



## Research Article

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# Youth Political Participation in Conventional Forms in Albania 2011-2021

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### Abstract

*Looking into the conventional forms of political participation in Albania, this paper analyzes the level of political decision-making participation of youth in this country in the period 2011-2021. The main focus is mapping the level of engagement of young Albanians into conventional politics, such as in the main political parties of Albania (Socialist Party, Democratic Party and Socialist Movement for Integration), youth forums, parliament, local and central government bodies. The result shows that has been a slight improvement in numbers and quality of youth in traditional politic, in terms of youth leader election, political activities and some presence of the young politicians in key political bodies of political parties and governance. The paper concludes that this positive inclination is still low in percentage compared to the old politicians in political leading positions, decision-making positions and in main political parties' structure. The low level of participation of young people in politics hinders them from the proactive role and their involvement in the traditional political structure of the country.*

**Keywords:** youth, conventional politics, decision – making, political parties

## 1. Introduction

Youth political participation is one of nowadays contemporary research issues. “The concept of youth participation itself is not a statistic one. As methodological and social sciences changes occur, this brings also evolution to the participation of youth over time. (Forbig, 2005: 22-24). Youth participation in political parties, voting, political interests, etc. in the literature is generally divided in two paradigms; the first paradigm is the pessimistic one, of low youth participation. “A number of authors have lamented the decline in youth voter turnout and engagement in key social and political institutions. Robert Putnam’s (2000), *Bowling Alone* is perhaps the best-known example of this work” (Sloam, Henn, 2019:24). The second paradigm is an optimistic one, which is based in conventional forms of political participation such as membership in political parties, parliament, youth forums, participation in elections, campaigns, etc. On the other hand there are the non-traditional (non institutionalized engagement) forms of political participation such as protest, civic engagement, political movements, etc. “Pippa Norris (2002) has, thus, conceived of political participation as a *Democratic Phoenix*, evolving to adapt to new political, economic and social realities.” (Sloam, Henn, 2019: 24). “Most of youth quantitative studies reveal an indifference of youth in engaging into politics, they show low levels of interest in electoral process, voting, political membership in political parties, youth forums, etc.” (Cross, Young, 2008; Quintelier, 2007; Hooghe, Stolle, et al. 2004).

This evolution in concept and engagement also brought some lacks in youth studies. The literature and studies about youth political participation “lack of larger cross-national studies that take into account a youth-adequate definition of political participation and conduct research on the political participation behavior of youths” (Weiß, 2020: 9). Moreover, in Albania this field of study lacks in data and deep analyzes. Researchers need to build a consistent ground of data and use them to analyze the forms of youth engagement in political institutions. Therefore, this paper is focused in addressing the aspect of the traditional political engagement of youth, the institutional political involvement of youth in local and national government, parliament, and political parties.

Diverse levels of politics in democratic countries, such as government and political parties, are expected to include in the political decision-making different groups of people, including the young generation. Positive factors for youth participative in political decision making is their familiarity with their age group issues and the tendency of non-depending in their political ideas from the political leaders, such as the old ones. In developing democracy such as in the Balkans, and specifically in Albania, this positive factor can turn into limitations for youth to be participative in the political process of democratic decision-making. Youth in Albania constitute more than 30% of the Albanian population (INSTAT 2021), therefore this group if not marginalized from the political arena, could establish an important weight in the political decision making. This paper seeks to find out the level of engagement of youth in the conventional political participation, therefore answering the research question of what is the real level of participation in the traditional forms of youth in politics, in the period 2011-2021. Taking into consideration that a crucial role in this context, apart from youth itself, has also political parties, the study includes also their relation in helping this group to come out from the marginalized section and take place into the political decision-making process. The study uses quantitative data for young political participation in the main political parties and executive institutions, Albanian Central Election Commission (KQZ), and other data from research institutions. Qualitative data are used for better supporting the quantitative results, as also mainly for analyzing the political parties’ attitudes towards youth. The age segment mapped in this paper is chosen to be 18 – 35 years (to include the maximum extension margins of the young age segment, which could be engaged into traditional politic institutions).

