

Civil rights and civic participation of youth in Latvia

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Abstract

The path to the modern democratic model has been lengthy and contentious, culminating in the recognition of civil rights as guarantees of equal social opportunity and legal protection for all, irrespective of race, religion or other personal characteristics. Realising civil rights requires the active engagement of all societal members, including the youth, who are especially vital for the future. This article aims to elucidate the legal avenues for youth civic participation in Latvia, assess the current situation and provide insights into the historical evolution of civil rights. To achieve this, we examined the existing legal framework, analysed theoretical literature, gathered statistical data, drew conclusions and reviewed recent research on youth civic participation. While laws regulate the opportunities for youth in Latvia to engage in civic activities, they do not resolve participation issues. Data from the Saeima (the Parliament of Latvia) elections between 2002 and 2018 reveal a nearly 17% decline in voter turnout, with youth participation even lower. This reluctance to vote or run for office reflects a broader political distrust in society. Additionally, the lack of consistent civic education further undermines young people's willingness to engage in civic activities.

Keywords

civil rights, civic participation, democracy, engagement

INTRODUCTION

The existence of any democratic society relies not only on the practical exercise of citizens' rights and duties but also on civic awareness. In the former post-Soviet countries of Europe, civic consciousness is emerging gradually and with difficulty. In the Soviet Union, rights were largely declarative, making it challenging for the older generation to understand that exercising rights in a democratic society requires active involvement, that is, civic participation. Instilling this understanding in the younger generation, without whom democracy has no future, is even more difficult. For this reason, we examine the role of education, particularly civic education, in shaping young people's civic participation. From a contemporary perspective, civil rights are not only a pertinent issue but also an integral element of a democratic society, necessitating regular study. Therefore, the aim of this article is to provide an insight into the history of civil rights (using the historical method) and to describe and analyse the current situation of youth civic participation in Latvia. Civic participation is primarily expressed through the right to vote, which includes both the right to vote and the right to be elected. According to data, since the restoration of Latvia's independence in 1991, the desire to vote and to be elected has been steadily declining both in society as a whole and

among young people. This article analyses not only the statistical data but also the findings of other studies using the monographic method.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reflecting on the history of civil rights, the centuries-long and complex journey of Western society towards the modern understanding of civil rights becomes evident. Ancient Greece is a notable starting point, where city-states (polis) granted certain citizens the right to participate in the electoral process. However, this privilege was initially limited to aristocrats and other nobles. Over time, the right to vote was extended to farmers, craftsmen, merchants and fishermen, who then acquired the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Nevertheless, women, newcomers and slaves were excluded from these rights. In ancient Greece, a citizen born in the polis had the right to participate in the assembly, decide on matters of power, elect office holders and be elected himself. Although the basic elements of democracy have existed for over 2,000 years, appearing sporadically (e.g., the Althing in Iceland in the 10th century), the journey towards a modern understanding of civil rights in Europe only began in the 13th century.

The Magna Carta is regarded as a pivotal legal document from the Middle Ages that transformed the existing order in England.

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Drafted and signed between 1215 and 1217, it proclaimed that no one would be denied rights or justice. The document was signed during the reign of King John (1166–1216). At the beginning of the 13th century, the King faced financial difficulties, prompting him to sharply raise taxes on all sections of society. As King John's authority gradually eroded, his only way to retain the throne was to broker a deal among the church, landowners and merchants (Kellner, 2009: 45).

As the first legal document of its kind, the Magna Carta introduced several key principles such as the limitation of power, protection of individual liberties, due process, representative governance and the rule of law, all of which continue to underpin democratic societies today. It forbade expulsion or any other form of deprivation of status except through a justified judgement in accordance with the law. Although the Magna Carta only managed to enshrine a small portion of basic legal protections for individuals, it served as an important starting point from which individual rights evolved over the centuries. This doctrine became a model for civil liberties and the rule of law in Britain and many other countries worldwide (Kellner, 2009: 45). By declaring the sovereign subject to the rule of law and documenting the freedoms belonging to 'free men', the Magna Carta laid the foundation for individual rights in Anglo-American jurisprudence (Stenton, 2024).

