is sometimes an entry point to more traditional politicking. For instance, young people active in climate change and environmental issues have been found to be primed to become active in adjacent political areas.³⁶ Not all single-issue engagement, however, leads to broader, traditional political engagement. Instead, young people may be inclined to pursue political ends through non-traditional paths, tending to do so through collective social movements that fall outside the formal political process.³⁷ Indeed, protests have been an increasingly popular avenue for young people to express their opinions, fueled by young people's dissatisfaction with formal political processes and desire for immediate action.³⁸ Concurrently, young people tend to be quite active in **civic spaces** through clubs and volunteering, collective advocacy, and activism movements.

The digital age and plethora of **online spaces** have meaningfully changed the ways young people choose to engage in both political and civic life. In the same IFES/KDI survey, respondents identified social media campaigns as the primary method for engaging young people, with in-person activities the next highest choice.³⁹ According to developmental theory, young people use popular culture (music, fashion, media) to establish individual and collective identity; this “necessary symbolic work” is required for identity formation.⁴⁰ Thus, new and diverse forms of engagement emerge continuously, especially in online spaces. Digital, nonpolitical, and nonformal engagement, such as music and memes, are important tactics of youth digital civic engagement.⁴¹ According to young people themselves, social media is an effective method for engaging their peers and an area where young people are seen

³⁴ Law, A., Timreck, S., and Emmons, C., *supra* note 13.

³⁵ Furlong, A., Cartmel, F. (2007).

³⁶ Suzuki, S., Medina, A., Guzman, P. (2022).

³⁷ Furlong, A., Cartmel, F. (2007).

³⁸ Teixeira, C., Risser, G., Byrne, J. (March 2024).

³⁹ Law, A., Timreck, S., and Emmons, C., *supra* note 13. Note that this preference further substantiates a point made by Putnam (2000) and explored in a subsequent section, that digital media or social media should not necessarily *replace* in-person activities.

⁴⁰ Hart, R., Daiute, C., Iltus, S., Kritt, D., Rome, M., Sabo, K. (1997).

⁴¹ Cho, A., Byrne, J., Pelter, Z. (2020).

as leaders.⁴² Digital media are a central source of information for young people as well as a space for activism – formal and nonformal, civic and political – to flourish.

While online spaces present new opportunities for all kinds of engagement, they also have powerful potential for harm, including information attacks, privacy breaches, and cyberbullying. Understanding how to identify false information and protect personal privacy is crucial for greater digital literacy and safer youth engagement. To support young people’s safe access to online spaces, scholars recommend that civic education programming cover three areas: information ecosystem literacy; social media literacy, including content creation; and critical reading training.⁴³ A 2019 study of young people between the ages of 15 and 27 found that the promotion of digital engagement literacies in a school setting increases online engagement in politics, although educational inequalities persist.⁴⁴ The same study also claimed that young people who received training on judging the credibility of online content became less likely to engage in “online participatory politics” and more likely to engage in offline civic engagement,⁴⁵ suggesting that digital and in-person participation may inform one another and overlap. Indeed, other research found a statistically robust connection in nonpolitical, interest-driven online participation serving as a gateway to volunteering, engagement in community problem solving, protest activities, and political voice.⁴⁶

While effective tools for digital and media literacy are being advanced worldwide,⁴⁷ and there has been a profusion of programs and ideas for digital and media literacy and engagement, measurements for success are still not universal and require deeper reflection and analysis. Indeed, promoting political tolerance through social media to fight against anti-democratic movements also requires further development and study. Further research is also needed to compare in-person with virtual communities, as some notable scholars assert that online platforms cannot replace in-person community building.⁴⁸

Youth Agency and Enabling Factors

Not all young people have the same degree of agency and opportunities to participate as democratic actors in their communities. Certain **enabling factors** have been linked to individual willingness to participate in civic and political life.

First, a groundbreaking 1963 exploration into local practices and behaviors that strengthened or weakened democratic attitudes across the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, and Mexico found that **nonpolitical authority relationships** could significantly influence young people’s political attitudes.⁴⁹ Family, school, and work-based relationships with authority figures impacted the democratic attitudes and behaviors of young people; those who felt they could express themselves and share their opinions at home, school, or work showed higher political understanding.⁵⁰ This finding holds true in contemporary studies as well. For example, a comparative analysis

⁴² Law, A., Timreck, S., and Emmons, C., *supra* note 13.

⁴³ Finkel, S., Ratway, B., Sigal, I. (2022).

⁴⁴ Kahne, J., Bowyer, B. (2019).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Kahne, J., Lee, N., Feezell, J. (2013).

⁴⁷ See: Neuvonen, M., Kivinen, K., Salo, M. (2018); Soep, E. (2014); Nosich, G. (2011).

⁴⁸ Putnam, R. (2000).

⁴⁹ Almond, G., Verba, S. (1963).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

of five European countries in 2012 found that **meaning-making activities** – “talking about politics and social affairs with parents, peers and teachers; open classroom climate; and reading newspapers and listening to radio and television news” – have “a strong positive relationship with citizenship knowledge, skills, and dispositions.”⁵¹ According to social learning theory, observation and modeling are fundamental to developing behaviors.⁵² Through active observation, individuals form ideas about how to behave, and this information later becomes a basis for action.⁵³

Social learning occurs in an individual’s private life as well as his or her economic and political life. Thus, family, friends, school, and community can all be sources of “influential personalities” whose actions or support may bolster young people’s understanding, interest, and subsequent participation in politics and government.⁵⁴ While parents are often identified as the first and most important catalysts for civic engagement, given that their political attitudes shape their children’s from early childhood,⁵⁵ familial impact is not the only determining factor for young people’s engagement. Educational attainment can have a mitigating effect on other inputs, including familial influence.⁵⁶ Higher education has been found to sometimes *alleviate* early authority patterns; for example, study participants with higher educational achievements demonstrated the highest political competence levels, in some cases despite early familial influences that discouraged disagreement or participation in decision-making.⁵⁷ In a contemporary survey of Kosovar college youth published in 2018, researchers found that mentorship by professors was the second strongest indicator of political interest for survey respondents, after the impact of parents.⁵⁸ All of this points to the significance of a **robust enabling environment**, including community support, to advance young people’s engagement in public life.

The **timing** of interventions is an important determinant of young people’s engagement. A 2019 cross-country analysis showed that political interest is most malleable between 15 and 30 years of age.⁵⁹ Similarly, a study of young people in the United Kingdom found that participation in student council, mock elections, and debating club at ages 15 and 16 correlated strongly with increased political participation at ages 19 and 20.⁶⁰ Also, *continuous* engagement has been shown to be important for young people to develop political inclinations, not only engagement during major democratic events like an election.⁶¹ Offering appropriate opportunities for young people to be involved in community organizations can facilitate developing their personal identities, as well as help them identify with their community, develop social competence and participation skills, and determine their own political beliefs.⁶²

Mentorship is another key enabling factor for future civic engagement. Constructive partnerships among younger and older adults can provide an observable and replicable pathway to lifelong civic engagement habits.⁶³ A study outlining five principles that make inter-generational mentorship more meaningful focused on setting clear goals, with the ability to adapt and revise as the situation requires. Additional principles for success included ensuring the sharing

⁵¹ Hoskins, B., Jamaat, J.G., Villalba, E. (2012).

⁵² Bandura, A. (1977).

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Pirio, G. (2019).

⁵⁵ See: Prior, M. (2019); Shala, A., Grajcevci, A. (2018).

⁵⁶ Almond, G., Verba, S. (1963).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Shala, A., Grajcevci, A. (2018).

⁵⁹ Prior, M. (2019).

⁶⁰ Keating, A., Janmaat, J.G., (2016).

⁶¹ See: Law, A., Timreck, S., Emmons, C., *supra* note 13; Lührmann, A. (2015).

⁶² Hart, R., Dalute, C., Iltus, S., Krittr, D., Rome, M., Sabo, K. (1997).

