



for every child

CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN PRACTICE

State-Led Youth Councils in the United States



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In fifteen states (and counting) youth councils are providing young people a platform to connect with one another, influence elected officials, raise money for causes close to home, and even pass laws.

INTRODUCTION

Civic participation — people's engagement in influencing policy, law, and local practices — is a cornerstone of the democratic tradition in the United States (U.S.). The U.S. government is a constitutional federal republic with a representative democratic system, such that power resides with officials who have been elected by citizens.¹ This structure represents a core commitment to facilitating participation by the people and is constructed on the idea that autonomous individuals should have a say in communal decision making.² In practice, however, the U.S. has historically imposed regulations and limitations on who can participate and how.³ For millions of young Americans, opportunities to meaningfully engage in government decision making are limited.⁴ People under the age of eighteen are not able to vote or donate to political campaigns, two crucial incentives that compel elected officials' attention.

Older adults often make decisions affecting young people based on the assumption that they lack maturity, experience, and knowledge.⁵ Yet these decisionmakers may themselves lack the relevant experience and knowledge needed to make informed choices on young people's behalf.⁶ Today, the average age of a U.S. senator is sixty-four.⁷ Most elected officials in the U.S. are representative of a generation that grew up without the Internet, before the COVID-19 pandemic, and before cell phones and smart devices fundamentally altered childhood.

In the face of these challenges, youth councils provide a dedicated space for young people to engage in civic life by identifying issues of public concern and influencing adults in power to make policy change or take executive action.⁸ Youth councils provide a platform to credibly convey young people's input directly to people in power who have the capacity to implement change.³

Youth councils provide numerous practical benefits to those who participate in them and to U.S. society at large. When young people have a way to form relationships with government officials, they can hold them to account and demand transparency.⁹ Adults in power benefit from these relationships, too: engaging with young people allows them to hear directly from people in their jurisdiction and make better-informed policy decisions.¹⁰

Youth councils are dedicated spaces for young people, typically between the ages of 15-22, to connect with one another and meet with their elected representatives to influence tangible, youth-informed change in their communities. Youth Councils are often housed within governments but may be coordinated by private organizations in a public-private partnership.

Youth councils strengthen personal and social development, contribute to better policy making, and can promote better, more inclusive democratic governance.¹¹ Adolescence is a time of essential growth, learning, and adaptation.¹² Having an opportunity to meaningfully engage in civic participation fosters a sense of purpose and place in society as well as stronger relationships with peers and communities during this crucial developmental period.¹² Civic participation can also contribute to higher self-esteem and prosocial behaviors, traits that are associated with positive trajectories and greater



THE AVERAGE AGE
OF A U.S. SENATOR

civic engagement in adult life.⁸ Participation in decision making also allows young people to develop critical thinking, problem-solving, and public speaking skills.¹²

Additionally, when young people are able to contribute to policy making processes, subsequent policies tend to be more effective and efficient, benefiting the community and taxpayers.¹³ Policies developed without young people's input, such as imposing sweeping social media bans¹⁴ or tracking bathroom breaks at schools¹⁵ tend to alienate young people by engendering frustration and resentment and may not effectively address real world challenges that young people face. When the gap between young people and adults in positions of power is bridged, however, stronger policies emerge. In Maryland, for example, young people are pushing lawmakers to designate May as Maryland Native Plant Month, turning their governor's yearly proclamation into actual law.¹⁶ The bill would rebuild rapidly declining pollinator populations and boost the green economy, all at zero cost to taxpayers.¹⁶ In Minnesota, a bill that would have increased the number of military recruiters in Minnesota's high schools did not pass after multiple young people came forward and provided testimony urging legislators against it.¹⁷ This demonstrates what's possible when young people are treated as stakeholders rather than bystanders in the policymaking process; their firsthand knowledge can shape outcomes that adults, working alone, might never have reached.

Young people have been at the forefront of social justice and community change movements for generations, demanding to be heard and taken seriously.¹⁸ After a 2018 mass shooting in Parkland, Florida, students organized March for Our Lives, a national campaign to end gun violence.¹⁹ And in the face of the existential threat of climate change, young people in Montana successfully brought a constitutional challenge against their state government for violating their right to a healthy environment.²⁰ Youth councils provide a formalized opportunity for young people to engage in creating such change. They also legitimize young people's agency and ambition and send an important message that young people deserve to, and are capable of, having a stake in decision making processes.²¹ By amplifying the voices of young people, governance structures are improved – a valuable step toward creating more inclusive, representative, and participatory democracies.²²