In the late 13th and early 14th centuries, during the period known as the Agrarian Renaissance, the *Liber Paradisus* was published in Bologna, Italy, in 1257. This document, titled 'A Vision of Good Governance', declared that man should be free because God created man free. It is considered the first document in Italian history to affirm the fundamental rights of individuals. An arbitral award issued by the City of Bologna in 1256, and formally confirmed in 1257, decreed the liberation of slaves belonging to local masters throughout the city. These slaves, bound *de jure* or *de facto* to their masters and their land, were granted freedom. The 1256 document was supplemented by statutes in 1257, 1282 and 1304, which extended these rights to servants and other categories of vassals (De Stefani, 2015: 39). Prior to the publication of this 'liberation' document, collective peasant liberations had already occurred in Padua (1239) and Brescia (1262), as well as in other parts of Italy. Peasants gained personal freedom while losing their rights to land, fundamentally changing the social structure of society. This period also saw intensified agricultural practices, leading to a rapid economic boom. The Italian economy was at the forefront of Europe, demonstrating that a free society with free individuals develops faster and more efficiently.

In December 1689, at the dawn of the Enlightenment, the British Parliament passed the Bill of Rights, significantly curtailing the powers of the monarchy. Although King William of Orange was displeased, he had no choice but to accept

it. The Bill outlined the fundamental rights of the people and Parliament, while also barring Catholics from holding positions of power as monarchs, assistant kings or parliamentarians (Kellner, 2009: 155). The Bill of Rights asserted that it is the law that determines the rights and liberties of the subject, as well as the succession to the crown. This legislation remains one of the most important documents in the development of British democracy.

Enlightenment philosophers made significant contributions to the understanding of law. In 1690, the English philosopher John Locke published 'Two Treatises of Government', a work highly regarded for its influence on democratic theory. Locke criticised the concept of the divine right of kings and argued that no government should possess absolute power. He asserted that *nature* has made men essentially equal, granting them an equal right to determine who governs them. For a government to be legitimate, it requires the consent of the majority. By accepting the right of the majority to govern, individuals could expect the state to protect their property, freedom of speech, thought and religion (Kellner, 2009: 160). In 1695, the English Parliament's decision on the Licensing Bill marked a significant milestone in democratic development and individual rights. This landmark vote is considered as one of the most crucial democratic advancements, making freedom of expression a reality. Prior to this, all publications had to be approved by the Stationers' Company of the City of London, an organisation founded in 1403 and granted a Royal Charter in 1557 (Blagden, 1960: 19). The Royal Charter, issued by the monarch, granted the Society a monopoly on publishing, and it was responsible for enforcing regulations, effectively censoring and monitoring the entire press (The Supplement to the Penny Cyclopaedia of the Society for Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, 1845: 331–332). Dissatisfaction with the Stationers' Company grew over time, driven by concerns about freedom of expression and the belief that the Company was exploiting its monopoly for commercial gain. By deciding not to renew the Licensing Bill, Parliament abolished censorship, allowing other publishers to operate independently and freeing the printed press from censorship requirements. More than a century later, the English historian Thomas Macaulay hailed this vote as having 'done more for liberty and civilisation than Magna Carta or the Bill of Rights' (Kellner, 2009: 164).

These historic events collectively shaped the evolution of civil rights and democracy. The Magna Carta established the principle that even the sovereign was subject to the law, laying foundational ideas for individual rights and limiting monarchical power. The *Liber Paradisus* marked an early recognition of personal freedom in Italy, influencing the development of individual rights and altering social structures. John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* advanced democratic theory by arguing against absolute power and advocating for

government based on the consent of the governed. Finally, the abolition of censorship in England with the Licensing Bill paved the way for free expression and a more open press. Together, these events advanced the principles of legal equality, individual rights and democratic governance, forming key pillars of modern democratic societies.

A contemporary perspective on civic participation

In Latvia, as a democratic state, every citizen is entitled to civil and political rights. According to the definition provided by the Ombudsman of the Republic of Latvia, 'Civil and political rights primarily emphasise the state's duty to refrain from interference and to respect the freedoms of individuals and society members'. These rights include freedom of association, freedom of speech and expression, the right to a fair trial, the right to liberty and security, freedom of assembly, freedom of scientific, artistic and other creative activities, the right to vote and the rights of foreigners (Ombudsman of the Republic of Latvia, 2024). While each of these rights is crucial for a democratic society, the right to vote is paramount. Civil society fundamentally involves public participation in governance, with the most familiar form being electoral participation (Stafecka, 2010: 51). 'The right to vote encompasses both the right to cast a ballot and the right to stand for election, which is intrinsically linked to the right to engage in state and local government. This right ensures citizen representation in the functioning of both state and local governments and is a fundamental component of a democratic state' (Ombudsman of the Republic of Latvia, 2024). However, civil and political rights can remain merely declarative if they are not actively implemented through instruments of civic participation. While elections represent a key form of civic engagement, they provide only a partial view of contemporary civic participation. It is crucial to recognise that meaningful civic participation relies on a foundation of public political trust. Without this trust, the effectiveness and quality of civic involvement can be significantly compromised.

