



Voters for the Future:

Reframing Political Apathy in Future European Elections.

Graduation Report

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Reframing Political Apathy in Future European Elections.



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Executive Summary

This thesis explores the growing issue of youth political disengagement in Europe, focusing on the misinterpretation of apathy and how it can be reframed as a valid form of political participation. Using speculative and strategic design methods, the thesis investigates how emotional reflection, rather than passive reaction, can empower youth and reconnect them with politics.

A significant gap exists between European youth and traditional political systems. Youth, frustrated by a distant, self-serving system, have increasingly turned to alternative forms of engagement. Politicians' empty promises, lack of focus on youth issues, and slow reactions to urgent matters like housing and climate change have deepened the disillusionment. While the electoral process remains central to democracy, its outdated structure is no longer aligned with the needs of today's youth—who are digital, issue-driven, and expect more continuous, meaningful involvement.

This thesis proposes a solution to address this disconnect: Civic Mirror. This platform is designed to acknowledge youth's emotional engagement with politics and provide them with a space to reflect on their feelings and influence policies. Unlike traditional voting systems, Civic Mirror allows users to express their emotions about current issues, track their emotional states, and take action when they feel most passionate.

Civic Mirror offers an inclusive, dynamic, and emotionally-driven model of political engagement that empowers youth to engage meaningfully with politics. By validating their feelings and offering personalized participation, Civic Mirror helps bridge the gap between youth and politics, ensuring their involvement in the democratic process is both relevant and impactful.

Tamara Vecic

*Politics isn't broken because
we don't vote. We don't vote
because politics is broken.*

Anonymous young citizen, 2025

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Research for Design

About

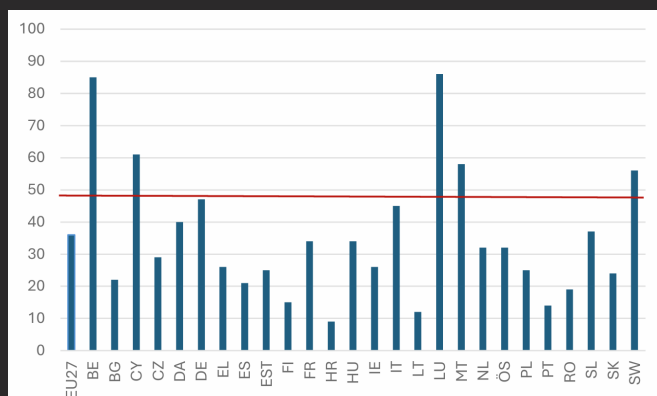
In this chapter, I outline the primary thesis motivation, stemming from my personal experience with Slovenian politics as a young European. By stretching the context of political participation to national and European scale, I explore common issues between democratic nations. Additionally, I present a detailed design approach used throughout the thesis and key insights gained from the primary research.

1.1 Perceived Problem

Media headlines like “Is our democracy in danger?” and “If young people care, why do they not engage more with democratic life?” reflect a growing concern: **youth are increasingly abandoning politics.**

Recent trends show that **young Europeans are stepping away from traditional politics**, while their frustration is “migrating” towards alternative forms of engagement. In the most recent European Parliament elections, **only 36% of eligible voters aged 18-24 cast their vote**, which is 6% less than in previous elections. For instance, fewer than a third of eligible voter in countries like **Czech Republic, Estonia, and Portugal** voted, while youth turnout in **Croatia** didn’t even reach 10% (Lavizari, 2025).

Figure 1: Voting turnout of citizens aged 15-24 in 2024 European elections (Eurobarometer, 2024)



In contrast, over the past year alone, hundreds of protests have erupted across Europe, all with one aim; **to establish a dialogue with political institutions outside of the ballot box** (FRA, 2024). Notable movements include the “Palestine Support” protests calling for peace and humanitarian aid in Gaza (De Ruiter, 2025), Serbia’s Student Protests demanding democratic reforms and institutional accountability (Lau & Chater, 2025), and climate strikes in European capitals (Fouda, 2025).

This shift poses a significant question: **With youth—the future of any society—becoming less involved in decisions that will directly affect their lives, is the very foundation of poli**

Figure 2: Students protesting corruptive governmental practices in Serbia (Djurica, 2025)



tics at risk? Addressing the widening gap between young Europeans and their political systems is crucial before the divide deepens further and becomes irreversible.

1.2 Personal Experience

In 2022, just months before the Slovenian parliamentary elections, the public was shaken by pandemic fatigue, inancial crisis, and war in Ukraine.

For my friends and me, everyday discussions were often replaced by shared concerns over rising prices, limited personal freedoms, and a collapsing housing market—**issues that politicians seemed to ignore** while focusing on internal party conflicts and recent corruption scandals. **For many young Slovenians, including my friends, this neglect fuelled their disconnection from politics.**

During a regular coffee date, my **friend Marko** voiced his frustration: “I was really disappointed but not surprised. They ignored our problems completely. I remember having to move back home because I couldn’t afford to pay the rent in Ljubljana anymore.” While discussing politicians’ neglect of youth issues during the pandemic, our **friend Jaka** joined the conversation, adding “We weren’t only ignored;

Figure 3: Coffee with my friends Marko and Jaka



we were blamed for the problems politicians created. I remember being told to not complain because youth weren't at risk of dying. Two years later, we're still dismissed as a privileged generation." When asked if they planned to vote, Marko and Jaka responded: "I don't think so. No one cares about us, so why bother?"

