

# Youth Mobilization for Change



## The Impact of Youth

- **Youth** are the **most impacted** by climate change, yet are often left out of climate policy discussions.
- Although many youth are not yet able to vote, they can still have **immense impact on policy**.
- Some of the key methods of political engagement used by youth are:
  - **Protesting:** the act of publicly demonstrating opposition to or support for a particular issue, policy, or action. It involves expressing dissent or advocating for change through various means such as rallies, marches, sit-ins, strikes, or other forms of public assembly.
  - **Lawsuit:** a legal action initiated by one party against another in a court of law to resolve a dispute or seek remedy for a perceived wrong.
  - **Boycott:** a deliberate and organized refusal to engage with or support a person, organization, or product as a form of protest or to bring about change.
  - **Social Media Mobilization:** refers to the use of social media platforms to organize, coordinate, and rally people around a specific cause, issue, or event.

## Climate Change and Youth

As we have learned, climate change is an issue with unequal impacts. One key determinant of impact that is less acknowledged in many policy discussions is age. Youth are more susceptible to the worst impacts of climate change as they must bear the future consequences of today's inaction; they face the greatest risks from growing societal insecurity, inequality, and ongoing environmental crises (United Nations, 2023). For example, in developing regions within Africa, where youth make up the largest demographic and the primary agricultural labor force, they face increasing existential challenges due to climate-induced changes such as altered water availability (Reddy et al., 2020).

Yet, young people play a critical role in creating innovative solutions for addressing urgent global environmental challenges. In recent times, youth have emerged as powerful agents of societal transformation, mobilizing for climate action, advocating for racial justice, championing gender equality, and advocating dignity for all. Increasingly youth have taken action into their own hands by pioneering change across corporate, political, academic, and professional fields (United Nations, 2023). In recent years we have seen youth use various methods to impact policy, even before they are able to vote.

## Protesting

In 2018 and 2019, an unprecedented global environmental movement took hold, sparked by Greta Thunberg. Known for her Friday school strikes, Thunberg gained international acclaim for boycotting school to demand stronger climate policies from older generations, governments, and international organizations. Her activism has inspired millions of teenagers worldwide to join in, organizing protests in various countries.

**Protesting is the act of publicly demonstrating opposition to or support for a particular issue, policy, or action.** Despite their dispersed locations, participants in the movement have unified around calls for urgent measures such as immediate cuts in greenhouse gas emissions and the phasing out of fossil fuels.



In a 2021 study in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology* found that environmental protests were highly associated with increased internet searches about environmental issues, particularly climate change (Adger et al., 2021).

Another study found that Members of Parliament (MPs) representing districts in Germany with higher participation in environmental protests during the March 2019 global climate strike have shown greater responsiveness to the Climate Strike Movement compared to MPs from districts with fewer protests. This highlights the significant influence of local protests, demonstrating that they can shape political discourse alongside major events in capital cities.

The decentralized approach of the Climate Strike Movement, organizing global strike days, proved effective in leveraging local activism to impact individual political decision-makers.

Moreover, MPs' acknowledgment and response to local protest events suggest a form of direct representation within Germany's predominantly party-driven political system (Smith, 2023).

## Lawsuits

Using every tool at their disposal, youth have pursued legal action to achieve climate justice. In the notable case of *Juliana v. U.S.*, 21 teenagers from Oregon filed a constitutional lawsuit in August 2015 against the federal government and the fossil fuel industry, alleging negligence in addressing climate change (Reddy, 2020). They argued that this negligence violated their rights to life, liberty, and property, and failed to safeguard critical public resources. Similar legal actions have unfolded in developing nations like Colombia and Pakistan. Additionally, young people in some developing countries have taken the lead in addressing climate change and its detrimental effects, prompting international organizations such as the U.N. Development Program to fund various environmental projects led by youth worldwide.

In Canada, the ongoing case of *La Rose et al. vs. His Majesty the King* (formerly, Her Majesty the Queen), saw the plaintiffs argue that youth are experiencing harm from climate change, asserting that the federal government is infringing upon their rights to life, liberty, and security of the person, as outlined in section 7 of the Charter (David Suzuki Foundation, n.d.). Additionally, they claim that the government's actions violate their right to equality under section 15 of the Charter, citing disproportionate impacts of the climate emergency on youth.



Photographer Tilly Nelson, set design Kendra Martyn & Kira Evenson  
Image Source: (Ecojustice, 2024)

## Boycotting

Increasingly so, youth are using economic methods to make their voices heard. In fact, Gen Z is the most likely generation to boycott as a form of protest (BBC Worklife, 2022). Boycotts can be used to disrupt business practices or governmental policies by refusing to support certain products, services, or institutions that are deemed unethical or unjust. Such boycotts have proven effective by leveraging the collective energy and visibility of younger generations to challenge social, economic, or political issues. The effectiveness of youth-led boycotts is dependent on their ability to mobilize quickly, create significant economic pressure, and inspire broader societal change.

## Social Media Mobilization

Digital spaces have fundamentally changed the way Gen Z and Gen Alpha will be able to shape their civic identities and express their political views. The online realm provides a venue for them to exercise agency that they might not find in conventional civic settings such as schools, universities, or workplaces.

**Gen Z:** *Most frequently defined as people born from 1997 to 2012.*

**Gen Alpha:** *Most frequently defined as people born from 2012 to mid 2020s.*

According to a 2020 study by the UK Safer Internet Centre, 34% of 8-to-17-year-olds reported that the internet has motivated them to act on a cause, while 43% feel that it gives their voices significance (BBC Worklife, 2022). Historically, resources such as time, money, and education were large barriers to political participation, however, social media appears to be closing this gap (Johnson et al., 2023).

Young people have been able to use TikTok videos, Instagram infographics, podcasts, and hashtag movements like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter to galvanize support and awareness for political and social movements. These methods were only expedited by the pandemic which shifted the focus toward remote organizing.

Gen Z and Gen Alpha's seamless integration of technology into their social and political activities and their intuitive use of it could make it so they might be sharing memes one moment, and the next, they could be inundating a company with fake job applications to protest the company's decision to fire workers seeking to unionize. From the Arab Spring to Black Lives Matter, youth-led movements are gaining momentum through digital platforms, leading to large-scale, transnational protests. A notable example occurred in March 2019 when students of all ages walked out of school to demand action on climate change. The School Strike for Climate, which mobilized 1.4 million participants and became the largest of its kind in history, garnered global attention by sharing local protests on Twitter (BBC Worklife, 2022).

Information sharing has become another tool of activism for youth. During the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, social media became an imperative mechanism for showcasing on-the-ground updates through livestreams and shared videos. Platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have enabled young people to swiftly share information, mobilize support, and amplify their voices on various political issues. Social media allows them to organize protests, campaign for causes, and challenge injustices with unprecedented speed and reach. By creating viral content and leveraging hashtags, they can draw global attention to local issues and engage in meaningful dialogue with a broader audience.

This digital activism not only empowers youth to influence public discourse and policy but also fosters a sense of community and solidarity among like-minded individuals worldwide.

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