⁶³ Booth, R. B., Guzman, P., Suzuki, S. (2023).

of power among all participants, capacity-building, engaging young people as experts, open-mindedness, and avoiding tokenization.⁶⁴ An after-school program in Montreal, Canada, credited a cooperative relationship between young people and older adults for its success in creating a sense of value and identity for its members, claiming that program administrators could tailor activities to be more responsive to young people's interests and desires.⁶⁵

Participating in **nonformal group activities** can also prepare young people to become political actors later in life by strengthening their skills and capacity for that kind of engagement. Studies have shown "involvement in voluntary associations concerning community service, representation, speaking in public forums, and generating a communal identity most encourage future political participation," measured as political activities six and 12 years later.⁶⁶ Additionally, those studies found that involvement in "service organizations, student council, drama clubs, musical groups, and religious organizations" all have positive returns on adult political participation.⁶⁷

While supportive peers, mentors, or fellow community members and spaces such as after-school programs or community centers can give young people support and opportunities to engage, young people's **self-empowerment** and sense of agency are necessary. PYD⁶⁸ approaches call attention to this duality: the need for confident young people to access their own agency along with improved enabling environments. Success relies on combinations of these factors. For instance, an after-school program in California encouraged young people to create videos representing youth of color for various audiences. The process of writing and producing stories and presenting their work resulted in an increased sense of their own agency as well as their social and civic duty.⁶⁹ Taken together, opportunities such as these are thought to encourage young people to become leaders in their societies and contribute to them in myriad other ways.

Fighting Authoritarianism and Democratic Backsliding through Youth Participation

Youth participation takes on additional importance considering global trends of democratic backsliding and the rise of authoritarianism. Autocrats today increasingly seek to interrupt the relationship between holders of political power and the people (see Table 4).⁷⁰ Strengthening **democratic resilience** and pushing back against authoritarian threats require ongoing efforts to prepare for potential threats to democracy, respond to them, and recover or transform in the aftermath.⁷¹ These efforts require *all* members of a society to be engaged with (not to mention included in) political and civic discourse. While inclusion is often a structural barrier for certain groups – including young people – the choice to engage is a necessary condition for a vibrant democratic society. So, how can young people's participation tip the scales?

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ehret, C., Ehret L., Low, B., Ciklovan, L. (2019).

⁶⁶ McFarland, D.A., Thomas, R.J. (2006).

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ For more information on PYD approaches, see: YouthPower. (n.d.).

⁶⁹ Charmaraman, L. (2010).

⁷⁰ Shein, E., & Emmons, C., with Lemargie, K., & Buri, F. (November 2023).

⁷¹ Ibid.

Table 4: Threats to Democracy

Attacks on independent institutions (judiciary, legislature, autonomous bodies) by the executive branch
Corruption in the civil service and/or abuse of state resources
Interference in a country's civic and political process by dangerous or ill-intentioned foreign actors
Systematic disenfranchisement of groups of voters
Election manipulation (such as through gerrymandering)
Exclusion and/or repression of marginalized populations (such as young people with disabilities or young people from the LGBTQI+ community)
State control of the internet
Closing opportunities for CSOs, non-governmental organizations, and other civil society groups
Targeting journalists, capture of media, and restrictions on freedom of speech
Threats to information integrity
Repression of opposition political parties
Limits on individuals' activity and/or expression of opinions

Source for Table 4: Shein & Emmons with Lemargie & Buriil (November 2023)

Scholars have emphasized the importance of communication and ties *across* civic organizations for democratic resilience against increasingly recognizable authoritarian tactics, such as exacerbating social and political polarization and incremental abuses of power meant to paralyze the opposition.⁷² Training young people in information literacy and civics becomes particularly crucial to recognize and respond to such strategies more effectively. This connection also reflects the importance of network-building. Positive relationships between community members promote positive social interactions and alternative narratives to bad politics and violence.⁷³

While civic education can promote knowledge and skills for positive community engagement and alternative narrative-building – both steps toward democratic resilience – not all engagement is equally impactful.⁷⁴ The creation of reciprocity and trust in a society – also known as social capital – can occur both through bridging groups (inclusive groups, such as a youth climate organization or bowling league) and bonding groups (exclusive groups, such as a country club or women's church group).⁷⁵ Both are necessary for a healthy, democratic society, but bridging groups build broader identities and the reciprocity needed for a society to function.⁷⁶ Targeting youth engagement in bridging groups can thus be a better investment when supporting democratic resilience and fighting authoritarianism.

The Arab Spring illustrates the power of civic groups in enabling youth political participation. Before 2011, middle-class Egyptian youth engaged in non-political volunteerism primarily through community service, which exposed them to inequities in society. Many of these volunteer-oriented young people were active in the uprising. The primary goal of youth community volunteer organizations (bridging groups per the definition above) was to build self-awareness and youth ownership of the political situation, empowering young people to mobilize for change.⁷⁷ Other research,

⁷² Haggard, S., Kaufman, R. (2021).

⁷³ Finkel, S., Horowitz, J., and Rojo-Mendoza, R. (January 2022).

⁷⁴ Putnam, R. (2000).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Abdou, E., Skalli, L. (2018).

based on interviews with Cairo-based volunteers in Egypt's *Resala* youth movement in the years following Arab Spring, demonstrated that young peoples' viewpoints changed over the course of their volunteering, and that they built organizing and social media skills that they put to use for demonstrations and organizing.⁷⁸ Civic groups also provided spaces for young people to learn about civic and political engagement and practice their own. For example, *shillas* are nonformal groups of 10 to 15 throughout Arab society that include family and close friends who share common interests (bonding groups).⁷⁹ Tunisian *shillas* on topics such as art and LGBTQI+ rights have been key in developing civic consciousness among young people.⁸⁰ In Egypt, bridging groups created ties and opened minds to the experience of other members of society, while bonding groups provided the foundation of trust and consideration of alternative political and culture narratives to provoke interest in change.⁸¹

Young people in conflict situations, closing or closed political and civic spaces, or areas with high rates of crime and violence, and those from marginalized and underrepresented groups, may need more holistic support than their peers in more open or inclusive environments.⁸² People who live in countries in the midst of intractable conflicts are likely to feel isolated from broader community-based or collective identities.⁸³ They may have strong positive views of people who share similar backgrounds or social identities and strong negative or delegitimizing views of those they consider outside of their immediate circle.⁸⁴ In such situations, a supportive family relationship, social support, caring child care facilities, and a sense of self-agency can all support holistic wellbeing and mental health.⁸⁵ Positive youth involvement in civil society can challenge dangerous ideology and polarization and promote cohesion among diverse populations, facilitating both individual and collective resilience. Civic engagement among young people of color living in urban areas with higher rates of violence in the United States, for example, has been associated with reported better mental health and wellbeing.⁸⁶ Other researchers call for increased study and promotion of youth re-entry programs following a conflict,⁸⁷ and a 2018 analysis of current United Nations youth peace programs emphasizes a need for collaboration with young people as equals, youth mentorship, and capacity building in youth programs for peace.⁸⁸

Beyond civic education and civic and political participation, the literature also supports a focus on youth employment and economic opportunity as pathways to stability and peace. Increased economic development alone cannot facilitate democracy's emergence, but it does make democracy more stable.⁸⁹ Today's young people need positive pathways between school and work, including apprenticeships and internships, to encourage their personal development into politically and civically engaged members of society.⁹⁰ While outside the scope of this evidence report, it is important to recognize economic opportunity as both a stabilizing force for democracy and an accelerator toward democratic resilience and anti-authoritarianism.

⁷⁸ Sparre, S. L. (2013).

⁷⁹ Bayat, A. (2017).

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² See Groves, J., Zraly, M., Gupta, S., Lee, J., Tagert, A. (May 2024).

⁸³ Wainryb, C., Recchia, H. (2015).

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Betancourt, T. S., Khan, K. T. (2008).

⁸⁶ Jain, S., Cohen, A. K., Kawashima-Ginsberg, K., Duarte, C. P., Pope, A. (2019).

⁸⁷ Brainerd, L., Chollet, D., LaFleur, V. (2007).

⁸⁸ Simpson, G. (2018).

⁸⁹ Przeworski, A., Limongi, F. (1997).

⁹⁰ Youniss, J., Bales, S., Christmas-Best, V., Diversi, M., McLaughlin, M., Silbereisen, R. (2002).

