

Youth with clipped wings: bridging the gap from youth recruitment to representation in candidate lists

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FIGURE 1

Youth wing representation across the ladder of recruitment by party and total, 2002-2019.

Young people are significantly underrepresented in global parliaments, with the most recent data pointing to less than 3 percent of parliamentarians being under 30 years of age (IPU, 2021: 7). This raises normative concerns, as democracy should not systematically exclude segments of the population (Stockemer and Sundström, 2022: 3). Youth underrepresentation may foster disengagement of younger cohorts from conventional democratic participation, potentially creating a “vicious cycle of political alienation” for young people (Stockemer and Sundström, 2022: 3).

This article examines the role of party youth wings in candidate selection. Despite being the “lifeblood” of party life (Trimithiotis, 2015: 167), their involvement in candidate selection remains largely overlooked, even though they are crucial for training future legislators and party leaders.

Results demonstrate that youth wings play an uneven role in candidate selection, generating an iceberg-shaped recruitment ladder. They supply parties with a

sizeable proportion of young members and potential candidates. However, this does not translate to the visible part of the recruitment ladder, with the impact of youth wings sharply clipped when it comes to actual candidates and MPs.

Also, the number of youth wing candidates significantly increases with district magnitude, but they do not necessarily secure better list positions. More importantly, informal mechanisms and negotiations between youth wings and the mother party leadership emerge as a central factor in the ability of youth wings to influence candidate lists.

These informal dynamics often build fences around the young, rather than building bridges that could spur their inclusion as candidates and MPs. Strengthening party youth wings has been proposed as a strategy to enhance youth representation. Yet, as this research suggests, their formal empowerment may be severely hampered if informal practices within parties are not also addressed.