This paper has analyzed crucial political institutions such as central and local governance, parliament, political parties, and the level of inclusiveness of political parties/forums/attitudes toward youth. The political parties analyzed in this paper are the three main ones in Albania in the period 2011-2021: the Socialist Party (PS), the Democratic Party (PD) and the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI), given the fact that these parties are the most impacting ones towards the possibility of youth to enter and engage in the Albanian politics. In 2019, Albania had 162 registered political parties, but only few of them did have an impact on the political arena. Besides, we need to make clear also that in terms of missing empiric data specifically for the Balkan Countries, some of the data below are in term of the South East Europe (SEE) countries. In SEE studies the authors worked mainly with the countries’ data that make part of the Balkans. Consequently, we take into consideration a possible margin of error between the SEE countries and the Balkan Countries, although, as post – communist countries, they have a similar trend of citizens’ perceptions in decision – making participation behavior.

## **2. Youth in Political Parties and Youth Forum**

In order to deeply explore the youth engagement in political parties, for each of the three main parties PS, PD and LSI, are considered indicators input factors such as their structure and organization, statutes political activities regarding the young members in their party and youth forums. Generally, the tradition in Albanian politic for youth representation in political parties is under the influence of the party’s leader and elite. Although there have been cases, especially in the last years, in which PS and PD leaders decided for youth to be included as a somehow forms of quotas in the key party’s body. All parties through their decision-making have given a privileged place to the delegation process of all their senior representatives in local government and in central government, and during specific divisions for

particular party groups such as youth and women. Each party determines, depending on the political need of the moment that a variable percentage of youth seats in selected structures be reserved for women and the same for young people. The number of young people, aged not over 30 years should not be less than 15 percent. Such positive designations for the needs of party representation and image create imbalance in voting because candidates of another age, who represent higher number of votes, do not result winners only because of the exclusion by the age quotas. (Krasniqi and Hackaj, 2016: 81).

A positive factor in all three major parties in Albania is their tendency to convey their interest toward youth, with focus to academies and training programs for young members and candidates. For example, PS has applied training activities with the “Qemal Stafa” Foundation (Fondacioni Qemal Stafa, 2020); PD with the Political Academy “Foundation for Freedom and Democracy” (Fondacioni për Liri dhe Demokraci, 2020) and LSI every year organizes youth Academy in Jalë (Tradita e kampionit të Jalës, 2020). On this regard, LSI has also made more efforts in prioritizing youth in policies, party programs, political debates, etc., than the other two parties, taking also into consideration that for LSI party youth (especially early youth) was one of its main electoral target groups. Considering the above examined indicators, we can assert somehow positive results in youth political participation inclusiveness. However there is another indicator that the parties lack on. There is no evidence in all the three parties of building these programs, statutes, activities on reliable research and data. This limitation, infers us to hesitate in asserting that political parties include not only formally but also de facto the young participants in initiating and setting their own agendas and issues solving. Young people in politics do not provide guarantees and indications that they have a more liberal mentality and are more open and competitive than senior politicians, which also reflect the problems of internal democracy at a capillary level in political parties (Krasniqi, 2016: 13).

Youth party forum on the other hand, is one of the main forms of this group engagement into politics. As mentioned above, the main political parties of Albania have in their organizational structure the Youth Forum. Practically, the three main political parties’ youth forums are: PS has FRESH (Eurosocijalist Youth Forum) – left wing ideology, PD has FRDP (Democratic Party Youth Forum) – right wing ideology, and LSI has LRI (Youth Movement for Integration) – left wing ideology. FRESH is considered part of the socialist political structure (Projekt-Statuti FRESH, NENI 1/1.). Instead, the other two forums FRDP and LRI are considered from the parties as partner organization (Statuti i PD, Neni 58, pika 1/a; STATUTI I LSI, and XVII/17.1). LRI has a distinct political aspect from the other two youth forums. LSI is a fragment from PS, but in the aspect of youth forum, it mostly does not include young members from the PS, because its focus was mainly in the youngest age persons of youth segment, such as high school youth and students. This is one of the main reasons that this indicator practically in LSI had better positive results than the other two parties regarding the inclusion of a large number of young Albanians in LRI. The other two forums derive from the main party structure. In the context of youth forums, it is another important indicator to consider while analyzing youth engagement into traditional politics: youth forums separate web pages from the political parties. This indicator is fulfilled only by FRESH and LRI. Their web addresses are accordingly <http://fresh.al/> and <http://www.lri.al>. On the other hand, FRDP has no separate webpage from PD (in the web page is shown only the form to apply as a member of the forum). Crucial information is missing and none of the political parties show definitive forms of statutes and programs, but only draft formats. Furthermore, almost none of youth activities, structure, debates, branches, finances, etc., are published in the websites. The information reflected in the web pages is mostly outdated, 1-3 year old.