Today, civic participation, encompassing both obligations and rights, is intrinsically linked to membership in a state and the rights granted by that state to its democratic society, as outlined in various national and international laws. These include the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (10 December 1948), the European Charter and the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (in force since 14 July 1992), among others. The fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 and the subsequent democratisation of new European countries marked the beginning of a new era of civic participation (Krūmiņš, 2021: 274). During this period, the issue of citizens' trust in political institutions became and continues to be highly relevant. Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's 'The Civic Culture' (1963) significantly contributed to our understanding of political trust within the broader concept

of political culture. They emphasised that while institutions are crucial in fostering political trust, the political context also plays a vital role (Krūmiņš, 2021: 100–101).

At both societal and individual levels (Adler and Goggin, 2005: 241), civic participation is defined as the active involvement of citizens in their community to enhance the well-being of others or to influence the community's future. Civic engagement, often synonymous with 'civic participation', encompasses a wide range of activities, from voting in general elections to engaging in social activities such as donating to charity or participating in political discussions with friends (Ekman and Amnå, 2012: 285). US political scientist Robert D. Putnam also recognises a broad spectrum of activities within civic engagement, including reading newspapers, participating in political processes, voting and social networking. This broad understanding of civic engagement is closely associated with the functioning of a healthy democracy and a dynamic market economy.

Civic engagement can be understood at two levels: (1) vertical, where individuals or groups seek to influence policy decisions and interact with public institutions and those in power; and (2) horizontal, where individuals focus on the well-being of their local community through activities such as volunteering (Barrett and Zani, 2014). In analysing civic participation, researchers observe a decline in direct and representative forms of democratic involvement, while indirect and informal forms are expanding rapidly. Political and civic participation is relatively straightforward to define and classify. However, categorising the social, moral and psychological dimensions of individual participatory behaviour is more complex, as these can be highly multifaceted and variable in their expressions (Krūmiņš, 2021: 280).

While the historical and theoretical perspectives offer one view, the current reality presents a different picture. In Latvia, voter turnout in elections has been steadily declining. Data from the Central Election Commission (CEK) highlight this trend since Latvia regained independence in 1991. For instance, voter turnout was notably high in the elections for the 5th Saeima (1993), reaching 89.9%, reflecting a strong citizen desire for change and involvement in state-building. However, subsequent parliamentary elections have seen a gradual decrease in participation. Turnout figures include 71.4% for the 8th Saeima (2002), 63.1% for the 10th Saeima (2010), 56.5% for the 12th Saeima (2014) and 54.6% for the 13th Saeima (2018). On a more positive note, the 14th Saeima elections (2022) saw a slight increase, with turnout reaching 59.4% of eligible voters (CEK, 2023). These data underscore that only a small portion of the eligible population is actively exercising their voting rights.

A similar trend is observed in the European Parliament (EP) elections. In the first EP elections held in Latvia on 12 June 2004, voter turnout was 41.3% of the voting-age population

(CEK, 2004). In the next EP elections in 2009 the figure increased to 53.7% (CEK, 2009), but this was due to the fact that the EP elections were held together with the municipal elections that year. Turnout in subsequent EP elections has declined significantly, never surpassing the 2004 level. Specifically, turnout was 30.2% in the 2014 EP elections (CEK, 2014a,b), 33.5% in the 2019 EP elections (CEK, 2019) and 33.8% in the 2024 EP elections (CEK, 2024).

The trends in Latvian civic participation reveal a decline in voter turnout over time. Despite high engagement in the early years following independence, both parliamentary and EP elections have experienced decreasing participation rates. This decline is evident across various electoral processes, reflecting a growing disengagement among voters. While there was a slight uptick in turnout for the 14th Saeima elections and a modest increase in the 2024 EP elections, overall, fewer citizens are actively exercising their voting rights, indicating a significant challenge for democratic engagement in Latvia.

Civic participation of young people in Latvia

One of the core values of the European Union is civil rights, which retain their significance only when actively practised. It is therefore fitting that 2022 was designated as the European Year of Youth, emphasising the crucial role of youth involvement in civic life and democratic processes. In Latvia, this initiative was managed by the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) in collaboration with the European Commission and various civil society organisations. Recognising the pivotal role of young people in democracy, Latvia introduced the Youth Law in 2010, which applies to individuals aged 13–25 years. According to Article 1 of the law, its purpose is to enhance the quality of life for young people by encouraging their initiatives, including their participation in decision-making and public life. While there is no single definition of civic participation, it generally refers to the activities individuals engage in to improve societal or community life. Article 2.1 of the Youth Law outlines the roles and responsibilities of those involved in youth policy, including their competences, the involvement of young people in policy development, and the principles governing the funding of youth initiatives and their participation in decision-making and public life.

