The Issue in the Decline of Political Engagement

Political engagement is a cornerstone of functional democracies, encompassing voting, advocacy and public participation in policymaking. This 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. An engaged citizenry with high levels of political and civic participation is often seen to confer a degree of legitimacy on democratic institutions, through increasing the chances that leaders will choose policies that benefit the majority. Despite this, it is important recognise that political engagement happens in every institutional context, from democracies to autocracies, albeit in different ways. Even when formal institutions restrict the power of "ordinary" citizens, who hold no public office and are not organized into influential groups, research suggests that leaders are constrained by the informal powers of non-elite citizens to engage in protests or revolts.

Nevertheless, it is still worrying to note a trend of global decline in political participation, with factors such as political disillusionment, economic inequality, lack of civic education, misinformation and barriers to participation being key contributors to this trend. Youth engagement is also particularly low in many nations, which threatens the future of political engagement for countries where the older generations are driving voter participation numbers. This disengagement threatens democratic institutions, governance, and public accountability, by allowing governments to create policies that favour more privileged demographics and even facilitating the consolidation of power by authoritarian leaders. This ultimately risks undermining democratic health on a global stage, which makes addressing these issues essential to ensuring the legitimacy of governing institutions worldwide.

Disillusionment and a lack of trust in democratic institutions is a key driving factor behind reduced voter turnout and political participation in many countries. Corruption, political scandals, and perceived inefficiency can cause citizens to doubt the legitimacy of both general elections and the government’s motivations for policy making. In the case of Brazil, a series of corruption scandals such as the “Operation Car Wash” investigation left citizens distrustful of political elites, contributing to scepticism about governance and reduced voter turnout.

Economic inequalities and social barriers can also lead to reduced voter participation, as marginalized groups can feel politicians do not represent their interests leading to exclusion from meaningful political participation. Socioeconomic factors can also exacerbate political disengagement, as low-income individuals may prioritize survival over civic participation. In South Africa the high levels of income inequality have left many citizens feeling alienated, despite democratic institutions remaining strong. The poor are also less likely to participate in elections or civic activities due to systemic exclusion, which leads to politicians gearing policies towards overrepresented communities, perpetuating the cycle.

Misinformation is often used as a part of political campaigns, particularly those utilising social media, to exacerbate polarisation which reduces constructive political dialogue and alienates moderate voices. This perceived polarisation discourages individuals from engaging in a system perceived as combative and unproductive, which can lead to large numbers of individuals regarding voting as meaningless. In India the use of fake news during election periods has led to increased cynicism about the validity of their democratic process. This trend has discouraged many citizens from participating, believing their votes will not matter.

Lack of civic education can also contribute to lower levels of political engagement, with the current youth being particularly affected by this factor.  Lack of participation in civic duties, such as voting, is often attributed to a lack of awareness and accessibility, which is a direct result of failing to educate the youth about political matters. Many countries struggle to provide such education in an unbiased and inclusive way, with many autocratic countries presenting a one sided view of political parties, while democratic countries may avoid discussing political climates as part of state education in order to prevent students being influenced by biased opinions or information.

Barriers to voting and participation have also been shown to be highly effective at reducing voter turnout and participation. Structural obstacles can include restrictive voter ID laws, inaccessible polling stations, and complex registration processes, which have widespread usage in many countries. These can make voting cumbersome or exclusionary, which results in limited representation and undermines trust in the electoral system. In the United States, strict voter ID laws in states like Georgia and Texas disproportionately affect minority and low-income communities, resulting in potential representatives and policies being more targeted to high-income and overrepresented groups within these states.

It is also worth noting that youth disengagement has become particularly prevalent in recent years, with voter turnout shown to be significantly higher for older generations worldwide. Younger generations globally seem to feel disconnected from traditional political systems, viewing them as outdated or unrepresentative of their values. The absence of youth voices significantly weakens democracies, posing an ongoing threat to democratic health worldwide. This suggests that outdated political systems ultimately hinder long-term policymaking that reflects generational needs, indicating we need to update and in some cases reevaluate political systems worldwide, to ensure they are sufficiently accessible to today’s youth. In Japan, voter turnout among individuals aged 20-29 in recent elections has consistently been below 40%. This disengagement stems from disillusionment with politicians’ ability to address pressing issues such as climate change and job insecurity, revealing the dangers of political parties and systems catering exclusively to older generations.

Ultimately, low political engagement undermines the foundations of democracy, increases inequality, and threatens governance. It is clear that states need to prioritize strategies that encourage participation and empower citizens to engage actively in the political process, which in some cases may involve reforming the country’s political system as a whole. Going forward, increasing political engagement, particularly in the youth, is essential to maintain democratic health worldwide. Without these efforts, democracies risk becoming fragile, unresponsive, and ultimately unsustainable.

Questions to consider:

Is mandatory voting an acceptable solution to low voter turnout?

How can we rebuild trust in political systems?

What measures can be taken to facilitate voting in deprived socioeconomic communities?

Is it possible to prevent the polarisation of media in member states?

How can we reduce misinformation on social media regarding political campaigns?

Can we provide unbiased civic education to today’s youth?

What measures can be put in place to facilitate voting for minority communities?

Is a full-scale reform of countries’ political systems the answer to addressing youth disengagement? How else can we encourage the youth to participate in voting?

To what extent do approaches need to differ in democratic and autocratic states?

Useful websites:

<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/10/17/international-political-engagement/>

<https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-political-participation.pdf>

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0740624X23000102>

<https://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/research/projects/understanding-political-engagement>

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41293-021-00186-4>