OUR RESEARCH

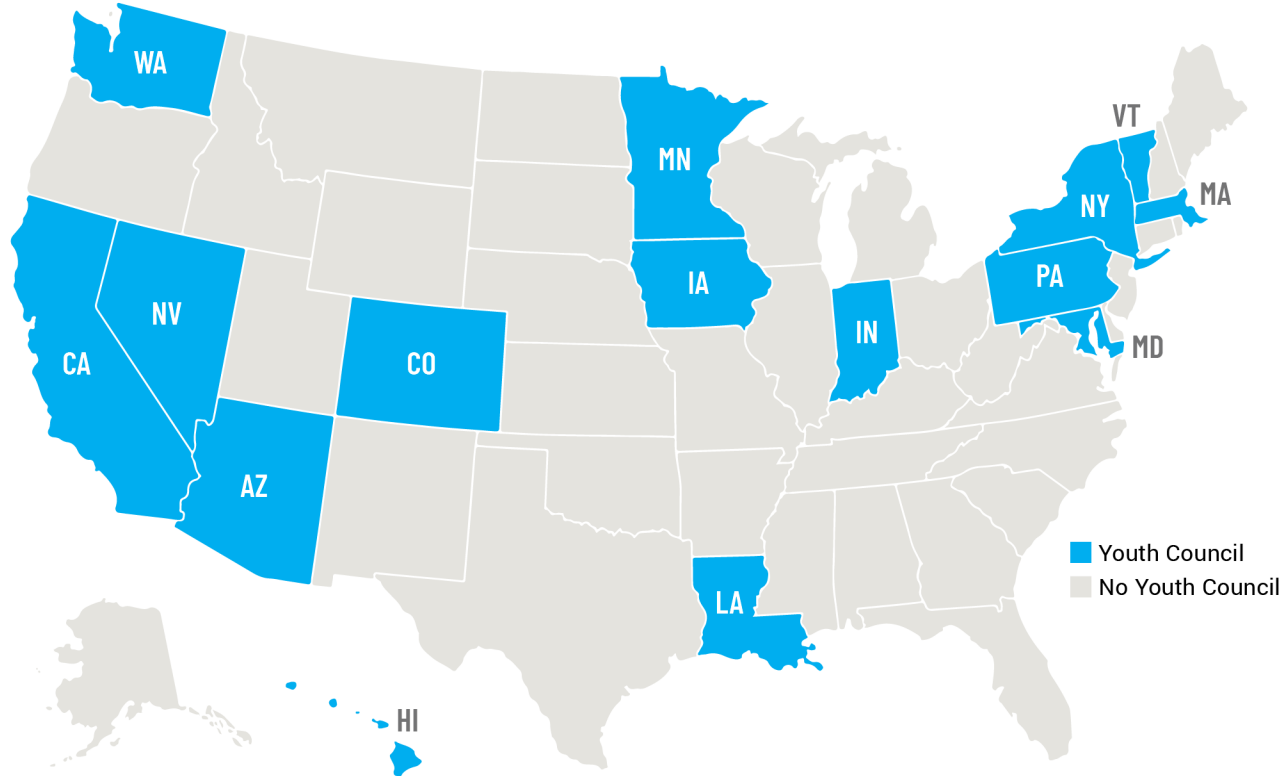
This research set out to identify which U.S. states have state-led youth councils and how these existing councils are effectuating positive change in their communities. After legislative research of all fifty U.S. states was conducted using Westlaw, LegiScan, and state government websites, twenty interviews were held with thirty people involved in these councils: elected officials that have championed youth councils, government employees that facilitate and organize the logistics of the councils, and the young people serving on the councils themselves.

Young people were asked to describe their motivations in joining or starting youth councils, their experience meeting with lawmakers, raising money, drafting legislation and policy proposals, and their recommendations for people who are interested in starting a council in their own states. Adults in charge of advising the youth councils shared their experience working to secure budgets to support the councils, recruiting a diverse and representative cohort of young people, and building trust between adults in power and young people eager to make change. Search terms and interview questions are available upon request; please reach out to Anne Leong at aleong@unicefusa.org.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Fifteen U.S. states have youth councils embedded into state government. Their accomplishments are as substantial as they are diverse: they are passing legislation, raising money, influencing governors' executive action, and communicating young people's ideas and concerns directly to adults in power.