Meanwhile my friend **Kaja**, who lived in Belgium at the time, chose to **protest the current political situation by casting an "empty vote"** as a statement against politicians' empty promises. She explained, *"I will vote; however, I won't circle anyone's name. After their dismissive rhetoric and ignorance of our housing and employment problem during Covid, they deserve my negative vote."*

This personal experience led me to question whether my friend's disillusionment with politics was a **sign of a much bigger national crisis**. The clear **gap between youth and political institutions called for a deeper exploration** of what political participation means for today's young generation in Europe, and how it can be redefined.

1.3 Youth Political Participation as the Domain

1.3.1 Why Political Participation?

Political participation was chosen as the domain for this thesis due to three factors.

- **Political participation is central to ongoing global issues.** Recent youth activism, especially around climate change (Euronews Green,

- 2023), and the rise of political discussions on platforms like TikTok and X ahead of elections highlight the growing relevance of political engagement (Ingram, 2024). These trends emphasize the importance of focusing on political participation in contemporary contexts.
- **Political participation offers various design opportunities**, including tools to stimulate engagement, platforms for civic discourse, and innovative modes of participation. This intersection of design and politics makes it an ideal focus for a strategic design thesis.
- **Political participation is a personal interest of mine**, stemming from my active involvement in NGOs and digital political groups.

1.3.2 Term Definition

Political participation is a broad concept encompassing various activities. Despite increased academic interest in recent years, its definition remains complex, especially when terms like "youth," "activity," or "engagement" are added. Today, experts interpret both **politics** and **political participation** in different ways, making it crucial to define both terms clearly for consistency throughout this thesis.

Politics

The concept of politics dates back to ancient times when humans organized into communities for protection and socialization. The term was first formally defined by **Aristotle** as *"a technique of organizing polis"*—the Greek state.

Modern scholars have expanded on this definition, with Harold Lasswell (1936) defining politics as *"who gets what, when, and how,"* focusing on power and resource distribution, while Bernard Crick (1962) saw it as *"a means of mediating conflicts through compromise."* Today, politics encompasses a wide range of activities, from the organization of the state to everyday concerns like human rights, the price of electricity, or public transportation.

For this thesis, I adopt David Easton's (1953) definition, which sees politics as **"the process through**

which societies make decisions regarding the allocation of common values”. This definition emphasizes collective values, aligning with the aim of this thesis.

Political Participation

Early academic **definitions of political participation** focused primarily on conventional political practices like elections and party membership (Verba & Nie, 1972). Over time, the scope expanded to include activities like campaigning, petitioning, and contacting officials—activities referred to as **“conventional politics”**.

Today, political participation refers to **any activity that shapes, affects, or engages with the political sphere**, a definition also adopted by the EU (EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership, 2025). Jan van Deth (2001) identified **four key features** of any political participation:

- **Proactive:** Requires active engagement, not passive consumption.
- **Voluntary:** Not mandated by law.
- **Amateur:** Not carried out in a professional capacity.
- **Targets politics:** Aimed at influencing political decisions rather than driven by personal gain.

Van Deth further **categorizes political activities into conventional** (e.g., voting, running for office, or joining a political party) and **unconventional** (e.g., protests, boycotts, or volunteering) **activities** that influence politics outside formal institutions (Galstyan, 2019; Quaranta, 2012; Stockemer, 2024). A more recent one, **individualized participation**

or **lifestyle politics** emerges from personal values rather than collective or institutional frameworks. Examples include adopting a vegan diet, avoiding fast fashion, or conserving water (Bennett, 2012).

This thesis defines political participation as *“any form of civic activity aimed at influencing political decision-making”* (Parry et al., 1992).

Example: Is sharing an Instagram story in support of a pro-abortion protest a political participation?