Evidence from IFES Programs

The literature review provides a strong foundation for this research, but several questions remain. For example, while the literature illustrates a range of ways young people are civically active, both in person and online, how can or does civic engagement *lead to* political engagement? Knowing that young people's agency and drive stem from their relationships with other young people, adults, institutions, and networks, and that experiences early in life can impact later civic and political engagement, how can practitioners more *meaningfully support and encourage* young people's sustained nonformal and formal political participation? Finally, understanding that inclusive civic spaces can strengthen democratic resilience, helping people form their identities and develop trust in their society, how has young people's engagement across civic and political spheres and in both digital and in-person spaces *impacted or been impacted by* the rise of authoritarianism and democratic backsliding?

With these questions in mind, we turn to evidence from IFES programming. The case studies discussed in this section showcase the three flagship IFES programs that train and engage young people in civic and political processes that were introduced earlier in this report: Youth SPACE, IFES's primary global youth leadership program; SAVE, focused on non-violent civic engagement; and SEED, a civic education curriculum designed for use in university and vocational school settings. Each program emphasizes individual agency in line with a PYD approach and provides resources and guidance to promote participants' further civic and political engagement. The content and approaches used in the programs often overlap and reinforce each other while responding to unique needs presented by the contexts in which they were developed and implemented.

The programs' structure and goals are described below, highlighting the way they each 1) hone skills to translate (political or civic) knowledge into action; 2) provide opportunities for students to test and, ideally, scale their engagement within their communities; and 3) respond to changing political contexts, fostering resilience skills that permit participants to pursue democratic change. The evidence gathered for each case illustrates that empowering and equipping young people to take action can promote civic participation – and also enable them to promote broader engagement of their networks and communities. By mobilizing their peers and showing them viable paths to both formal and nonformal engagement, young people can contribute to more sustainable participation in civic and political processes, a step toward building more resilient democracies.

IFES Case Study 1: Youth Supporting Participation, Action, and Civic Engagement (Youth SPACE)

Youth SPACE is IFES's global youth leadership training program, designed to equip and empower young people to step into leadership roles. Through intensive two-, three-, or four-day seminars, the training helps participants better understand elections, democracy, and peacebuilding and their rights and responsibilities in those processes. Youth SPACE also builds young people's skills to effectively lead, communicate with, and mobilize their communities. Youth SPACE includes three thematic tracks (see Table 5), each including core modules on leadership skills and ethics, stakeholder engagement and community mobilization, and communication principles. Trainings have primarily been conducted in collaboration with local CSOs, which are initially trained on the material through a training-of-trainers

(ToT) program. The trainers then cascade the training through their existing networks. In Ethiopia, for example, a CSO partner received ToT and then trained university students. After the training, participants have the chance to apply what they have learned by developing and carrying out community initiatives of their own design, such as voter education or civic education campaigns, social media campaigns, and dialogue activities. Hundreds of young people have been trained on Youth SPACE in Belarus, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea, Senegal, Serbia, and Sri Lanka since its development in 2020.⁹¹

Table 5: Youth SPACE Thematic Tracks

Youth Participation in the Electoral Cycle	Youth-Led Advocacy	Youth, Peace, and Security
Builds knowledge of the importance of young people’s engagement throughout the electoral cycle	Supports young people to strengthen their advocacy skills and mobilize their peers and communities to raise issues and advance causes important to them	Trains young people on the global Youth, Peace, and Security Agenda
Highlights ways that young people can adopt leadership roles in the pre-electoral, electoral, and post-electoral phases	Encourages young people to utilize advocacy tools and strategies through digital or in-person engagement	Integrates democratic and ethical leadership into young people’s peacebuilding efforts through tools such as dialogue, promoting human rights, and positive peace narratives that counter harmful messages

Translating Knowledge into Action

According to program data, Youth SPACE has helped **consolidate young people’s interest in community development** and, critically, translate this interest into action. Ahead of the 2022 national elections in Papua New Guinea, IFES conducted two Youth SPACE ToTs to prepare participants to disseminate voter and civic education messages and to conduct subsequent Youth SPACE trainings across the country. The pre- and post-test data from cascade trainings showed as much as a 20 percent increase in participants’ understanding of voter education and community mobilization. Participants also were more likely to say that they themselves could lead activities in their communities after the training. Program participants collaborated with IFES in civic and political engagement initiatives after the training in the lead-up to the elections, including planning youth engagement activities and volunteering at two voter festivals that encouraged young and first-time voters to participate in the elections. The knowledge and skills acquired in the training have continued to resonate with Youth SPACE participants. In the 2024 Alumni Survey, a majority of the 47 Youth SPACE alumni respondents reported familiarity with disinformation, social inclusion, human rights, leadership, and civic education issues, and that they still felt equipped to lead community projects, serve as leaders, and engage in civil society activities.

⁹¹ At the time of data collection for this report, Youth SPACE participants in Senegal, Belarus, and Sri Lanka had not completed action projects. Therefore, surveys were not disseminated to them.

The advocacy track also emphasizes **translating knowledge and skills into formal civic and political engagement**. For instance, Youth SPACE engaged a cohort of 16 young people in Serbia to strengthen the skills and capacity of participants on topics including civic action, community mobilization, stakeholder engagement, and participation in civic and political life. As indicated in the program’s pre- and post-tests, the greatest gains related to community understanding and mobilization. Integral to the design of the program, participants planned action projects focused on a community issue they cared about and, after the program, implemented their projects, engaging with other CSOs and community members to advance their work. One young program alumna conducted a research project on youth participation in her community and found no existing avenues for youth participation in the local government. To address this gap, she led a series of workshops to share community policies with young people and developed a plan to include young people in advocacy efforts to increase participation mechanisms in the community. She then advocated for more robust mechanisms for youth participation in her community and local government. Nearly all participants agreed that they had a new appreciation or understanding of how change could begin in their communities, and how they could lead that change.

“I started educating other associations – I started providing training on action plan[s], vision, things I learned through this program. I also joined a student organization; asked them vision and mission questions, which they were not thinking about.” – Youth SPACE Serbia participant

Scaling Civic and Political Engagement Skills to National Processes

Youth SPACE also provides young people **opportunities to engage in local, regional, and national processes** by honing skills that they can readily apply to ongoing situations. A major component of the Youth, Peace, and Security training track is learning and applying dialogue and other conflict mitigation strategies in peacebuilding processes. In Ethiopia, IFES has trained more than 400 young leaders from universities across the country as “Peace Ambassadors” to lead peacebuilding initiatives on their campuses and in their communities. Following trainings held in 2022 and 2023, Peace Ambassadors have, at the time of writing, conducted more than 300 initiatives, including tree planting activities, peace walks, and dialogue sessions with diverse participants framed around traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremonies.⁹² The activities reached more than 5,000 people directly and more than 30,000 on social media. These results reflect not just the reach of the young leaders’ efforts but also the power of the messages that resonated with broader audiences across online networks.

Several Peace Ambassadors went on to engage as dialogue facilitators among their peers on campus, further illustrating the long-term impact and potential scale of the Youth SPACE skill-building component. Youth SPACE advanced young people’s engagement in national dialogue processes through its skill-strengthening components, supporting young leaders as dialogue session facilitators on their campuses to address tension and conflict among students across ethnic and religious divides. These opportunities for students ran in parallel to ongoing dialogue at

⁹² The International Foundation for Electoral Systems. (2023, January 30).

the national level designed to resolve conflicts in society and promote social cohesion, underlining the importance of these skill-building opportunities for young Ethiopians.⁹³

Protecting Democracy in Closing Spaces

The Youth SPACE training modalities – and the skills fostered by them – are *adaptable* to changing political contexts. In August 2020, IFES piloted its first Youth SPACE training in Myanmar to support young leaders to lead voter education efforts and outreach in their communities. The training included topics such as electoral processes, leadership, social media, communication, and stakeholder engagement in the lead-up to elections that November. Young leaders and local partners also collaborated on community engagement initiatives including voter game boxes, mock voting stations, street theater, and voter education tea talks. Those community outreach activities reached more than 17,000 people between August and November 2020.

The February 2021 coup in Myanmar clearly necessitated a shift in approach. IFES adapted its engagement with young people to focus on topics and skills that would increase ***personal and community resilience***. The IFES team continued to partner with local organizations with a focus on the inclusion of diverse and marginalized populations. Post-coup, the trainings incorporated stress management, digital security, and information literacy into its regular core curriculum covering leadership, networking, and dialogue. One activity, Saturday Youth Dialogues, engaged young people in facilitated discussions on topics such as community cohesion, consensus building, and federalism. Other trainings focused on strengthening young people’s leadership when operating in restrictive environments, again prioritizing their personal and digital safety and security.

