From First Vote to Voting Habit

Strengthening Youth Electoral Participation in Kosovo



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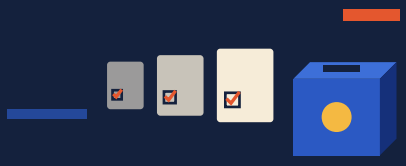
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Executive Summary

Young people are often described as less likely to vote than older citizens. Comparative research supports a broad age gap in electoral participation, but the explanation is more complex than political apathy. Voting is shaped by life-cycle conditions, repeated electoral experience, residential and economic stability, political efficacy, trust, and whether young citizens feel represented by political actors (Goerres, 2007; Niemi, Stanley, & Evans, 1984; Castanho Silva, 2025).

In Kosovo, this issue deserves a more precise diagnosis. The Central Election Commission's analysis of turnout trends from 2009 to 2021 shows that youth should not be treated as a single electoral category: participation differs across the 18–21, 22–25 and 26–40 age groups. Available age-disaggregated evidence indicates that first-time voters can participate at comparatively strong rates, while participation among voters in their early twenties is less consistent. The policy challenge is therefore not simply how to persuade young people to vote once, but how to sustain participation after the first electoral experience.

This distinction matters because Kosovo has a young electorate and youth participation is already recognized as a policy priority. The State Strategy for Youth 2024–2032 defines youth as persons aged 15–29 and emphasizes participation, empowerment and involvement in decision-making. The EU Election Observation Mission for the 2025 parliamentary elections reported that 125,852 citizens were registered as first-time voters, representing around six per cent of the electorate, while election bodies carried out outreach in high schools and universities (Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport, 2024; EU EOM, 2025).

At the same time, the Youth Study Kosovo 2024 points to concerns about political trust, representation, employment, migration and the country's future. These findings suggest that electoral participation cannot be separated from young people's broader assessment of whether institutions respond to their interests and whether voting can produce meaningful political influence (Berisha et al., 2024).

This policy paper therefore asks: How can Kosovo strengthen sustained electoral participation among young people, particularly after the first voting experience? It identifies five connected areas for action already implicit in the existing youth-policy framework: practical civic education before the first vote; continued engagement with voters aged 18–25 between elections; stronger opportunities for meaningful youth participation in public decision-making; clearer and more accessible non-partisan election information; and systematic monitoring of turnout and political participation by age group.

The central argument is that youth turnout should not be approached as a problem of motivation alone. It is better understood as a problem of political socialization, continuity and efficacy. The objective should therefore be to help transform a first electoral experience into a stable democratic habit while improving the institutional conditions that make participation feel consequential.

Introduction

Voting is one of the most basic mechanisms through which citizens participate in representative democracy. Elections allow citizens to authorize political representatives, sanction incumbents and influence the direction of public policy. Yet electoral participation is not evenly distributed across social groups, and age is one of the most persistent differences identified in comparative research.

The common explanation that young people vote less because they are uninterested in politics is insufficient. Political interest and electoral participation are not the same. Young citizens can follow political news, discuss public affairs, participate in protests or digital campaigns and hold strong views on employment, corruption, migration and education while still deciding not to vote. The Youth Study Kosovo 2024 supports this distinction by documenting substantial concerns among young Kosovars about their economic and political future (Berisha et al., 2024).

Research on electoral participation points instead to several overlapping mechanisms. Young adulthood is a period of transition: individuals may be finishing education, entering the labour market, moving between municipalities, becoming financially independent or considering migration. These conditions can weaken stable connections to local communities and political institutions. At the same time, young voters have had fewer opportunities to develop a routine of electoral participation, while low trust and weak political representation can reduce the sense that voting will have meaningful consequences (Goerres, 2007; Niemi et al., 1984).