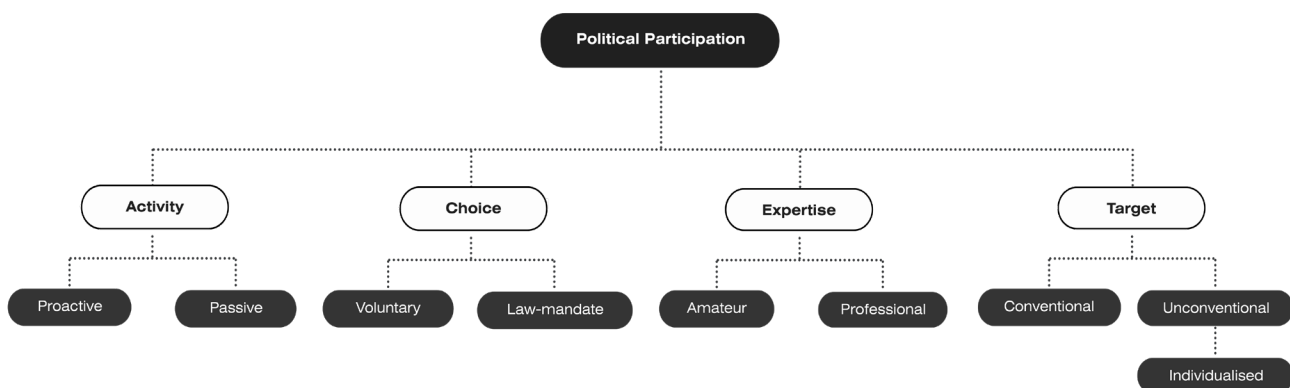
The action is proactive, with actively choosing to share the post. It is voluntary, since there is no obligation to do so. It is amateur, requiring no special political expertise, and the political intent is present. Therefore, the action can be labelled as political participation (Van Deth).

1.4 Thesis Aim

The aim of this thesis is to explore the **fractured relationship between European youth and politics**. This will be achieved by examining *patterns of political participation, identifying the key barriers young people face in engaging with politics, and proposing a speculative design intervention to foster a more meaningful connection* between young generations and political systems.

Furthermore, the thesis aims to **challenge political preconceptions about youth** and **their engagement**, while **provoking young people to reconsider the value and importance of their**

Figure 4: Political participation key features (Van Deth, 2001)



political participation. Additionally, **development of a meaningful design solution that will close the gap between the two** is the aim of this thesis.

1.5 Research Questions

To guide this thesis, the following research questions were developed:

Research Question 1: “How does the relationship between young European citizens and politics look like today?”

- “What are the most recent patterns of youth participation in Europe?”
- “In what way is youth political participation unique?”
- “Why is youth political participation important?”

Research Question 2: “What factors are causing European youth to disconnect from politics?”

- “How do young European citizens and the system perceive their relationship today?”
- “What are the main challenges youth face in engaging with politics?”
- “What factors encourage/discourage youth from political participation?”

Research Question 3: “In what way might political participation of youth change in the future?”

- “How do young Europeans envision their ideal relationship with politics in the future?”
- “Which developments and trends may impact political participation going forward?”

Research Question 4: “What kind of design can improve youth’s relationship with politics in the future?”

1.6 Stakeholders

The key stakeholders involved in this project are **young Europeans, political institutions, policy-makers and NGOs.**

Young people are the **primary group being stud**

ied, as they are the focus of this research. **Political institutions**, including national governments, European bodies, municipalities, electoral bodies, and political parties, are **secondary stakeholders**, as their systems and structures impact the opportunities available for youth engagement. Policy-makers in charge of electoral reform, will be crucial to the implementation of my proposed solution. **NGOs** are recognized as an important bridge between the two in this thesis and used as the **third contributor.**

1.7 Target Group

This thesis focuses on **individuals aged between 18 and 30**—including those aged 30, **that live in Europe.** This group represents a critical age range for forming political identities and attitudes and offers many research and design opportunities. Within this group, sub-categories such as **first-time voters, diaspora youth**, and particularly **political-ly disengaged individuals** will also be explored. Understanding the diversity within youth participation is important for designing interventions that cater to different experiences and motivations for engaging—or not engaging—with politics.

Who constitutes as youth?

Young people are increasingly being recognized as a distinct group of individuals, attracting research across various fields (Furlong, 2013).

While the **United Nations** (2025) defines youth as **15 to 24 years**, the age range varies regionally and culturally. **The World Health Organization** separates youth into **adolescents (10-19), youth (15-24),** and **young people (10-24).** The **European Union** defines youth as **13-30 years** (Eurostat, 2025).

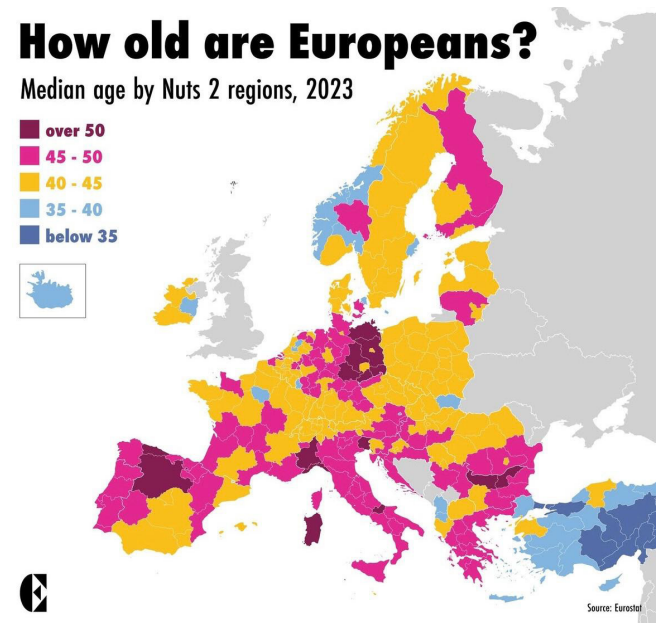
As this thesis explores the European context, it’s essential to look into different countries’ definitions. Bojana Perović (2016) identified **six distinct models:**

- **Predominant model:** 14 to 30 years (23 countries, including Slovenia)
- **Shortened model:** 13 to 25 years (5 countries)

- **Start-earlier-and-end-later model:** 12 to 30 years (5 countries)
- **Prolonged model:** 12 to 35 years (5 countries)
- **Youth model including childhood:** 3 to 30 years (3 countries)
- **Merged children and youth model:** 0 to 30 years (6 countries, including the Netherlands)

These varying definitions highlight the complexity in studying youth political participation, emphasizing the need for a nuanced approach in this thesis.