Map of state-led youth councils in the United States



- **Youth councils should be mandated by law within state governments.** Fourteen of the fifteen councils are legislatively embedded within state governments, with eleven in state code and three by governor's executive order. This structure improves the effectiveness of youth councils by facilitating a space with access to information, supporting meaningful opportunities for young people to be heard by people in power, and establishing mechanisms to ensure young people's views are given due weight.²³ Establishing youth councils by mandate also sends an empowering message to young people that their government recognizes the legitimacy of their participation, which bolsters the self-esteem and confidence of young legislators.²⁴ Finally, state-led youth councils that effectuate change from within government are predisposed to positive conditions for changemaking. Other modes of youth participation typically effectuate change from the outside-in by writing letters, attending protests and town halls, or amplifying social media campaigns, all of which may not be as readily heard by people in power. But when states take ownership of youth councils, they foster a direct relationship between government and young people that is hard to ignore.²⁵ Councils established by law also have more potential for longevity. A codified council is largely insulated from relying on the goodwill of elected officials from one administration to the next. Though sunset reviews can repeal legislation and executive orders can be rescinded, these processes have far more guardrails than dismantling a council that was never codified.

"It may seem daunting to be around adults in power but trust yourself." – Sebastian, Nevada

- **The size and age range of councils can vary without impacting their effectiveness.** While each council strives for diversity in age, geographic, racial, ethnic, religious and political affiliation, there isn't a rubric that all councils follow to guide their composition. The councils range in membership from as few as thirteen in California to as

many as fifty-seven in Arizona. Councilors range in age from thirteen to twenty-six. Some states contract non-profit organizations or private contractors to advise the councils, as in Vermont and Colorado, whereas others, such as Louisiana, have a dedicated legislative aid from the state senate organizing the council's activities. What works for one state may not work for another, but composition does not necessarily have a bearing on that council's ability to empower young people and generate positive change.

“Government felt inaccessible before, but it feels more real now. I was able to grow a lot as a person. [Joining this council] helped solidify my interest in public policy and deepened my understanding of the inner workings of legislation.” – Misty, Hawai‘i

- **Young people serving on youth councils should be compensated for their time.** While all councils provide reimbursement for travel related to council activities, only California, Hawai‘i, Minnesota, and Vermont provide stipends to their youth councilors.²⁶ Compensating young people for their work is an acknowledgment that young people are equal partners to adults, all of whom are paid for their work. Young people who are paid for their time and efforts are more likely to feel a sense of responsibility, commitment, and dedication toward their work, all of which can be enabling conditions toward a council operating effectively. Compensation doesn't have to be money: while for most states lack of payment is due to budget constraints, there are ethics rules in Maryland that prevent monetary compensation. Most councils have found creative workarounds, such as allowing councilors to earn community service hours that count toward high school graduation requirements.

“I realized adult senators and representatives are everyday people elected to represent constituents. They have kids, they're just like us. It's helped me be more patient and respectful of the government. Being on this council has been eye opening. This is how the democratic process should be.” – Sabina, Washington

- **Adult champions are key to the sustainability of a youth council.** The power dynamics between young people and adults are inherently unequal. Adult legislators can cancel or reschedule meetings with councilors on a whim or refuse to meet with them altogether. Therefore, successful youth civic participation requires adults to enthusiastically engage.¹¹ Starting and sustaining a youth council often depends on practical considerations that tend to supersede normative, rights-based interests, such as budget availability. Not only are adults responsible for creating councils via executive order or legislation, adults also provide young people with knowledge, guidance, and vocabulary about civic engagement and legislative processes.²⁷ This is crucial for young people to effectively direct their change-making efforts.²⁷ From a psychosocial standpoint, youth participation tends to thrive when young people and adults trust and respect one another and are motivated to collaborate.²⁸ So long as adults are skilled and committed, they can serve as key role models and allies to create meaningful youth participation.²⁹ During interviews with adult advisors of youth councils, they each emphasized the importance of intergenerational partnerships. Their role, they clarified, is not to direct the council's work, but to empower, support, and nurture young people's ability to form their voices and propose change.

“Adults really underestimate young people. They leave [our meetings] more inspired and impressed.” – Megan, Louisiana

- **Youth councils should have direct access to elected representatives.** Elected representatives are consistently impressed with the councils they interact with, such that they express appreciation for how articulate, informed,

and passionate young people are, and they are moved by the depth of their research. For example, young councilors in Iowa designed a bill that would increase mental health services for youth, modeled off a law in North Dakota, which has a similar legislative structure. They sought feedback from Iowa's Department of Health and Human Services and pitched the bill to nearly a dozen state senators. Youth councilors in Nevada regularly hold virtual and in-person town halls to capture youth voices in their neighborhoods and better understand their ideas and concerns. In Louisiana, youth councilors provide written and live oral testimony in front of legislators. These interactions build trust and credibility. Adults are more likely to listen to young people when they connect with them directly.