A similar focus on resilience was employed in 2023 for Youth SPACE trainings with Belarusians living abroad. Many of the participants were known to rely on social media as a means of communication. Given this interest among participants, the training included digital safeguarding for skills building, a topic not traditionally included in Youth SPACE programs. The participants subsequently developed activities promoting democracy and human rights online, speaking out against the rising tide of authoritarianism in their home country.

Moving Forward: Enhancing Youth SPACE by Incorporating Safety and Mental Health Support

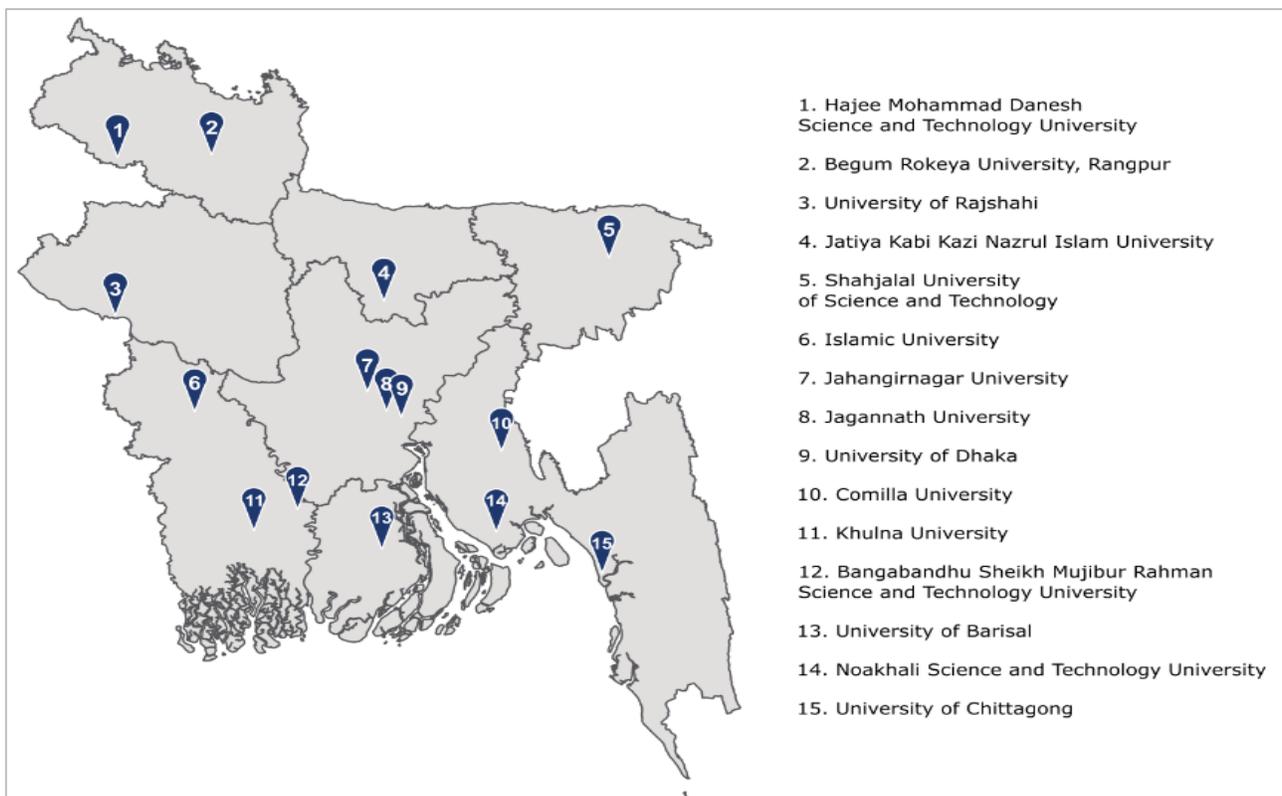
IFES recognizes that civic and political engagement can be draining and even dangerous for young people in certain environments. Given recent experiences, Youth SPACE trainings now integrate mental health and wellbeing support and safeguarding approaches into the curriculum. Continuous efforts are needed to ensure participating young people receive holistic support in trainings, including their personal safety and emotional wellbeing, while they engage in issues of importance to them and their communities, particularly in closed or backsliding contexts.

⁹³ Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission. (n.d.).

IFES Case Study 2: The Students Against Violence Everywhere (SAVE) Program

SAVE is a university-based civic engagement program developed in 2018 in partnership with the University of Dhaka (Bangladesh) Microgovernance Research Initiative.⁹⁴ Over a five-year period, the SAVE network expanded to 14 additional universities across the country (see Figure 2) and trained more than 3,000 students. SAVE comprises two critical components: 1) a one- or two-day capacity strengthening training curriculum rooted in human rights and positive community action that stresses the importance of nonviolent youth engagement; and 2) student-designed and -led community civic engagement activities. The SAVE training approach is modular (see Table 6), offering the opportunity for participants to become master trainers after completing the course. Civic engagement activities conducted after the training generally include awareness-raising campaigns, advocacy, or civic education initiatives on topics such as democracy, non-violence, voting rights, gender and minority rights, disability rights, and climate change.

Figure 2: Geographic Distribution of SAVE Network Students Across Bangladesh



⁹⁴ SAVE was adapted from the People Against Violence Everywhere, an election violence prevention and peace-building initiative that provides local leaders and key actors with the tools and skills needed to anticipate, mitigate, and prevent violence around elections. See The International Foundation for Electoral Systems. (n.d.). *People Against Violence*. See also, Microgovernance Research Initiative. (n.d.).

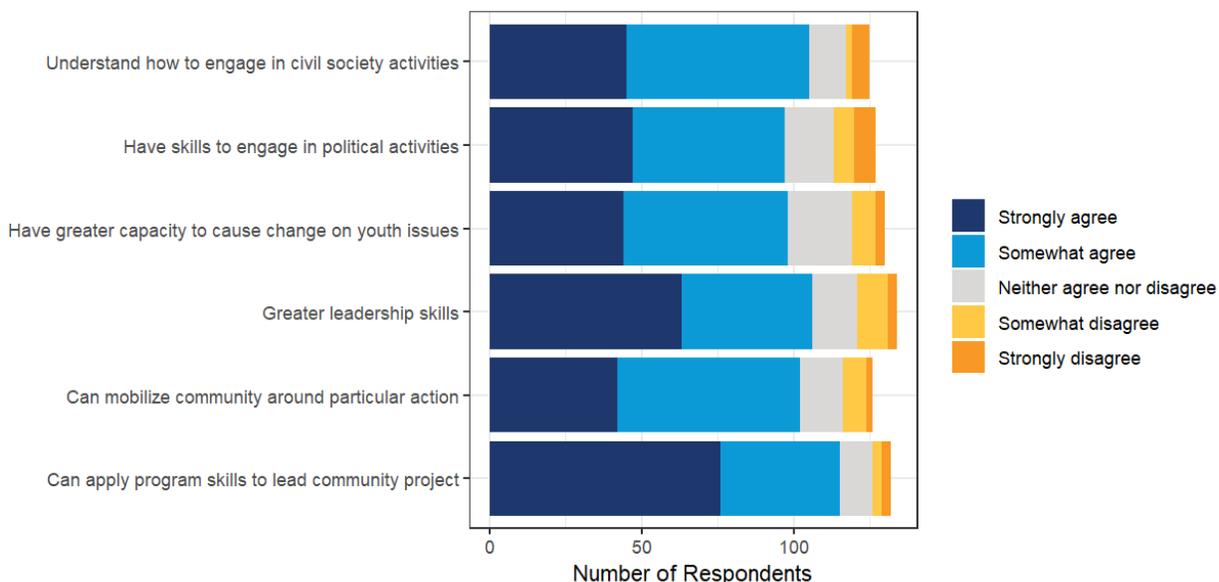
Table 6: SAVE Structure and Module Topics

Foundational Modules (All Participants)	Complementary Modules (Optional)	Master Trainers Program (Optional)
Positive community engagement	Alternative dispute resolution	Review of foundational modules
Stakeholder engagement	Gender equality and social inclusion	Facilitation basics
Democracy and human rights	Share (focused on threats to information integrity and hate speech)	Action planning and safeguarding
Ethical leadership	Climate change	
Communication	Peace and harmony	
Conflict and violence		
Action project design and implementation		

Strengthening Agency and Self-Confidence to Effect Change

SAVE participants report greater skills and capacity to engage in civic life. According to pre- and post-training assessments, 39 participants in a SAVE training in May 2024 at Jahangirnagar University self-reported a significant increase in their ability to plan and design civic activities in their communities. In the pre-training assessment, only 26 percent of male participants (N=15) felt that they had a good or very good understanding before the training, while 86 percent reported a good or very good understanding afterwards; 24 percent of female participants (N=24) felt that they had a good or very good understanding before but 79 percent felt that way after the training. Those skills also seem to last beyond the immediate training period. Alumni of earlier SAVE trainings strongly agreed that they have the skills to engage in community projects, according to the 2024 Alumni Survey (Figure 3).