Figure 5: Median Age of European countries (European Magazine, 2023)



1.8 Thesis Scope

This thesis focuses on youth political participation within the **context of Europe** , specifically examining the political engagement of young citizens in two representative countries: **Slovenia** and the **Netherlands**.

Why Europe as a context?

Europe represents a **diverse political landscape** with a wide range of *political systems, cultures, and social dynamics*. Despite its heterogeneity, youth engagement across the **continent faces similar challenges**, such as declining voter turnout and a shift towards alternative forms of engagement. Understanding these shared patterns provides valuable insights into the evolving relationship between youth and political institutions in Europe.

Why Slovenia and the Netherlands?

To avoid confusion and streamline both the literature review and field research, I chose **two European countries** to represent the term “Europe” throughout the thesis: **Slovenia** and the **Netherlands**.

The selection process focused on balancing **diversity** and **comparability**. **Comparability** was ensured by selecting countries with robust national data on political participation. **Diversity** was prioritized to provide a richer, more varied perspective on youth political engagement.

Key factors in the selection included:

- *Experience with democracy* (short vs. long),
- *Geographical location* (Central Europe vs. Western Europe),
- *Historical and cultural context* (Eastern vs. Western influences),
- *Current political context*.

Additionally, **accessibility** was added to ensure project’s feasibility during field research.

Figure 5: Slovenia and the Netherlands comparability factors

	Slovenia	The Netherlands
Democracy experience	Young democracy (1991) with developing political identity, low trust and participation in institutional politics.	Old democracy (the 19th century). Long tradition of liberal governance and civic participation.
Geographic location	Central/Eastern Europe, with historical ties to both the Balkans and Central Europe.	Western Europe, centrally involved in EU and global institutions, such as NATO.
History and culture	Young national identity. Values include solidarity, education, and nature.	Established national identity. Values include individualism and pragmatism. Strong tradition of consensus.
Current political context	Parliamentary republic with high polarization. Civil society is growing.	Parliamentary constitutional monarchy. Politically fragmented, but stable. Civil society is strong.

Slovenia, a young democracy with a relatively recent transition from communism, offers valuable insights into youth engagement in a post-communist context. **The Netherlands**, with its long-established democracy and central role in European politics, provides a contrasting yet complementary perspective on youth political participation.

Together, these regions offer distinct yet relatable views on youth engagement in politics across Europe.

1.9.3 Methods

Several strategic and speculative design methods were employed in this thesis during the Double Diamond and Speculative Diamond phases. Those include *Contextual Factors from VIP Design*, the *Iceberg Model from systemic design*, *Signal Scanning* and *World Building*.

Iceberg Model

The Iceberg Model (Meadows, 2008) was used to analyse how healthcare, security, and education systems in Slovenia and the Netherlands respond to systemic crises. This **systems-thinking tool** helped uncover deeper *patterns, structures, and beliefs* behind surface events. Key analysed crises included the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2016 migration crisis, and the ongoing student housing crisis. Insights are presented in “Case Insight Boxes” throughout the thesis.

Why Iceberg Model?

The method was chosen for its ability to reveal underlying patterns and root causes behind surface-level events, offering a deeper understanding of the systemic issues influencing youth political participation.

Context Factors

Context factors as defined by Paul Hekkert’s and Matthijs van Dijk’s in *Vision in Design: A Guidebook for Innovators* (Hekkert & Dijk, 2021), are **the “building blocks of our world”**. These include personal observations, theories, laws, beliefs, and trends. They are classified into four categories: *developments, trends, states, and principles*, as outlined in *Designing for Society* (Tromp & Hekkert, 2019).

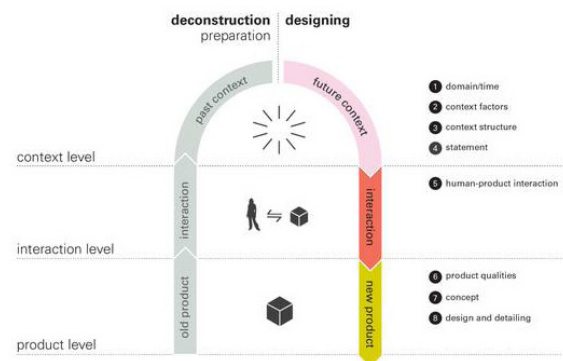
Types of Context Factors

- **Development:** A biological, political, technological, or demographic change in the world.
- **Trend:** A shared, evolving experience, belief, or behaviour with varying intensity.
- **State:** A static context description with no expected change in the near future.
- **Principle:** Laws (e.g. physics) that govern human life and are used to understand phenomena.