Youth participation requires a clear youth policy, which young people themselves have a role in defining. The Youth Law establishes seven key principles to guide youth policy, with the principle of participation being the foremost. This principle ensures that young people have a meaningful role in discussing and shaping decisions that impact youth policy before they are finalised. Article 7 of the Law underlines the right of young people to be involved in both the development and implementation of youth policy and outlines various

avenues for this involvement. These include participating in non-formal education, volunteering, student self-governance, project development and other initiatives. Additionally, young people can engage with youth organisations and other associations, influence national and local decision-making processes related to youth policy, and participate in activities that foster their involvement in policy development. Article 12.2 further supports this by granting the right to state budget funding for projects designed to enhance youth initiatives and their participation in decision-making and public life (Youth Law, 2010).

The Youth Law is in effect in Latvia, but the country faces challenges in achieving sustainable and comprehensive youth policy planning. According to Ilze Bergmane, President of the Latvian Youth Council (LYC), there is a notable lack of administrative and political accountability in the youth sector. Currently, youth policy is a secondary concern, with minimal progress and unresolved critical issues. This situation is evident in several troubling trends, including a declining youth population, significant emigration, a high number of young people not engaged in education or employment, and insufficient participation in non-governmental youth organisations and volunteer work. Additionally, Latvia's funding for youth organisations and initiatives remains the lowest among the Baltic States.

The Youth Policy Guidelines 2021–2027 align closely with the objectives of the Youth Law, aiming to create opportunities for the development and well-being of all young people. They focus on enhancing the inclusion and participation of youth across all aspects of society and promoting the establishment of a high-quality, sustainable youth work system at both national and local levels. Article 1 of the Constitution (1993) declares Latvia to be an independent democratic republic, but for Latvia to thrive and evolve, it is essential to enhance the democratic awareness of its citizens, develop effective democratic mechanisms and maintain the continuity of democratic values. Achieving this requires a strong emphasis on the civic education of youth, particularly in the social sciences.

After Latvia regained its independence, a significant ideological shift occurred in the education system, initially impacting the social studies curriculum. The range of subjects expanded to include civil sciences and the economic foundations of business (Catlaks, 2024). A major subsequent development was the promotion of integration of the Russian youth through the transition to education in the Latvian language.

A key document in Latvia's education policy is the Concept of Education, adopted in 1995. The subsequent development of education was guided by the Latvian National Development Plan (NDP) 2014–2020, which outlined the strategic direction for education policy. The central focus of the NDP is an 'economic breakthrough', to be achieved through three main

priorities: economic growth, human security and growth-promoting regions. While these priorities are crucial for national progress, their effectiveness is significantly enhanced by the active involvement of civil society, including the youth. Society benefits from the active involvement of young people in social processes, while young people, in turn, need their civil rights to be upheld. This creates a mutual interest. Research indicates that experiences of participation during adolescence and youth foster active engagement in adulthood, as well as the development of diverse social networks and social capital (Krūmiņš, 2021: 303).

Civic education plays a crucial role in fostering the civic participation of young people. Research by University of Latvia scholar Ireta Čekse highlights that many young people in Latvia have limited knowledge of democracy, with only 19% demonstrating high civic competence (Čekse, 2018). Without a clear understanding of the importance of civic participation for maintaining democratic societies, it is unrealistic to expect spontaneous engagement. To address this, the Education Development Centre (EDC) has been established to promote civic education. The centre offers a 36-h programme designed to enhance young people's understanding of civic education and democracy, address human rights issues and strengthen their sense of social responsibility (EDC, 2024). This education aims to inspire young people to become more active participants in a democratic society. However, it is regrettable that such civic education is not yet integrated into compulsory school curricula.

The current situation is also disheartening. In 2021, the Society for Openness – Delna conducted a study titled 'Civic Participation of Young People in a Democratic Society'. In all, 26% of young people state that they have no desire or interest in participating in civic activities; 31% of young people admit that they lack information about activities to participate in, and they have no friends to do it with. These findings reveal that youth participation in civic activities in Latvia is low, despite the availability of numerous opportunities for engagement. For instance, the Youth International Programme Agency (YIPA), an organisation operating under the MoES, provides a diverse array of activities and mobility options for young people.