Kosovo is particularly relevant for this discussion because youth constitute an important part of the electorate and public policy already recognizes youth participation as a strategic objective. The State Strategy for Youth 2024–2032 places participation and empowerment among its priorities, while the 2025 EU Election Observation Mission noted specific voter-education outreach to first-time voters in schools and universities (Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport, 2024; EU EOM, 2025).

The policy problem, however, should be framed carefully. Kosovo's own electoral data do not support treating all young voters as uniformly disengaged. The Central Election Commission's analysis of elections between 2009 and 2021 separates voters into age groups and points to different participation patterns among first-time voters and those in their early twenties. This suggests that the key policy question is not only how to mobilize young people for a first election, but how to prevent participation from weakening as they move through early adulthood.

Policy question: How can Kosovo strengthen sustained electoral participation among young people, particularly after the first voting experience?

Problem Statement and Analysis

The central problem is not a simple absence of political interest among young people. It is the difficulty of converting political awareness and an initial voting experience into sustained electoral participation over time.

Youth turnout is not a single pattern

A major weakness in many discussions of youth turnout is the tendency to treat all voters under 30 as one homogeneous group. Kosovo's Central Election Commission uses separate age categories, including 18–21, 22–25 and 26–40, precisely because electoral participation changes across different stages of adulthood. Historical CEC data from 2009–2021 show that first-time voters can participate at relatively strong rates, while the 22–25 age group has generally displayed weaker participation. This is important because it shifts the policy focus from a one-time mobilization problem toward a participation-retention problem.

The difference is consistent with life-cycle research. Niemi, Stanley and Evans (1984) show that turnout changes across the life course rather than increasing mechanically with age. Goerres (2007) similarly argues that repeated participation, length of residence and the gradual development of a subjective norm of voting help explain why older citizens often vote more regularly.

The first elections in a citizen's life may therefore be particularly important. Participation can become habitual when it is repeated, but a first vote does not automatically guarantee future participation. Policies aimed only at first-time voters risk missing the years immediately afterward, when young adults face some of the greatest instability in education, work and residence.

2.2. Life transitions, economic insecurity and migration

Young adulthood is usually characterized by greater mobility and uncertainty than later stages of life. Young people may leave their hometown to study, move to Prishtina for employment, change addresses frequently or prepare to leave Kosovo. These transitions can weaken the local social ties that often reinforce participation and can also make elections feel less immediately connected to everyday life.

Economic uncertainty is especially relevant in Kosovo. The Youth Study Kosovo 2024 identifies employment, economic prospects and migration among the central concerns of young people (Berisha et al., 2024). Economic difficulties do not automatically reduce turnout; they can also increase political attention. The more important issue is political efficacy: whether citizens believe political institutions and elections can meaningfully affect the problems they face.

Migration intentions add a further dimension. A young person considering study or work abroad may remain politically interested while feeling less certain about their long-term connection to domestic institutions. This should not be treated as a direct causal explanation for non-voting, but as part of the broader instability that can make sustained electoral habits harder to establish.

2.3. Trust, political efficacy and representation

Political information alone is unlikely to be sufficient when young people believe their participation has little effect. The Youth Study Kosovo 2024 points to weak trust and concerns about whether young people's interests are represented in national politics. This distinction between interest and efficacy is central: a person can understand politics and care about public issues while still doubting that voting will influence outcomes.

Representation also matters. Castanho Silva (2025), using data from 223 national elections in 58 countries, finds that voters under 30 are more likely to participate when the leading candidate of their preferred party is closer to their own age. The study does not imply that candidate age alone determines turnout, but it provides evidence that descriptive representation can affect political efficacy and democratic satisfaction among younger voters.

For Kosovo, the implication is broader than the age of individual political leaders. Young voters are more likely to perceive elections as meaningful when they see credible opportunities to influence policy agendas, participate in party and civic structures, and engage institutions between elections rather than only during campaigns.

2.4. Civic knowledge and the first-voter experience

For first-time voters, electoral participation also has a practical dimension. Voting procedures, party programmes, candidate lists and the electoral system may be unfamiliar. Civic education can reduce these information costs by explaining how elections work, how to compare political programmes, how to identify misleading information and where to obtain reliable voting information.