Figure 3: SAVE Alumni Reflection of Increased Skills Following SAVE Trainings



Source for Figure 3: IFES Alumni Survey, 2024

SAVE participants also reported a significant increase in their overall leadership skills. In the same May 2024 SAVE training at Jahangirnagar University, more participants reported they had the skills to lead groups of people for a common cause. As many as 86 percent of male participants at Jahangirnagar University (N=15) felt they had the skills to lead before the training, while 100 percent of the male participants felt that way by the end. The effect was even more striking among female participants (N=24): 66 percent agreed before the training, but 91 percent agreed afterwards. The participants also reported greater capacity to effect change on issues of importance to young people in their communities than before the trainings: 93 percent of male participants and 91 percent of female participants agreed somewhat or strongly after the training, up from 80 percent and 66 percent, respectively. In two trainings that month, at Jahangirnagar University and Pabna University of Science and Technology, all 66 participants agreed that they had the capacity to engage in public speaking by the end of the training.

Through its training of master trainers in particular, the SAVE program encourages participants to take on leadership roles in the SAVE network of students across Bangladesh participating in trainings and leading community engagement activities. ToT participants are expected to mentor and support new SAVE program participants, lead SAVE trainings, and monitor and review SAVE civic engagement activities. Master trainers receive additional training, building their self-confidence and leadership skills in inclusive communication, facilitation, and collaboration.

Leading Change in the Community

Participants in SAVE trainings not only gain deeper awareness of community challenges; they also **actively address pressing community issues**. For example, in 2023, SAVE participants from Rajshahi University conducted a community advocacy campaign called Transgender Voice to garner support for transgender individuals' access to employment and to increase their confidence as business owners. The advocacy work included direct support and trainings for members of the transgender community and organizing street dramas to increase acceptance in the community.

SAVE program participants' community civic engagement activities can take highly innovative forms. For instance, one SAVE leader, a young Indigenous woman, has created more than 30 YouTube videos in her Indigenous language to inform community members about their civic and political rights. As of the time of this writing, the videos had been viewed more than 2,200 times.

These projects can have long-term impact on communities. For instance, in 2018, another SAVE project at Dhaka University launched the Bangladeshi Youth Initiative⁹⁵ to support students as civic leaders. Today, the Bangladeshi Youth Initiative continues to function as a volunteer-based organization that has conducted nine projects on issues such as poverty reduction, education, and sustainable development.⁹⁶ Networks, common byproducts of these activities, can present repeat engagement opportunities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a Chittagong University SAVE participant coordinated with CSOs to provide her peers in the SAVE network with volunteer opportunities such as recycling and repurposing materials to make plant holders. Simultaneously, the student coordinated with other SAVE members to orchestrate an awareness-raising campaign with two CSOs, JAAGO Foundation and Volunteer

⁹⁵ Bangladesh Youth Initiative. (n.d.).

⁹⁶ Deal, C. (2019, August 27); Bangladesh Youth Initiative. (n.d.).

for Bangladesh, informing people how to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.⁹⁷ This young person's leveraging of her informal network with peers and CSOs enabled her to amplify her message and create volunteer opportunities for others.

Increasing Democratic Resilience through Action

SAVE participants develop critical knowledge, skills, and experience that can help counter risks to democracy – including specific threats against marginalized groups. For instance, in response to increased violence against the Hindu community in Bangladesh in October 2021, 13 universities from across the SAVE network organized in-person and digital protests promoting peace. They also held a vigil in multiple locations to reflect on communal violence and respect for diversity. As an ongoing effort, they developed awareness-raising videos on religious tolerance, applying some non-traditional and nonformal political participation skills gained in the program. Through such acts, SAVE members function as resilient democratic actors, championing democracy in Bangladesh at the community level.

In the 2024 Alumni Survey, SAVE alumni reported feeling very prepared to counter threats against democracy in their country. One illustration of such pro-democracy strategies is a 2023 awareness campaign on hate speech and promoting tolerance, respect, and inclusion conducted by SAVE members at Begum Rokeya University. The university subsequently provided resources including online guides and posters to help students better recognize and respond to hate speech. This action by the university elevated and reinforced the students' efforts to create a more democratic space on campus for students from all backgrounds to engage.

“A nation can't be a good democratic nation if there isn't good education. First priorities should [be] in [the] education sector.” – SAVE participant, Bangladesh, from Alumni Survey

IFES Case Study 3: Strengthening Engagement through Education for Democracy (SEED)

Through the SEED methodology, IFES offers a contemporary, interactive approach to civic education to thousands of university and vocational college students in semester-long courses. The methodology emphasizes three components:

- **Knowledge gain**, covering topics such as democracy, human rights, civil society, civil discourse, media literacy, good governance, and inclusion and accessibility.
- **Interactive teaching**, in contrast to traditional lecture-style teaching formats, that fosters skills such as dialogue, critical thinking, problem-solving, and consensus building.

⁹⁷ The International Foundation for Electoral Systems. (n.d.). *Learning Curve: How university students applied skills learned combatting violence to fight COVID-19 in Bangladesh.*

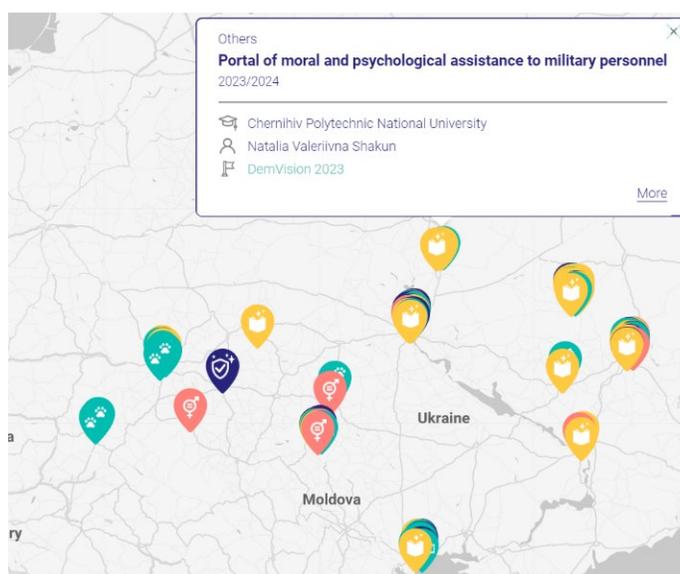
- **Action projects**, the culminating exercise of the course, in which students identify an issue in their communities and plan and execute projects to address it.

Tailored for each country, the courses introduce young people to fundamental concepts of democratic citizenship, systems of government, civic participation, and human rights. They deepen soft and hard skills through hands-on, real-world learning experiences. SEED is designed and taught with an eye to mindful citizenship in the digital age and to counter immediate and long-term threats to information integrity. Through SEED, IFES has worked with over 165 universities and colleges, and over 450 education specialists in Armenia, Bangladesh, Georgia, the Kyrgyz Republic, Serbia, Sri Lanka, and Ukraine to develop and offer fully accredited university and vocational college-level curricula. To date, more than 37,000 students have completed IFES's semester-long civic education courses.