In early 2021, the research company SKDS (Research Centre is a private and independent research company) conducted a study titled 'Young People's Interests and Their Views on Priorities for Latvian Decision-Makers in the Next 10 Years'. The survey, which included 303 young people aged 16–25 years from across Latvia, revealed a disparity between the opportunities available for civic engagement and actual participation. Although 37% of respondents valued the chance to engage with non-governmental organisations, only 17% took part in such activities. Similarly, while 49% appreciated the opportunity to join youth organisations, only 22% did so. Additionally, 68% recognised the chance to volunteer, but only

34% had volunteered. The findings indicate that while young people are generally aware of the importance and potential benefits of civic activities, their actual involvement remains notably low.

RESULTS

The right to vote encompasses not just the ability to cast a vote but also the right to stand for election. This article focuses on the exercise of this civil right by young people, specifically their right to stand for office. By analysing data from the CEK regarding political party candidate lists, we examined the proportion of young people who have actively participated in parliamentary elections as candidates. In the 2010 elections for the 10th Saeima, 16.3% of candidates were aged 21–30 years. This figure increased to 18.0% in the 11th Saeima elections but then declined to 16.2% in the 12th Saeima elections, and further dropped to 12.9% in the 13th Saeima elections. In the 14th Saeima elections, the proportion of young candidates fell to just 9.8% of the total (CEK, 2023). Like the Saeima elections, voter turnout in the EP elections is generally low, with fewer than half of eligible voters participating. Furthermore, when examining the proportion of young people aged 21–30 years who choose to stand for election as candidates, the figures are even more disheartening compared with parliamentary elections. Although 24.2% of young people were candidates in the 2009 EP elections, their participation has significantly decreased in subsequent years. By 2014, this figure had dropped to 11.8%, further declined to 10.2% in 2019 and fell to just 5.9% in the 2024 elections (CEK, 2024).

Determining the exact reasons behind the declining involvement of young people in political activities, particularly in standing as candidates in elections, is challenging when relying solely on candidate data or lists from political parties. To gain a clearer understanding of this trend, further research is needed into factors such as educational attainment and comprehension of democratic principles. Key questions to explore include whether young people grasp the significance of civil liberties and their role in a democratic society. It can be argued that insufficient civic education, widespread public distrust in state institutions and prevalent corruption contribute to diminishing interest in civic engagement among the youth. It is also essential to consider the country's political culture, which is marked by widespread mistrust of political parties. As noted by Krūmiņš (2021), 'Trust in political parties has consistently remained below 10%... This low level of trust in political parties is not unique to Latvia but is a common issue across various European countries. It is regarded as one of the significant challenges facing democratic politics today' (Krūmiņš, 2021: 106).

In an interview with the LV portal (A portal about Latvia, explains legislation, answers citizens' questions about its application, reflects the work of the courts, research carried out in society, etc.), Daunis Auers, Assistant Professor and Political Scientist at the University of Latvia, highlighted that only 6% of the population in Latvia trusts political institutions, while just 3% are politically active. Within this group, only 1% of young people engage with political parties (Auers, 2020). Public trust in political institutions is influenced by various major societal processes, encompassing not just societal values but also historical experiences and the current political context. However, the relationship between political trust and civic participation remains unclear, as existing research often yields contradictory and ambiguous findings (Krūmiņš, 2021: 303).

DISCUSSION

Civic participation can manifest in various ways in contemporary society, prompting the question of whether these forms can be transformed into political participation, and if such a transformation is even necessary. This query arises naturally, given that descriptions of civic engagement often focus more on ethical dimensions rather than political ones, such as acts of giving.

Another pressing question for both youth policymakers and researchers is whether there is a direct correlation between political trust and civic participation. Despite political mistrust, active public involvement can still occur; for instance, during the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Latvian citizens have actively engaged in collecting donations for Ukraine.

CONCLUSIONS

In Latvia, citizen turnout in elections has been on the decline, as evidenced by data from the CEK since Latvia regained independence in 1991. This decline is not only seen in overall voter turnout but also in the participation of young people in political parties, leading to a lower number of young candidates on the ballot. The legal framework supporting active civic participation for young people is well-established through various laws and normative documents.

The Youth Policy Guidelines provide numerous opportunities for young people to engage effectively in civil society. Despite the broad array of civic activities available, young people in Latvia are underrepresented in civic engagement.

The existing research reflects the current low levels of youth participation, indicating that young people's attitudes towards elections are influenced by broader societal processes. To gain a deeper understanding of the reasons behind the low

engagement of young people in Latvia, further research is necessary.

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