A positive aspect of these parties is the form of their youth leader’s election. PS and PD in the recent years has applied the form of election of 1 member 1 vote, while LSI still remains at the delegation level of elite election. However, in both PS and PD there are some critics from high level party leaders about the voting and election process. One example is the 2016 case of “PS - election was not organized by the Forum statute practice but was imposed from leadership, differently from the earlier experience when PS was in opposition” (ISP, 2017: 9). Therefore this aspect results in a non-consistent youth political vision in the political participation of the political parties’ structure as Krasniqi states:

*“more representative of the younger generation appears as imitators and fiery advocates of the views and attitudes of the respective party leaders, greatly damaging the representative power, the autonomy and the ability of bids for changes in policy.” (Krasniqi, 2016: 13).*

Some positive elements concerning the forums structure of FRESH and FRPD can be considered that FRESH in recent years has shown the accomplishment of some election criteria and election organization, even better applied than the party itself. Additionally FRPD positive element of youth real engagement and participation is the one of the self-candidacy in the political structure. These essentials contribute to a positive trend of political party democratization from the young people in Albania. Additionally, the forum's organization structure FRESH, FRPD and LRI have shown some democratic and political groundwork of youth and presence in some of PS, PD and LSI activities, as also forming the political democratic debate. Specifically, FRESH sometimes does fulfil better results compared to their organization structure elections. Whereas LRI on the other hand, following the same positive logic of the above shows to be more active in youth activities organization. Moreover, compared to the other two, LRI organize more public activities, and have a tendency which aims at the participatory engagement of young people in this structure.

On the other hand, election and internal debate have been criticized. A standing argument of this behavior is the example of FRESH and FRPD critics. The election of youth in party leadership structure were criticize, “mainly due to disproportion of district representation and restriction of competition in names that have family support from senior management levels in the PD and PS” (Krasniqi, 2017: 33) to be promoted due to family linking support with the party elites. The lack of internal or public youth political debate in FRESH, FRPD and LRI, limits the autonomy and in some way obstructs youth to liberally perform in their political decisions.

The level of electoral participation is another important element contributing to the traditional politics participation. Youth are considered nowadays as one of the most detached and non-engaged age group in politics, and therefore manifested in low levels of electoral participation as well. “Young people's political disengagement may especially impact countries marked by incomplete democratic consolidation” (Merkel 2007, in FES 2019: 61). These evidences could underline some of the causes of reduced interest of the Albanian youth in politics, as well as the young participation in elections as voter. According to FES data in “Albanian Youth 2018-2019” we can observe that “62 percent of young people say they are not interested in politics at all”. Compared to 2015 data, when was 40 percent, we notice that their lack of interest in politics has increased” (Çela and Kamberi, 2019: 63).

This perspective is reflected also in a broader range, in the SEE countries youth. “Engagement through traditional channels, such as political parties, appears to be rare and a small share of youth throughout the SEE region hold a political function, as also the willingness to take on a political function is significantly positively correlated with trust in political institutions at the regional level” (Jusić and Lavrič, 2019: 67). According to FES data the 65 percent of the young Albanian respondents are not willing to take a political function. This result reputedly confirms the poor perception of young Albanian's trust in political parties, related political institutions and also in political leaders.