SEED In Action

In Ukraine alone, nearly 17,000 students have participated in SEED since 2018. The course, *Democracy: From Theory to Practice*, was designed to include philosophical foundations of democratic governance; human rights; the role of civil society, and citizen engagement. Before beginning action projects, participants take part in activities including debates and discussions, analyzing case studies, and interactive simulations. Action projects address problems in students' communities, covering diverse topics such as ecology, education, gender equality, digital literacy, career skills, and animal rights (see Figure 4).⁹⁸ Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, IFES restructured the course to respond to participants' new and developing needs. The remainder of this case focuses on SEED's unique programming in Ukraine, drawing on monitoring and evaluation program data, project surveys, and interviews conducted with course educators and students since the course's inception.

Figure 4: DemMap, IFES Ukraine's Mapping of Action Projects Conducted by SEED Alumni



Fostering Skills and Reconceptualizing Community Engagement

Students enrolled in the first few semesters of the course consistently reported knowledge gain and attitude shifts toward community engagement. Over 800 students were enrolled during the 2018–2019 academic year. In a post-course survey, they reported knowledge gain and increased understanding of course topics including civil society (90 percent), citizen engagement (88 percent), human rights (87 percent), and democratic governance (74 percent).

⁹⁸ Some of the projects can be found on the IFES Ukraine team's interactive map of student action projects. See: The International Foundation for Electoral Systems. (n.d.). *Map of Student Action Projects*.

Instructors also observed that students were highly proficient at considering an issue from multiple perspectives, working collaboratively, analyzing information and generating conclusions, and engaging in discourse.

When IFES expanded the course to vocational schools during the 2022–2023 academic year, students echoed those experiences. They identified several methods of political participation in which they engaged for the first time or on which they developed a new perspective since participating in the course. These included developing or signing petitions (formal political engagement), engaging local officials (nonformal political engagement), taking part in rallies and protests (formal civic engagement), and voting (formal political engagement). Participants from vocational schools also frequently noted their new skills in social media advocacy, a type of nonformal civic engagement.

Organizing for Community Change

The Youth Democratic Association (YODA) is a notable example of course participants applying what they learned to advance their and peers' civic engagement. In 2019, SEED alumni formed YODA, a non-profit organization that provides young people nonformal civic education resources and opportunities to connect and engage, including with dem talks, panel discussions on different topics; social media platforms; and a podcast.⁹⁹ YODA's example reflects young people's simultaneous pursuit of nonformal and formal engagement modalities and underscores the importance of providing opportunities for both.

Committing to Democracy Amid Conflict

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, IFES adapted SEED to help participants navigate their new realities. Based on feedback from teachers and student participants in the course at the onset of the war,¹⁰⁰ IFES expanded the SEED curriculum to include topics such as martial law and security and emphasized skills such as identifying information attacks. During the 2022–2023 academic year, the course was also offered online to increase its accessibility and accommodate students displaced from their homes or dealing with difficult living conditions.

“Students are generally demotivated... For some of them, working on a student action project was a solace, as they were distracted from the war.” – SEED instructor in Ukraine

In focus group discussions at the end of the semester, students commented that the course had deepened their civic identities despite challenges related to the war. They noted an increased sense of urgency in their continued commitment to democratic principles. One teacher shared that their students “all said that it was important for them to learn about this civic engagement, that they could still have an impact. I think this awareness will help them. If they decide to take part in the post-war reconstruction, they will be aware of the methods of civic participation.” With knowledge and skills adapted to fit the context, the course illuminated for students the need to engage in formal civic and political processes, especially to support post-war recovery.

⁹⁹ Youth Democratic Association. (n.d.).

¹⁰⁰ The International Foundation for Electoral Systems. (2022, August 5).

Rather than diminishing SEED's robust alumni networks and institutional commitments, the war spurred the development of a crucial support system for teachers and currently enrolled students. Supporting Circles provided teachers a safe space to share their feelings and professional development support as they adjusted to online teaching and a new curriculum. YODA, a SEED alumni project, provided additional spaces for students to engage their peers and share information about community efforts around the war and wartime recovery.

Overview of Findings and Recommendations

Our review of the extant literature and IFES programmatic evidence revealed four key takeaways that address the learning agenda questions. Practitioners can bear these in mind when designing youth engagement programming to encourage young people's long-term engagement in civic and political life and as democratic actors and leaders.

Learning Agenda Questions

What types of informal civic engagement can lead to greater and/or more formal political and civic engagement among youth?

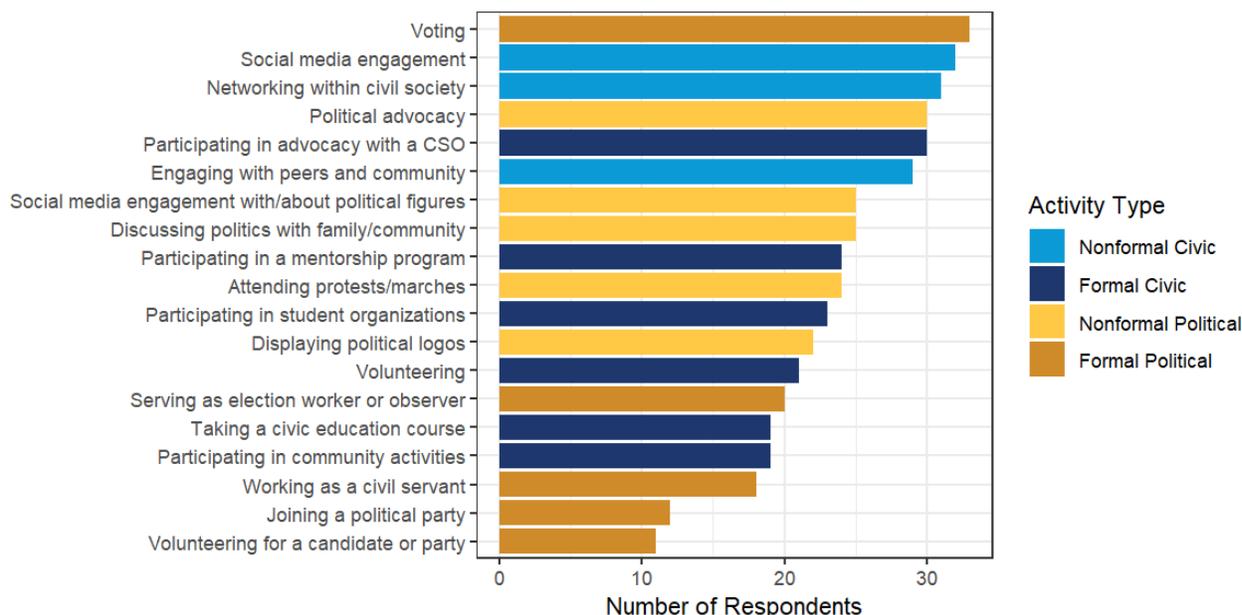
How can these types of engagement be harnessed to fight against authoritarianism?

Key Findings

Finding 1: Civic and political engagement does not necessarily progress from nonformal to formal. The learning agenda question implies the existence of a transition from nonformal to formal. The evidence from the literature review and our own programmatic data, however, indicate that young people generally engage in both nonformal and formal civic and political activities *simultaneously* rather than moving sequentially from nonformal to formal activities. As noted in the case of civic education students in Ukraine, experiences in the classroom and discussions on topics such as democracy and community engagement led to a range of activities that students engaged in simultaneously, such as volunteering with CSOs, engaging in campus politics, and advocating with their peers on issues of importance.

Responses to the Alumni Survey further support this conclusion. Alumni reportedly participate in civic engagement activities at a higher rate than in political engagement activities and in nonformal more than formal activities. However, respondents often engage across categories at the same time. Furthermore, after completing IFES trainings or courses, survey respondents also indicated they started to engage in both formal and nonformal civic and political engagement activities (see Figure 5). Given young people's interest in civic and political participation regardless of activity type, it is therefore more important to consider civic education interventions that support young people's engagement in public life in ways that are meaningful to them.

