

Global Elections and Political Transitions (GEPT) Technical Leadership Research

**Taking Wing: Pathways to Participation and Leadership Offered by Political Party Youth Wings**

**Preliminary Research Findings (June 2018)**

**Introduction**

There is growing acknowledgement that politics and participation are integral to the process of sustainable development (World Bank 2017). This includes an active role for young women and men. However, young people face many barriers when it comes to political participation, while also being disproportionately affected by some of the world’s toughest development challenges. Helping this demographic group find peaceful ways to take part in decisions affecting their welfare is a growing imperative (USAID 2012). To assist in meeting this need, CEPPS is working to better understand the avenues for youth political participation and leadership, and how support can be delivered. As part of a broader research effort funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), CEPPS/NDI examined the role political party youth wings can play in amplifying the voice and influence of young people. The empirical process included reviewing existing literature, interviewing political party leaders and youth activists, analyzing political party assistance programs and speaking with program implementers. The research concludes that youth wings can offer young people a formative political experience, in certain circumstances, and tailored assistance can have some influence on the agency of youth wing members and their enabling environment. However, the entire picture is rather complex, given the political dynamics and changing incentives found in most multi-party systems. These research findings will need to be combined with existing lessons and learning about how political parties develop, as they simultaneously engage in political competition and manage unavoidable power struggles, both externally and internally.

**Connecting Youth with Traditional Political Institutions**

Nowadays, young people and politics might seem like oil and water. A significant body of research suggests that today’s generation of young women and men are turning away from traditional political institutions and processes, including political parties. This is not a rejection of politics, but instead reflects growing discontent with formal systems that are viewed as inaccessible and unresponsive (Dougherty, et al 2016, Crowley and Moxon 2017). As a result, young people are finding alternative ways to express their views and influence decisions. This includes everything from online petitions to youth-led street protests. Although these forms of activism can be effective in igniting change, traditional politics and the role of political parties cannot be ignored completely in democratic societies. Despite an overall global decline in political party membership and young peoples’ disaffection with traditional politics, parties still matter when it comes to the peaceful competition for power and earning the right to govern. If young people only employ civil disobedience, they will inevitably be left out of many decisions. Previous NDI research concluded that young people need to be encouraged to use both formal and informal channels to influence political outcomes and the two can be made to intersect (NDI 2017). In Macedonia, for example, NDI helped political party youth wing members join forces with youth participating in social-media campaigns and public demonstrations to develop a set of youth-centered national policies (Crowley and Moxon pg 32).

**A Role for Youth Wings**

Youth wings are semi-independent organization tied to a parent party. The structure of this relationship can be very different across parties and party systems. However, most youth wings are similar in that they establish a minimum and maximum age for membership (e.g., 16-35) and work to initiate young people into party politics. Young people are a heterogeneous contingent and this diversity is reflected by those that choose to join parties. Although representation within a particular political party youth wing might be skewed in one way or another, young women and men from rural and urban areas, with varying levels of education and different socio-economic backgrounds can be found in youth wings globally. Yet, the overall numbers remain relatively small. A recent NDI survey of youth in Hungary, Poland and Slovakia found that less than 10 percent of them would consider joining a political party (NDI 2018). Many of those that had an interest in joining, indicated that they would do so to improve their chances of securing a public-sector job. Nonetheless, according to the survey and other analysis, there is still an important minority of young women and men trying to satisfy political aspirations through their involvement in political party youth wings. Although they might only comprise a small percentage of youth, these young people have demonstrated an interest in party politics and working within the system.

Based on CEPPS/NDI’s comparative examination, the evidence suggests that youth wings can provide young people a formative political experience and can act as a proving ground for emerging political leaders. There are a few factors, however, that influence these outcomes. For example, the youth wing’s relationship with the parent party and the ability of youth wings to take relatively independent actions need to be considered. In those cases where a political party provides an enabling environment and young women and men can actively develop their agency, the results can be positive. CEPPS/NDI’s research identified structural factors that can enable or inhibit active, substantive youth participation and leadership. These can include how youth wing leaders are selected, whether financial resources are made available, what roles youth wings play in party decisions and how they are expected to engage during elections. There also factors related to how youth agency develops. For example, are there opportunities for youth wing members to gain practical political knowledge and skills, are they interacting with senior party leaders and other adults and does their activism increase their visibility? With these factors in mind, efforts to support political party youth wings should be designed in terms of the needs and opportunities presented by the enabling environment and agency of the young people involved.