### 3. Youth in Parliament and Central and Local Government

The parliament, central and local government are the most crucial institutions in empowering the engagement of youth in the political decision – making process. The data from the Balkan regional platform show that youth believes that they can influence and take part of the local and central governance decision making. They trust that their participation in youth policies contributes to change their position in society (creation, implementation and monitoring of local, national, regional youth policy, relevant laws, etc.). Significantly, 73 percent of them believe that their involvement in public policies can contribute to the change of youth policies. (Balkan regional platform for youth participation and dialogue, 2015: 43). Furthermore, they show lower but still considerable level of belief when they are asked “whether their local community or the state has the conditions for the inclusion of youth in

decision-making processes, and 64 percent of them consider that there are no conditions.” (Balkan regional platform for youth participation and dialogue, 2015: 40). Considering the real representation data for the main representative political institutions in Albania, this level of belief of youth is not translated into their real political engagement. In the two last legislatures of 2013-2017 and 2017-2021 (Kuvendi i Shqipërisë 2021 and Komisioni Qëndror i zgjedhjeve 2021) the number of young deputies has inclined from 5.7 percent to 8.6 percent. However, this level of representation can be considered very low if we consider that young people (18-35) make up over 30% of the Albanian population (INSTAT 2021). “Nevertheless there has been a slight improve in participation of young people in government institution such as parliament and government, there is still a high discrepancy between the nominated young people and elected ones. Young people are put at the end of nomination lists which decreases the chances to be elected” (Partners Albania for Development and Change, 2018: 33). A confirming argument is presented from Krasniqi (2016: 24) “The PD chairman has proposed to the President of the Republic the proposal for the 35 percent quota of young people in the upcoming electoral list. The concept of the percentage of youth quota relates to the tendency of reforming the seniority of the parliamentary representative group but has faced criticism and dissatisfaction with the traditional part of the parties, some of which have expressed public criticism and are not supportive of predetermined quotas.” On the other hand, young deputies also had shown pragmatist views. A case of confirmation is the PDIU political party. The only one young deputy of this party Reme Lala turned from PDIU party to PS party in June 2018. Turning to the main political parties, the low youth representation ratio of young deputy’s does not constitute a positive result in the direction of youth political decision-making. A positive factor is the LSI party, which does engage more young people into the party and in the possible winning position of the candidate deputy list. Below is reflected the structure and forums of the political parties, and from this structure we realize that youth representation in LSI is 2 times higher compared to the other two major parties.

**Table 1:** Central and local governance youth representation

Central government	2013 – 2017				2017 – 2021 <sup>1</sup>			
	PS	PD	LSI	other parties	PS	PD	LSI	other parties
Parliament (deputy)	3/66 (4.6%)	3/48 (6.3%)	2/17 (11.8%)	0/9 (0%)	3/74 (4.1%)	4/43 (9.3%)	4/19 (21.1%)	1/4 (25%) (PDIU)
	Total: 8/140 (5.7%) <sup>2</sup>				Total: 12/140 (8.6%)			
Ministers	10%	0	5%		36%	0	0	
Local government	2011 – 2015				2015 – 2019			
	PS	PD	LSI	other parties	PS	PD	LSI	other parties
Mayors	3 (male)	1 (male)	0	0	4 (male)	1 (male)	1 (female)	0
Municipal council	12.1%				36.4%			

In addition, if calculated the percentage of the young candidates in the 2017-2021 legislature, we confirm that LSI has given more chances to the young people to be included in the candidate deputy list 45 percent, from which 55 percent are women. The other two main parties have low level of youth representation, PS - 23 percent and PD - 34 percent. Through a deeper examination of the candidates lists and based on the election results and the list of winning candidates, again with the exception of the LSI where almost half of the young candidates resulted in the winning list (46.9%), in PD (27.4%) and especially in PS (17.8%) the young candidates are positioned mostly below the line of the winning possibility.

<sup>1</sup>During this period, the opposition of Albanian parliament boycotted the parliament activities and quitted their deputy mandates. Consequently, there have been changes in the parliament formation body.

<sup>2</sup>After the local elections in 2015, the number of youth representatives in parliament increased to 10 (7.1%) as a result of the replacement of the mandates of the deputies who resigned due to ministerial posts or candidacy in local elections. As part of these rotations, 3 young deputies resigned their mandates (1 PS and 2 LSI) and 5 new representatives entered in the parliament (2 PS, 1 PD and 2 LSI).