Figure 5: Activities Started by Participants After Training, by Category



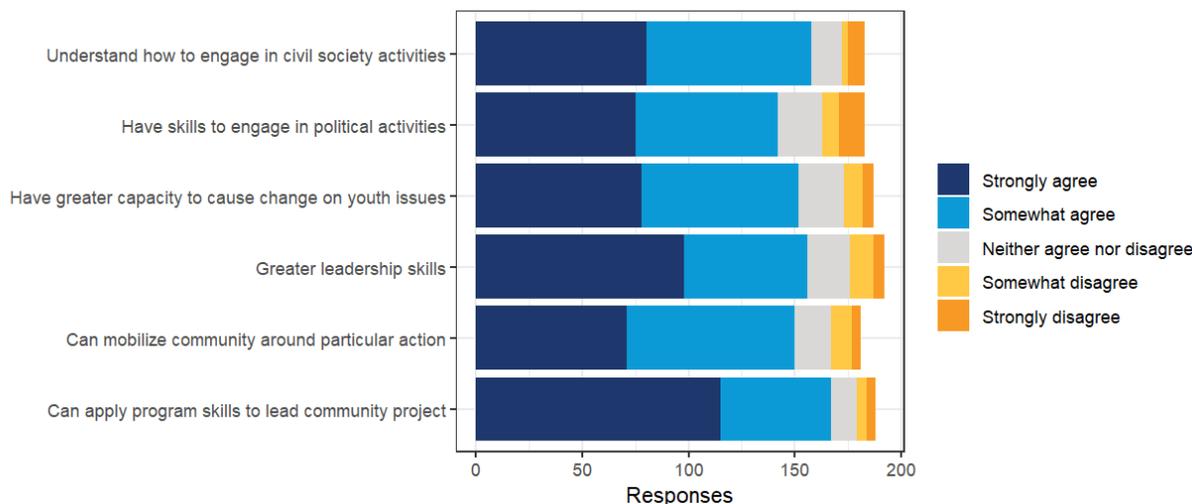
Source for Figure 5: IFES Alumni Survey, 2024

Finding 2: Civic education programming can accelerate engagement across civic and political life.

Practitioners should consider civic education programming as an *accelerator* to increase engagement across civic and political life. SAVE Bangladesh program alumni in particular indicated confidence that they had the skills to lead community projects, serve as leaders, and engage in political activities as a result of the SAVE trainings. Furthermore, the community action projects embedded across all trainings and courses enabled participants to immediately apply what they learned in their daily lives, thus helping to generate new and increased interest in engaging in civic and political life.

As seen in Figure 6, most Alumni Survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that, following their trainings and courses, they had the skills to engage in both formal and nonformal civic and political processes. While responses were more strongly in agreement when reflecting on skills for formal and nonformal civic participation rather than political engagement, alumni nevertheless also felt they had the skills to engage in political activities and effect change, more broadly, on youth issues. Looking again at Figure 5, it is also clear that the surveyed alumni began participating in a variety of formal and nonformal political and civic engagement activities following the training, suggesting that the civic education interventions encouraged new forms of participation.

Figure 6: Program Alumni Perceptions of Skills Post-training

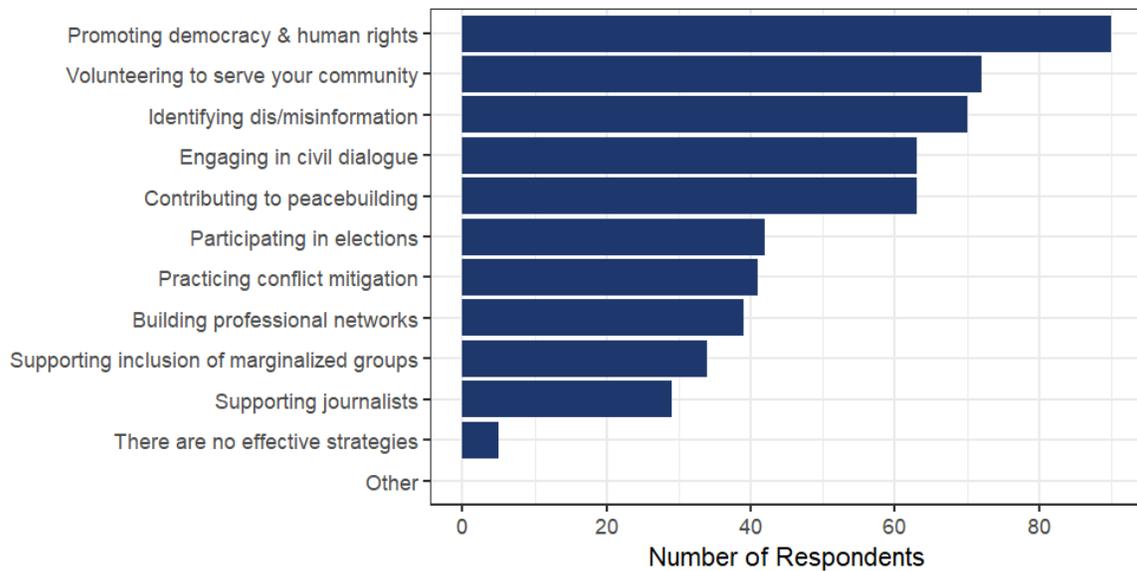


Source for Figure 6: IFES Alumni Survey, 2024

Finding 3: A PYD approach, combined with flexible training modalities, encourages the formal political and civic participation of young people. When engaging diverse groups of young people, it is critical to adapt trainings and courses so they are responsive to lived experience and contexts. This means rejecting a “one size fits all” approach and embracing a more holistic approach to young people’s leadership, engagement, and wellbeing. The benefits of this approach became clear in Ukraine after the invasion, when some participants’ student action projects became a means of supporting their mental health, wellbeing, and civic engagement in the midst of ongoing conflict. Contextualized training modalities also align with a PYD approach in creating an enabling environment in which young people to feel safe and supported and providing the assets for them to ultimately become leaders in their communities. In turn, young people are provided the foundation to contribute positively to their communities and engage in formal civic and political activities, as reflected in examples from SAVE alumni in Bangladesh and Youth SPACE alumni in Ethiopia.

IFES trainings are effective both in encouraging program alumni to engage in formal processes and in supporting their democratic values. A majority of respondents to the Alumni Survey indicated that, following their training or course, they felt prepared to promote democracy and human rights, volunteer to serve their communities, and identify dis- and misinformation to counter risks to democracy (see Figure 7). The case studies above have provided examples of program alumni from across the three programs putting these skills directly into practice as part of their community action projects.

Figure 7: Ready-to-Use Strategies for Countering Risks to Democracy



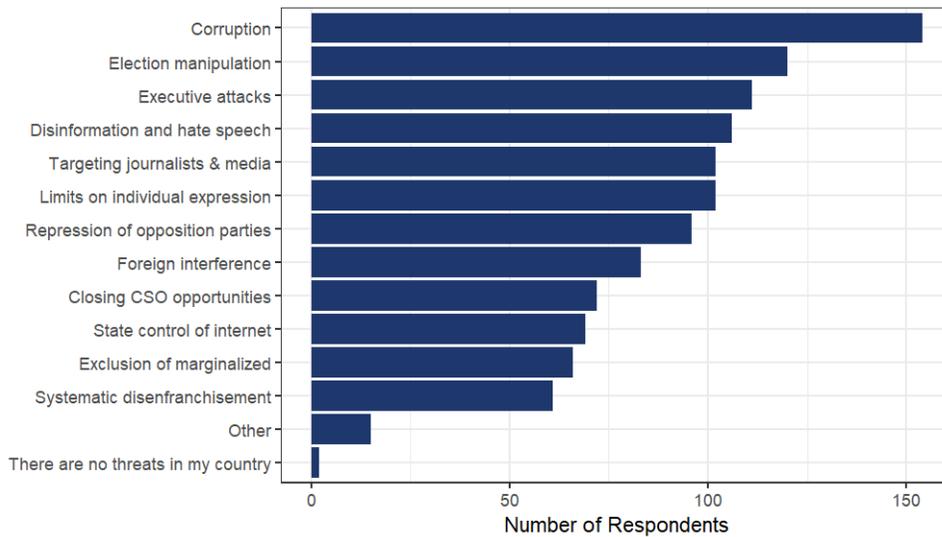
Source for Figure 7: IFES Alumni Survey, 2024

Finding 4: Youth engagement programs that integrate community action projects and network-building support the work of protecting democracy. Learning should not be confined to a training or course. Instead, participants should have opportunities to network with civil society, industry, and government representatives and with one another. Networking should be integrated into curricula and encouraged after the training or course ends. Networks like SAVE’s and the one created by civic education students and educators in Ukraine can also help advance community action projects following the training through ongoing mentorship and support from training or course organizers or other community members. Furthermore, the networks formed through IFES programs connect young people across countries and even regions, such as the virtual exchanges conducted with the SAVE network and global IFES program alumni that strengthen their work promoting democracy and “build[ing] and cement[ing] a democratic culture and demand for democracy.”¹⁰¹

Community projects provide ongoing opportunities to practice skills and apply knowledge acquired from the training or course, fostering sustained engagement in civic and political life. Many of the action projects across SAVE, SEED, and Youth SPACE programs focus on promoting democracy and human rights, advancing information integrity, and engaging in civil dialogue. Alumni Survey respondents identified corruption, election manipulation, executive attacks on independent institutions, and disinformation and hate speech as the biggest threats to democracy in their countries today (see Figure 8). The top strategies that respondents identified as potentially effective at **countering** these threats include promoting democracy and human rights, identifying dis- and misinformation, supporting journalists, and engaging in civil dialogue – all skills that were fostered in their programs and practices in their action projects (see Figure 9).