**Configuring Support**

A recent guidance document from the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID), highlights the instrumental role that political parties can play in public policy making and government oversight. The document also recognizes the practicality of political party development, with an emphasis placed on the inclusion of youth (Power, et al 2018, pg 20). To this end, DFID recommends an analysis of internal party structures and the operation of youth wings. NDI has [assessments tools](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI_ContextAnalysisTool_proof_f.pdf) available to help organize this analysis. The tools can offer insights into youth wings, by overlaying specific questions about the enabling environment and agency of young people within a party. This can include determining how much space exists for youth wing involvement in party decisions and the level of activism among youth wing members. Based on these determinants, subsequent programs could then follow a couple different tracks.

One track helps create space for youth to play a more substantive role in party decisions. In this case, a program might work with party leaders on structural reforms. For instance, in Pakistan and Tunisia, NDI has assisted with the development of new statutes that give youth wing members a seat on decision-making bodies and provides them greater access to the party’s electoral lists, if they are seeking elected office.

A second track assists youth wing members in developing their political know-how and making constructive contributions within their party. For example, when they appear on their party’s electoral list, programs can help youth wing members learn how to campaign effectively. In countries with a history of violent conflict (e.g., Bosnia and Herzegovina, Democratic Republic of Congo or Kenya), NDI has brought the youth wings of different parties together to work on cross-cutting policy issues as a means of building bridges and promoting civil political discourse.

These efforts have contributed to young people playing more active and influential roles within their respective parties and in their communities. The Bosnia and Herzegovina case study featured in the full report provides examples of young women and men becoming more capable political candidates, having greater access to party leaders and actively working to engage other citizens on policy issues. As one young women from Our Party stated, “leaders are becoming more open to our involvement and recognize how we can help make the party more competitive.”

**Conclusions**

1. Youth the world over want to be involved in decisions affecting their future and are increasingly turning to new ways of political organizing that fall outside the bounds of formal institutions and processes, because these are viewed with distrust. The majority find political parties, for instance, opaque and disinterested in youth perspectives. Yet turning away from parties completely has a cost, since political parties still play central roles when it comes to formally competing for power and earning the right to govern. To better balance formal and informal youth participation, support should be provided that helps young people find meaningful ways to enter party politics, so they can also work to influence change from inside the system.
2. Within political parties, youth wings can offer young people a pathway to participation and leadership under select circumstances, where the parent party provides an enabling environment and young people can actively exert influence. Too often, however, youth wings serve more as a tool of the parent party, further marginalizing youth voices. Under these circumstance, the youth that remain involved can become socialized to a structure of top-down decision making and young people waiting their turn.
3. The number of young people that join political parties and enter youth wings is relatively low, with some surveys showing less than 10 percent of this demographic being involved. The numbers can be even smaller from marginalized groups, like the Roma. However, this small number does represent an important segment of youth with political aspirations. Many of these young people view politics as a potential vocation and youth wings can offer this select group a formative political experience.
4. When designing assistance programs to promote youth participation and leadership through party youth wings, it’s necessary to understand the structural dynamics that exist between a parent party and the youth wing. In cases where a reform-minded party is open and receptive to youth wing participation, then a program can focus on helping young people step into different roles, including running for office. On the other hand, parties that are relatively closed and controlled by an elite establishment requires programs that encourage internal reforms, so that youth wing members can play more meaningful roles**.** NDI has [assessments tools](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI_ContextAnalysisTool_proof_f.pdf) available to help organize this analysis.
5. Even in cases where there has been concerted development support offered to youth wings and the buy in of party leaders, short-term political imperatives can keep youth wing members standing on the sidelines. In this way, political calculations, made in order to gain and maintain power, have implications for how parties approach the participation of young people. For instance, if polling showed that the electorate of a country is more likely to vote for someone over 40-years old rather than under 30-years old, then party leaders can be easily dissuaded from running young candidates.
6. Multi-partisan approaches that bring youth wing activists from different parties together, can help reduce political polarization and help promote more constructive forms of political discourse. In countries with a history of violent conflict (e.g., Bosnia and Hercegovina, Democratic Republic of Congo and Kenya), NDI has brought the youth wings of different parties together to find common ground and work collectively on policy issues. This has led to relationships that seem to discourage incivility.

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