An exception in the positions list (above the winning line) makes the young candidates, that in the 2017-2021 legislatures or in the previous ones held political party positions. This decision may be a consequence of their tendency to follow the instruction of the party leader in the decision-making process. Statistic data show better results of youth being part as ministers. First, we have to mention that in the first legislature PS was in alliance with LSI and in the second one PS governs the country as a single party. Young ministers in 2013 – 2017 were 10 percent minister from PS, by gender 2 males and 0 female out of 21 ministers and 5 percent from LSI, 1 female (the Minister of Integration Klajda Gjoshaj). In the 2019 governance, there has been a positive change toward including young ministers at the rate of 36 percent, and more positively five of them are women. Hence, this data could be considered positively by analyzing youth inclusiveness in the decision – making democratic governance.

Local governance shows better results of youth political representation. Comparing the first local governance of 2011-2015 to the second of 2015-2019 period, we find there an increasing tendency of youth as municipal mayors. In 2011–2019 there were in total 4 Mayors, 3 from PS and 1 From PD. Instead in 2015 – 2019 governance there are 4 from PS, 1 from PD and 1 from LSI. Only the last one is a woman, who actually governed a small city of Albania, Përrenjas. One of the males is the actual Mayor of the Albanian Capital, Tirana. Primary he has been the Minister of Welfare and Sport. Concerning the municipal councils, we also can see an increasing tendency from 12.1 percent to 36.4 percent, showing a 24.3 percent of increase towards a positive trend of youth inclusiveness. The municipal data compared to the central governance shows better results. Consequently, at this level we can assert that in the local level youth are probably better and easily included in the decision-making process. In overall, in the analyzed years, low participation of youth is found in central, local government and in important positions of the political parties.

**Table 2:** 2015 local executive by gender and municipally

Name Surname	Gender	Municipally	Ex- position in the party
Rigels Balili	M	Delvinë	
Bledjon Nallbati	M	Devoll	Mayor of Youth PD Forum, Member of Headship of PD Devoll
Saimir Hasalla	M	Peqin	Counsellor of PDIU Parliamentary Group
Miranda Rira	F	Përrenjas	Former deputy of Parliament
Beqir Nuredini	M	Rrogozhinë	
Erjon Veliaj	M	Tiranë	Former minister of Welfare and Sport
<b>Total</b>	<b>1 F / 5 M</b>	<b>8.2% (5 out of 61)</b>	

#### 4. Conclusions

The discourse of youth political participation is one of today's contemporary topics in political studies. The main purpose of this article is to map the level of youth engaged into conventional politics, such as youth spaces into political parties, youth forums, engagement and contribution into crucial governance bodies, local and central government and the parliament. These diverse levels of politics in democratic countries are expected to include in the political decision-making the young generation. Albanian politics shows some level of inclusiveness of this age group. Positive factors for youth participation in political parties are the assessment of youth quotas into key party's body, the tendency of the political parties to convey youth activities through trainings, political debate and the election organization for the leader of youth forums, etc.

Also, the forum's organization structure of FRESH, FRPD and LRI, demonstrate positive evidence of some democratic and political groundwork of the young people and presence in some of PS, PD and LSI activities. Therefore this consists in a positive direction of real political engagement of youth in conventional politics. On the other hand, none of the main parties, show evidence of building youth programs, statutes, activities on reliable research and data and political activities, such as election, internal debate and in years have been criticized for problematics of real representation. Additionally, PD and LSI, differently from PS, do not have even a youth forum



statute. Similarly, youth engaged in local, central, parliament and youth forums, show some level of pragmatism tendency toward the form of leading of the political parties' elite and leadership. These discrepancies convey youth towards not being motivated in entering the politics and showing a low level of willingness to take a political function. Furthermore, the results show the low level of young participation in central, local governance level as also in the parliament, deputy, etc. during 2011-2021. These low percentages level with respect to old politicians in positions of political leadership, discouraged even more youth participation in conventional political forms. In conclusion, this study of conventional political participation of youth in Albania confirms that although there has been small improvement in numbers and quality, there is still a limited number of young politicians in the decision-making positions. Therefore this may hinder and deprive them from a proactive role into political parties and other key political and governmental structure bodies.

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