"It's hard to describe how much of an impact [this experience] has on me. It's truly changed the trajectory of my life, and made me realize the importance of public service, being an advocate for change, and how accessible state legislators can be." – Holly, Louisiana

- **Youth empowerment is guaranteed.** Unanimous feedback from interviews with young councilors indicates that they leave their councils feeling more confident in their agency and ability to make change and to hold adults accountable. They gain practical skills, too, such as research, writing, public speaking, and familiarity with how the government works. They are better able to work across differences and are more likely to feel connected with their communities. At a Maryland youth council meeting last year, for example, a young councilor from rural Allegheny County voiced frustration that urban cities get more resources despite their reputation for being crime-ridden and dysfunctional. A councilor from Baltimore pushed back, describing his school's lack of updated textbooks, clean water, and air conditioning, suggesting that need shouldn't be dismissed because of a city's reputation for crime. The exchange led the Allegheny councilor to question how his beliefs had been shaped. Later, when he heard an adult in power repeat similar misconceptions about Baltimore, he pushed back with what he'd learned.

SPOTLIGHTING YOUTH COUNCILS

Nevada Youth Legislature

The Nevada Youth Legislature (NYL) is known for its success in creating laws. By statute, Nevada's legislature must allow NYL to draft and propose one bill per term, a recognized best practice in youth participation because of the depth of engagement in political processes that it requires.²¹ NYL must unanimously agree on their one proposed bill to the legislature, requiring extensive collaboration and negotiation between the young councilors.

In its eighteen-year history, Nevada has sent ten proposals to be introduced as bills; nine have become law.³⁰ Measures have included bills that:

- create a mentorship program for high school students;³¹
- establish a pilot program to provide free telephone calls between incarcerated women and their families;³²
- update concussion prevention and treatment policies for schools and youth sports.³³



Beyond passing bills, youth legislators are substantively engaged in other civic activities. Many are asked to testify about other bills proposed by state legislators, thereby providing expertise from a young person's point of view. The youth

legislators also organize town hall meetings with young people in their districts to connect with their constituents and learn more about their ideas and concerns.

The twenty-one youth legislators, one from each of Nevada's twenty-one state senate districts, serve two-year terms and meet in-person monthly for a half day. NYL also provides annual reports to Nevada's Governor that detail their activities and progress.

LOUISIANA YOUTH LEGISLATURE

Louisiana's Legislative Youth Advisory Council (LYAC) was started by a state senator who was inspired by the advocacy of a high schooler in his district. Even though Louisiana's state legislators are not required by law to hear the LYAC's bill proposals, LYAC has enjoyed legislative success. One year, to win the Governor's support, the entire council wrote handwritten notes to the Governor of Louisiana to convince him to set aside a budget for their proposed bill – an effort that was successful. LYAC has proposed and passed ten laws since 2012.³⁴ Recent bills include:

- banning social media companies from collecting data to use in targeted advertising to minors;³⁵
- a provision for student input in the annual review of high school crisis management and response plans.³⁶

LYAC operates like a real legislature. They follow parliamentary procedures and organize themselves into committees on the environment, education, criminal justice, and mental health. Each committee proposes bills that are pitched to the rest of the council and then voted on. Research, task forces, and interviews follow to further refine the idea.

Whereas some youth councils encourage their counselors to propose whatever bills they feel drawn to, LYAC takes a different approach: they listen to the climate of the legislature and strategically vet their ideas according to what might be championed and passed. The council has explored progressive proposals, including a proposed ban on conversion therapy, but decided against proposing it because of its potentially unfavorable reception in the Republican-dominated legislature. Along with their legislative success, council members testify in front of the senate on pending legislation.

LYAC is also engaged in a range of other civic activities. They were a finalist for a Department of Homeland Security grant that involved young people in designing initiatives to prevent hatred and terrorism in their communities. LYAC designed a card game called "Let's Talk" for 3rd and 4th graders that encouraged connections between peers and helped children overcome COVID-19 social stunting. LYAC also wrote, illustrated, and printed a children's book about diverse cultural experiences, complete with accompanying coloring sheets for classroom engagement.

LYAC's thirty-one youth legislators, approximately three from each of Louisiana's six congressional districts plus thirteen at-large members, meet every other month in person for a half day with regular Zoom meetings in between. Their terms are for one or two years. LYAC also reports their activities and progress to Louisiana's Commission on Civic Education twice a year.