Why Context Factors?

This thesis explores youth political engagement and aims to design a speculative intervention. Due to the complexity of elections, **context factors offered a flexible yet structured approach** to analysing diverse influences on young Europeans to not vote. These factors helped simplify a broad topic, focusing the research on key elements

Figure 7: Context factors (VIP method)



Signal Scanning (DESTEP Framework)

During the scenario divergence phase, I used Signal Scanning to identify observable indicators (signals of change) that points to potential future developments.

Signals are categorized as:

- **Weak signals:** Early-stage developments (e.g., AI-driven political campaigns in pilot phases).
- **Strong signals:** Clearly visible, widespread trends (e.g., youth-led climate activism).
- **Wild cards:** Low-probability, high-impact events (e.g., the collapse of social media platforms).

Worldbuilding

The second speculative method used in the thesis was **Worldbuilding**, a technique commonly employed in speculative design to create immersive future contexts. Worldbuilding **constructs a world in which that future is lived**—politically, socially, technologically, and culturally (Hamilton, 2009). This method helps designers imagine new systems, values, and ways of life, and is usually adapted to individual projects.

Worldbuilding consisted of the following steps:

- **Signal of change** (e.g., youth political disengagement perceived as apathy)
- **Posing “What if” questions** (e.g., What if privacy became illegal in future politics?)
- **Creating tensions** (e.g., Radical transparency vs. Increased mistrust in electoral outcome)
- **Prototype** (e.g., The Crystal Ball)

1.10 Design Relevance

The relevance of this work lies in the **potential of strategic and speculative design to address a critical gap in political participation.**

The exploratory and holistic nature of **strategic design** makes it well-suited for tackling political systems, which are often rigid and slow to evolve. Additionally, strategic design’s ability to zoom out from individual users and consider the broader ecosystem surrounding a problem allows it to bridge multiple disciplines (Reilly, 2018). This is especially important when addressing complex domains like political participation, where the conventional view often places the responsibility for change solely on young citizens, ignoring the roles of other stakeholders.

Speculative design, on the other hand, offers limitless ideation, unconstrained by legal, logistical, or real-life limitations.

1.11 Project Relevance

This project is relevant both in the **context of design and political science.** By exploring how speculative design can address youth disengagement, it offers **an innovative perspective on improving democratic processes.** The findings could be applicable to governments, political institutions, and NGOs seeking to enhance youth engagement and address the growing crisis of political apathy among young people.

1.12 Limitations

This thesis faces several limitations, including **personal, methodological, and resource constraints:**

- **Personal bias:** As a young Slovenian, I am designing for a demographic I belong to, which provides valuable insight but may introduce subjectivity. To mitigate this, I draw on diverse data sources and expert input.
- **No official client:** Without an external client, the project lacks validation and implementation support, but avoids political or organizational biases that could influence the direction of the design.
- **Methodological constraints:** This research uses existing data, expert interviews, and speculative design methods rather than direct policy implementation or real-world testing, limiting the ability to measure the impact of the proposed solutions.
- **Temporal and resource constraints:** Given the scope of a master’s thesis, the research and design process is time-limited, and resource constraints prevent large-scale empirical studies or long-term testing of solutions.

1.13 Conclusion

Key Insights

- **Problem statement:** Youth political disengagement is rising across Europe, as evidenced by declining voter turnout and growing alternative activism. This disconnect between youth and political institutions threatens democratic processes.
- **Thesis domain:** Youth political participation, due to personal relevance, potential for intervention, and significance in the context of current global events.
- **Political participation definition:** “Any form of civic activity aimed at influencing political decision-making.”
- **Scope:** Europe, represented by Slovenia and the Netherlands, chosen for their diversity and comparability.
- **Thesis aim:** The goal is to explore youth political participation, identify barriers to engagement, and propose a speculative design intervention to bridge the gap between youth and political systems.
- **Target group:** Individuals aged between 18 and 30, that live in Europe. Within this group, sub-categories such as first-time voters, diaspora youth, and politically disengaged individuals were explored.
- **Relevance:** Political participation is crucial in today's socio-political landscape, particularly with rising youth activism and concerns over generational voter turnout gaps.
- **Methodology:** The thesis combines strategic and speculative design methods, focusing on understanding systemic issues, exploring alternative futures, and offering design interventions to foster greater youth involvement in politics.
- **Limitations:** The research is influenced by personal bias, lacks an external client, and is constrained by time and resources, limiting large-scale testing and real-world implementation.

Next Steps

In the next chapter, “*Youth political participation research*”, I will explore different aspects of youth

political participation. **Specifically, I will explore:**

- Most recent participation patterns across Europe
- Youth's unique political identity
- Importance of youth political participation

02

Youth Political Participa- tion Research

About

This chapter explores the most recent patterns of youth political participation in Europe and its unique characteristics. It also addresses the changing political identity of European youth and why it is important for youth to be included in politics. The chapter concludes with narrowing of the domain of youth political participation to election context.