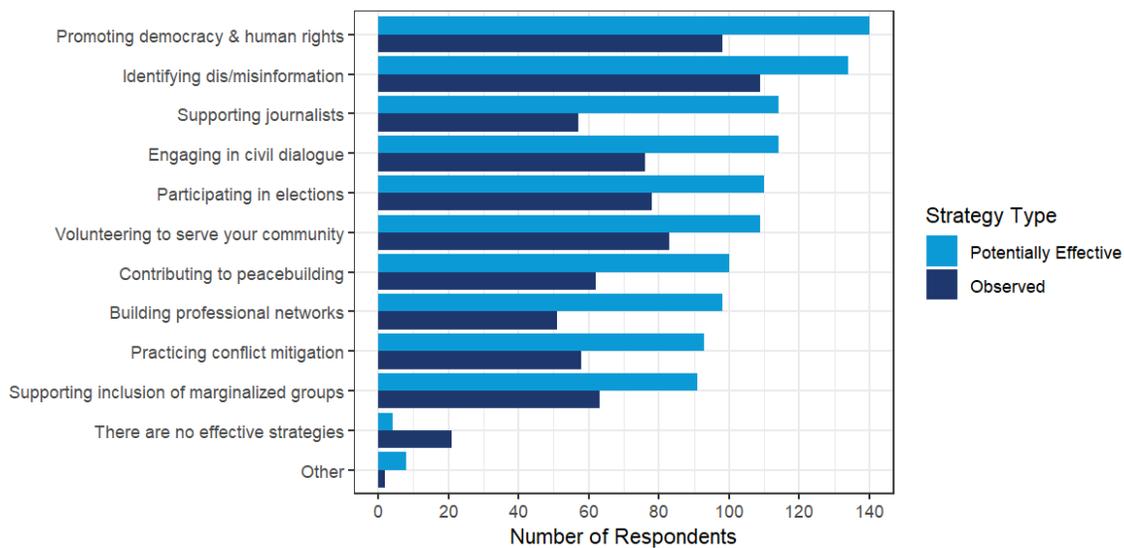
¹⁰¹ Shein, E., & Emmons, C., with Lemargie, K., & Buriel, F. (November 2023).

Figure 8: Perceived Threats to Democracy



Source for Figure 8: IFES Alumni Survey, 2024

Figure 9: Potentially Effective vs. Observed Strategies



Source for Figure 9: IFES Alumni Survey, 2024

Programmatic Conclusions and Recommendations

- Adapt trainings and courses to their audiences.** To contribute positively to young people’s civic and political participation, workshops, trainings, and courses should be responsive to and reflect their lived realities. Leadership opportunities should also be available for young people both during and after the training to advance their engagement in their communities and in public life beyond the classroom.

- **Create opportunities for young people to develop and lead activities directly.** Giving young leaders opportunities to design and implement their own activities encourages their civic and political participation. Furthermore, creating peer-to-peer connections across countries and regions and providing continuous learning opportunities through conferences, regional or international events, and study trips are ways to create broad networks of youth leaders.
- **Utilize PYD approaches.** The content and format of workshops, trainings, and courses should be adaptable and flexible to align with shifting sociopolitical conditions, what young people care about most, and the support they need as leaders. Integrating mental health and wellbeing support across programming and adapting activities so they are appropriate for different ages and developmental stages is a requirement for successful programming.
- **Pursue cross-sectoral approaches.** Programming should engage young people across sectors (for example, health, education, business, technology), not just those already engaged in DRG spaces. Since human rights are relevant to everyone, programming that meets young people where they are, in seemingly unrelated sectors, stands to have a broader impact on overall engagement.
- **Mainstream safeguarding and Do No Harm principles across all programming.** Using tools such as risk assessment and mitigation, programs can prepare for risks and put safeguarding processes in place. Consider the unique experiences and circumstances of young people with intersectional identities, such as young people with disabilities or young Indigenous people, and their lived experiences, when designing inclusive and accessible curriculum and safe training modalities.
- **Integrate effective strategies used to counter democratic backsliding into programming.** Doing so contributes to participants' knowledge gain and supports community-based initiatives that bolster democratic resilience. Strategies include providing opportunities for young people to network with their peers and apply what they learn in trainings to their own lives and communities. They can also promote democratic processes from the local to the national level through youth-led civic engagement activities such as community clean-ups, dialogue sessions that reach diverse populations across the community, and voter education campaigns that can encourage young people and first-time voters to vote.

Policy Conclusions and Recommendations

- **Invest broadly in all kinds of civic education.** To support young people's nonformal and formal participation, program design should take a holistic approach to civic education programming and include activities that engage young people in different spaces and using different approaches that support their engagement in public life.
- **Learn about successful youth engagement across sectors.** Donors and practitioners from different sectors should share lessons learned to strengthen work done in DRG spaces, add further nuance and context to programming, and better engage young people with diverse backgrounds and interests. Such relationships also create opportunities for two-way knowledge sharing, as DRG programming can also suggest ways to integrate human rights, civic engagement, and political participation into youth programming in other sectors.

- **Require young people’s meaningful engagement across activities.** To avoid tokenistic youth engagement, donors and practitioners must ensure that young people are more directly involved in program design. Beyond designing activities for young people, changes to proposal evaluations (e.g., higher scores for programs developed with young people’s input) and to program evaluation plans (e.g., disaggregation of indicators by age) should be required as a matter of policy.
- **Embed monitoring and evaluation mechanisms into program investments that go beyond outputs to capture the long-term effects of youth engagement.** Donors should support practitioners in developing robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks that effectively capture not only outputs from youth programming as well as longer-term outcomes and impacts achieved by program alumni to better assess the efficacy of the intervention. Donors and practitioners should also identify new ways to measure the impacts of digital and social media activities.

Final Considerations

Understanding how young people contribute to civic and political processes is inextricably linked to our ability – as practitioners, donors, policymakers, educators, and others – to support healthy democracies. The IFES Learning Agenda questions have enabled us to explore young people’s political and civic engagement, reconsider the nuanced differences between formal and nonformal engagement modalities, and examine how these findings can inform efforts to resist democratic backsliding. This report’s main findings can inform the design of programming that advances young people’s participation in public life and strengthen democratic resilience.

However, the research suggests that there is much more to understand about the complex relationship between young people’s political and civic engagement tendencies and democratic citizenship. For example, rather than asking how nonformal engagement leads to more formal engagement, we should ask how *holistic* civic education programming accelerates young people’s overall engagement. Research should look for more specific evidence of the impact of young people’s engagement in political life on *democratic resilience* during both crisis and non-crisis moments. Future research should seek to better understand unique challenges to young people’s civic and political engagement in *post-conflict contexts* and the changing nature of public participation through conflict. Finally, future work should consider new spaces and approaches to engaging young people, especially in the digital age, given changing conceptions of citizenship – including the idea of digital citizenship.

The findings in this report are, therefore, just a first step. Practitioners and policymakers can do more to advance young people’s engagement in political and civic life as democratic leaders and in fighting against democratic backsliding. With the future of democracy so critically at stake, it is time to work more urgently and proactively to involve young people in civic and political processes that build networks, engage communities sustainably, and involve young people as leaders in both formal and nonformal spaces.

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