IOWA YOUTH LEGISLATURE

One of the oldest councils in the nation, the State of Iowa Youth Advisory Council (SIYAC), was started as a passion project by then-Governor Tom Vilsack in 2001 and was later codified by the state legislature in 2009.³⁸ SIYAC is part of a state-wide initiative in Iowa called Opportunity Pathway, a long-term program that aims to create opportunities for young people to continue to pursue civic engagement as they grow up.



Each of the twenty-one counselors serves a two-year term. They meet on the first Sunday of the month virtually and once a quarter in person. Every other year the council sends a statewide youth survey and uses the responses to figure out what to focus on that year and which committees to organize themselves into. Typical priority areas include the environment, STEM, education, and mental health.

SIYAC has had a role in passing bills that mandate radon testing in schools, establish continuing education for teachers related to suicide prevention, lower the voting registration age from eighteen to seventeen, and standardize concussion testing for student athletes. But SIYAC has not proposed a bill that has become law in the last five years.³⁹ Iowa is a Republican state and the council's main champions are Democratic lawmakers. Some Republican lawmakers have suggested that the council is too political. The council's more left-leaning bill proposals in recent years have not been well received, including a proposed cap on the number of gun magazines that could be purchased at one time and a bill that would have required sexual education in public schools to be science-based. SIYAC has speculated that partisanship has contributed to their lack of successful legislation in recent years, along with a persistent mentality that young people are not partners or experts, but mere recipients of adult goodwill.

Considering legislative frustrations, SIYAC has pivoted toward influencing state agency policy and administrative rules. SIYAC has also begun pursuing community engagement strategies, including organizing volunteer efforts, providing STEM kits to public libraries, and creating service-learning opportunities for young people.

VERMONT YOUTH LEGISLATURE

In 2017, thirty young people in Vermont created a declaration of youth rights and started conversations about young Vermonter's involvement in policies that affect them.⁴⁰ While efforts to codify the group stalled during the COVID-19 pandemic, the group found a legislative champion in 2021 and Vermont State's Youth Council was officially created by bill in 2022.⁴¹

Vermont's council has twenty-eight young people, at least one from each of Vermont's fourteen counties, who serve three-year terms. The council meets twice a month on Zoom and twice a year in-person. By law, the council is organized into five committees: climate change; mental health; education; youth voice; and diversity, equity, and anti-racism. There are also council-wide topics on how to promote retention of young people in the state and preserve Vermont's traditions, namely agriculture and tourism. The council holds regular public hearings and surveys young people to learn about their concerns and ideas. Councilors also testify at house and senate committee meetings, providing expertise from a young person's point of view. The council crafts legislative recommendations as a group and meets with the house, senate and Governor separately to present recommendations. Moving forward, the council plans to make recommendations every two years to follow the legislative session schedule, allow more time to develop thoughtful recommendations, and find allies. At the end of each term, the council reports on their activities and progress to the Department of Health, who provides grant funding for the council.

While Vermont's council's proposals have not become law, they were able to successfully influence recent legislation: a new program that will transform the state's education system names Vermont's youth council as an entity that legislators



must consult as they develop legislation under this bill.⁴² Additionally, Vermont's council was recently able to repeal language that required sunset reviews of the councils, ensuring its longevity.

The council has enjoyed positive reception from its state legislators, such that adults are pleasantly surprised that young people have such thoughtful ideas and are excited to meet with young people. Their testimony and meetings with legislators are generating meaningful interactions. Legislators provide feedback and suggestions, not just "fluff," and connect young people to other legislators working on bills that may be of interest.

CONCLUSION

Civic participation in the U.S. has been "tried, tested, and expanded" as marginalized groups, including young people, continue to fight to have their voices heard and their collective power and humanity recognized.³ These fifteen state-led youth councils in the U.S. represent this effort. These councils advance democratic values by increasing communication and transparency between elected officials and young people while encouraging the healthy social development of young people. As councils expand, their benefits can continue to be reaped by communities nationwide, ensuring that even more young people become active partners in building more just, inclusive, and sustainable societies.

ABOUT UNICEF USA'S REPORT, PARTICIPATION IN PRACTICE

UNICEF USA's report, *Participation in Practice: A Human Rights Analysis of Youth Councils in the United States* was written by Isabel Geddes and Anne Day Leong.

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UNICEF USA

125 Maiden Lane,
New York, NY, USA, 10038
unicefusa.org

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To learn more, contact:

Anne Day Leong, PhD, MSW

Senior Director of Research, Evaluation and Research Partnerships

aleong@unicefusa.org

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