Research Focus

Research Questions

The following research questions and sub-questions will be addressed:

Question 1: “How does the relationship between young European citizens and politics look like today?”

- “What are the most recent patterns of youth participation in Europe?”
- “In what way is youth political participation unique?”
- “What are the main characteristics of today’s youth political identity?”
- “Why is it crucial for youth to reconnect with politics?”

2.1 Youth Participation Patterns Across Europe

2.1.1 Electoral Trends

To understand youth engagement better, it’s essential to analyse **current trends in their political behaviour across Europe**.

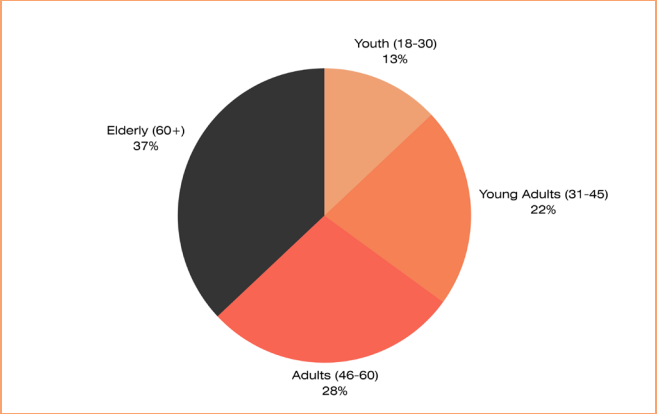
Firstly, several studies show a **persistently low youth turnout amongst European youth in national elections** (Deželan, 2015; López Pintor, 2002; Schmitt et al., 2015; Wattenberg, 2002). According to the European Election Studies (Schmitt et al., 2015), **nearly 60% of individuals aged 16-24 abstained from voting in 2014** (see Figure 8). Turnout for those aged 25-29 is slightly better (44%).

Figure 8: Voter abstention % in national parliamentary and European elections in 2014 (Schmitt et al., 2015)

Age Group	National Elections (EU28)	European Elections (EU28)
16/16-24	59,1%	72,1%
25-29	44,3%	69,3%
30-39	38,2%	62,2%
40-49	32,5%	56,4%
50-64	24,1%	50,2%
65+	24,1%	47,9%
Total	33,6%	56,9%

If we look at Slovenia for instance, during the 2018 Slovenian parliamentary elections, **only 13% of all eligible voters aged 18-30 cast their vote** (Daugul, 2022). By comparison, turnout among older groups was; 22% for ages 31-45, 28% for 46-60, and 37% for those over 60 (Državna volilna komisija, 2018).

Figure 9: Voter abstention % in national parliamentary and European elections in 2014 (Schmitt et al., 2015)



It is clear the voting turnout in national elections is low, a patter that concerns many experts. Tomaž Deželan, professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences in Ljubljana, warns that while low youth turnout is concerning, **the persistent downward trend is even more alarming**. He explains: “Ten or twenty years ago, youth voted more often. The downward trend is reducing youth’s political power and influence in society” (Daugul, 2022).

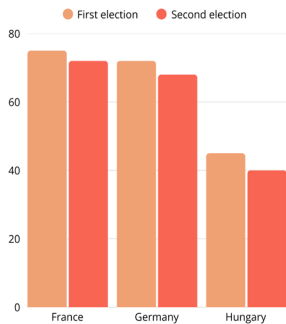
Second noticable pattern is **the voting turnout decline**. This phenomenon impacts European countries differently. The contrast is mostly visible between established and new democracies.

Old democracies like **France and Germany** have seen a recent drop in youth turnout. In the 2022 French presidential elections, 74.5% of 18-24 year-olds voted, a **2.5% decrease from previous elections**. Similarly, in the 2021 German federal elections, 71.5% of young voters participated, **4% less than in the 2017 elections** (IDEA, 2024).

In newer democracies such as **Hungary**, **youth turnout dropped by 5%** from 2014 to 2018 elections (Wikipedia, 2018). Even though the decrease is comparable with the Western Europe,

the Hungarian drop is more dangerous due to its lower baseline. This **combination of low and declining youth participation poses a particular risk for less established democracies** (Kostadinova & Power, 2007).

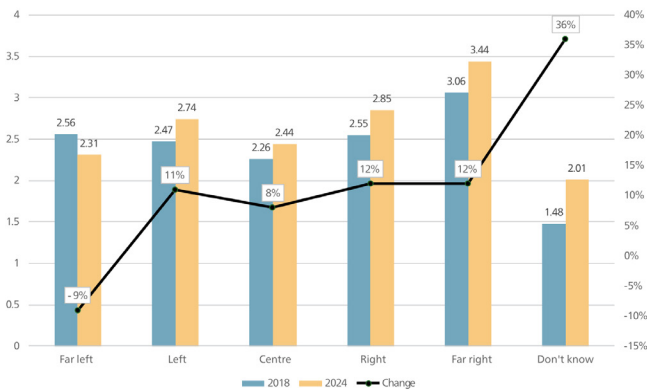
Figure 10: Youth voting turnouts in the French, German and Hungarian elections in the past decade (IDEA, 2024)



It is clear that disillusionment among European youth is widespread. While voter turnout continues to decline, **political interest has been growing recently**.

A Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung study shows growing interest in political information in Slovenian youth, influenced by global events like COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2024). Deželan explained this discrepancy: “Young Slovenians follow news and form their own opinions. However, when they disagree with government, they won’t simply vote for the opponent of Janša or Golob. They don’t give legitimacy to structures they distrust or see as the source of their problems, so they decide not to vote” (Daugul, 2022).

Figure 11: Interest in politics of young Slovenians across political spectrum (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2024)



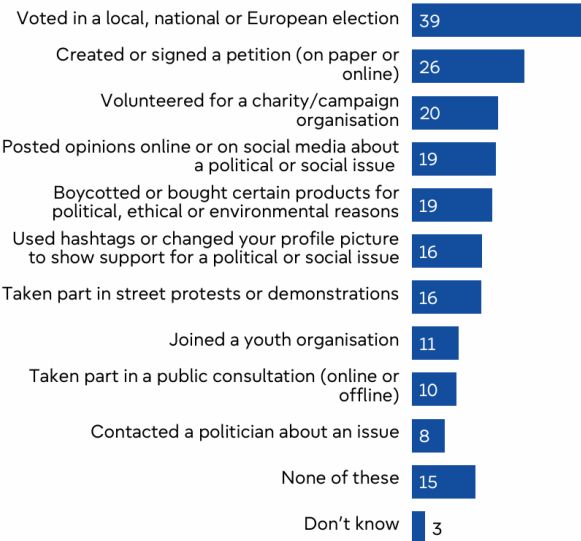
In **the Netherlands**, only 30% of youth reported interested in politics, yet **53% like to engage with topics like climate, poverty and crime** (Crone et al., 2023). The European Youth Survey 2024 also shows that **43% of youth (15–30) follow political or social issues** in the media, and 55% discuss them with friends or family (European Union, 2022).

This highlights a paradox: **while many young Europeans distance themselves from formal politics, they remain deeply engaged with specific issues**, reflecting frustration with institutional politics rather than a lack of political interest.

2.1.2 Other Trends

Besides voting, **youth show little interest in joining political parties as well** (Van Bizen et al., 2012). A 2022 European Commission study revealed that **only 8% of young Europeans joined a political party before** (European Union, 2022). Similar disinterest was noted for youth organizations, with 11% join rate in 2024 (EP, 2024).

Figure 12: Most popular means of engagement of European youth in 2024 (European Parliament, 2024)



The 2024 Youth Survey reported that 26% of young citizens engaged in **petition signing**, both online and offline. Less traditional forms of engagement are also common, with **20% expressing their political opinion online** and **19% are boycotting a brand**. Surprisingly, **only 16% of respondents said they have participated in street protests**,

making it seventh most desirable form of engagement. More traditional actions, like **contacting officials (8%)** were placed at the bottom of the list.

It's important to note that self-reported participation often overestimates actual involvement by around 10-20% (Deželan, 2022).

Despite the growing interest in alternative forms and declining voter turnout, **elections were the most desired political activity amongst European youth (39%)**, 13% ahead of petitions in the second place. While youth participation patterns are shifting, it is clear elections keep their central position.

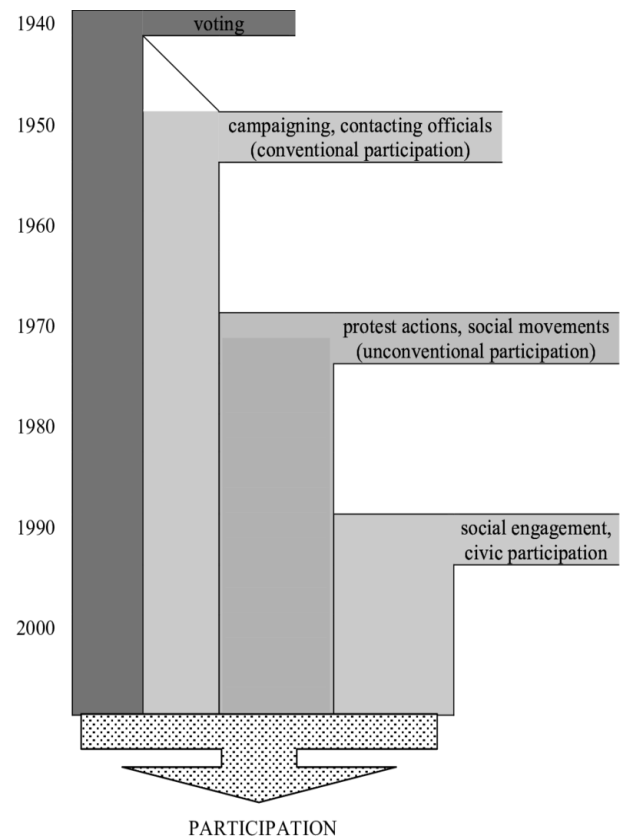
2.2 Changing Relationship with Politics

Young people have a complex relationship with politics, partly because they understand it differently than other generations. Generational replacement theory proposed by Paul Robert Abramson and Ronald F. Inglehart, supports this idea, by arguing that **each generation brings distinct values and habits to previous generations** (Abramson & Inglehart, 2009). There are **three distinct shifts** in youth's attitude towards politics, compared to other generations.