This type of education should remain strictly non-partisan. Its purpose is not to influence which party or candidate a young person supports, but to strengthen the capacity to make an independent electoral choice. Kosovo's election administration already recognizes first-time voters as an important target group for voter education, and the 2025 EU Election Observation Mission recorded outreach activities in high schools and university campuses (EU EOM, 2025).

The policy gap is continuity. Information campaigns are often concentrated immediately before elections. If the broader objective is to develop stable electoral participation, civic learning and public engagement need to continue between election cycles and extend beyond the first voting experience.

2.5. A self-reinforcing cycle of participation and representation

Lower or less consistent participation among young adults can also have consequences for political responsiveness. Political parties have incentives to focus attention on groups that participate reliably. When young people participate less consistently, their policy priorities may receive less sustained attention; when they then perceive their interests as weakly represented, electoral participation can become less attractive.

This relationship should not be interpreted as evidence that political parties intentionally ignore young voters. Rather, it illustrates how participation and representation can reinforce each other. Breaking this cycle requires action by more than one institution: election bodies can provide neutral information,

schools and universities can support civic competence, public institutions and municipalities can create regular participation channels, civil society can facilitate engagement, and political parties can determine how meaningfully young members participate in internal policy development.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The following measures reorganize the solutions already identified in the original draft into a more coherent implementation framework. They are complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

1. **Introduce practical, non-partisan civic education before the first vote.** Schools, universities, election institutions and civil-society organizations should cooperate on short practical modules for students approaching voting age. The content should explain registration and voting procedures, the structure of elections, how to compare programmes and candidates, how to identify misleading information, and how to locate authoritative election information. The programme should explicitly avoid partisan advocacy.

2. **Extend youth voter engagement beyond the first election.** First-time voter campaigns should be complemented by continued outreach to the 18–25 age group between elections. The purpose should be to sustain familiarity with democratic institutions and prevent the first electoral experience from remaining an isolated event. Universities, municipalities and youth organizations can provide recurring civic-information sessions, public discussions and opportunities for institutional engagement.

3. **Create regular channels for meaningful youth participation in public decision-making.** Government institutions and municipalities should use youth councils, public consultations and other participatory mechanisms envisaged in the youth-policy framework as regular rather than symbolic channels. Where young people can see how their input is considered and what decisions follow, participation can strengthen external political efficacy even outside election periods.

4. **Make election information clearer and accessible on the platforms young people use.** The Central Election Commission and municipal election bodies should continue to provide concise, neutral and accessible information through digital channels and social media, especially on voting procedures, deadlines, polling locations and changes to electoral rules. Communication should focus on practical information rather than motivational or partisan messaging.

5. **Monitor participation by age and evaluate what happens after the first vote.** Kosovo should continue publishing age-disaggregated turnout data and use it to distinguish first-time voters from voters in their early twenties and later youth cohorts. Longitudinal analysis would help determine whether participation is sustained across successive elections and whether specific educational or institutional interventions are associated with stronger participation. This would also reduce reliance on broad assumptions about 'young voters' as a single category.

Youth electoral participation in Kosovo should therefore not be reduced to the idea that young people are uninterested in politics. The evidence reviewed in this paper points to a more complex relationship between age, voting habits, life transitions, political efficacy, representation and institutional trust.

The most important policy implication is that electoral participation should be treated as a process rather than a one-time event. First-time voters are an important group, but the years that follow the first election may be equally important for determining whether voting becomes a stable part of democratic life.

Kosovo already has several building blocks for such an approach: a youth strategy that recognizes participation as a priority, an election administration that conducts first-voter outreach, age-disaggregated electoral data and an active network of schools, universities, municipalities and youth organizations. The next step is to connect these elements into a continuous participation framework that supports citizens from their first encounter with elections through the transition into stable adult political participation.

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