Firstly, **youth are less interested in institutional politics**—evident by the declining voter turnout, small numbers of young MPs, PMs and ministers in governments, and seldom activity in associational life (Putnam, 2000). Certain established scholars characterize this trend as **a threat to representative democracy**, suggesting youth should return to institutional politics (R. J. Dalton, 1988; Huntington, 1982; Putnam, 2000; Rose, 1980; Torcal, 2006).

Another evident shift is **the recent growth of political engagement spectrum** (Norris, 2002; Sloam, 2016). With the emergence of new types of participation, more focused on issues, engagement became diversified and became less compatible with institutional politics (Bennett, 2012).

Figure 13: The expansion of the political action repertoire (W. van Deth, 2001)



Lastly, **the line between traditional and alternative engagement is becoming increasingly blurry**, as young people don't divide the two as strictly as older generations and the system. Frustration from organized protests has therefore migrated to digital devices and youth's everyday lives (Soler-i-Martí, 2014).

Instead of thinking that political awareness amongst youth is disappearing and that democracy is in danger, a more accurate view would be that **political identity is evolving in its form and expression amongst our target group**.

2.2.1 Apathy Spectrum

Non-participation in institutional politics, does not necessarily equal **apathy**.

Youth who for example abstain from voting, do so for a variety of reasons. Some do it solely due to **lack of interest**, some feel **too inexperienced to make big decisions**, many **lack trust in institutions**, while a few may intentionally abstain as **a sign of protest** (Mycock & Tonge, 2011).

One of the most recognized works on this phenomenon, a spectrum of political abstention levels, is the **“Standby Citizens” framework** by Ekman and Amnå (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). Their framework distinguishes between **four types of youth’s political attitude based on their political interest and participation**.

The four attitudes are:

- *Active* (high interest, high participation),
- *Standby* (high interest, but lower or irregular participation),
- *Unengaged* (low interest, low participation), and
- *Disillusioned* (low interest, minimal or no participation, often tied to distrust or discontent).

Figure 14: The “Standby Citizens” Framework (Ekman & Amnå, 2012)



2.3 New “Modern Citizen”

Besides the changes in youth’s political attitude, several studies show that **a new type of citizen is emerging**, one shaped by *cause-oriented politics, individualization, transnationality, and digital media* (R. J. Dalton, 2008; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Norris, 2002).

2.3.1 Digital-First: The Networked Citizen

Unlike older generations, **young Europeans engage with politics primarily through digital platforms**, reflecting the **“born-digital”** nature of Generation Z (McKinsey & Company, 2024).

Social media, particularly Instagram and TikTok, **are the preferred political channels for youth** (Smith et al., 2009; European Parliament, 2024c). These platforms have blurred the lines between digital and physical politics, fostering a more non-hierarchical society (Galstyan, 2019). Young generations also tend to use a different **online political language**, like *memes, hashtags, and short videos*,

to raise awareness on political issues. For example, hashtags like **#BlackLivesMatter** and **#FridaysForFuture**, helped unify national movements and allowed for larger and quicker responses globally (Black Lives Matter, 2025).

Figure 15: #BlackLivesMatter Instagram post (PBS News Hour, 2016)



The digital-first engagement allows young citizens a **lower-barrier mobilization, less centralized participation, and a more responsive environment to their real-time issues**.

2.3.2 Cause-First: The Issue-Driven Citizen

Studies suggest that young people are less attached to political parties and their ideology, and **more motivated by specific causes**, like climate change, social justice and human rights (Bárta et al., 2021). According to BBC’s Worklife report, around **70% of Generation Z was involved in at least one social or political cause in 2022**—making them the most cause-driven generation yet (Carnegie, 2022).

Movements like **FFF** and **BLM** attracted significant youth support in their beginnings, mostly due to their “one-issue nature” (Wallis & Loy, 2021). Digital activism is usually a key component to all issue-driven campaigns.

2.3.3 Individualism: Self-Expressive Citizen

The rise of *autonomy, self-expression, and critical thinking* in post-industrial society has led to **a more individual approach to politics amongst youth** (R. Dalton, 2008; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005).

Experts argue that **young people today construct**

Figure 16: Environmental activists rally during the Global Climate Strike in New York (Swann, 2021)



their political identities mostly through personal choices and non-inherited structures, rather than political ideology of left vs. right (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). This results in more personalized, lifestyle-based political act, which often happen outside of formal institutions.

2.3.4 Globalisation: The Global Citizen

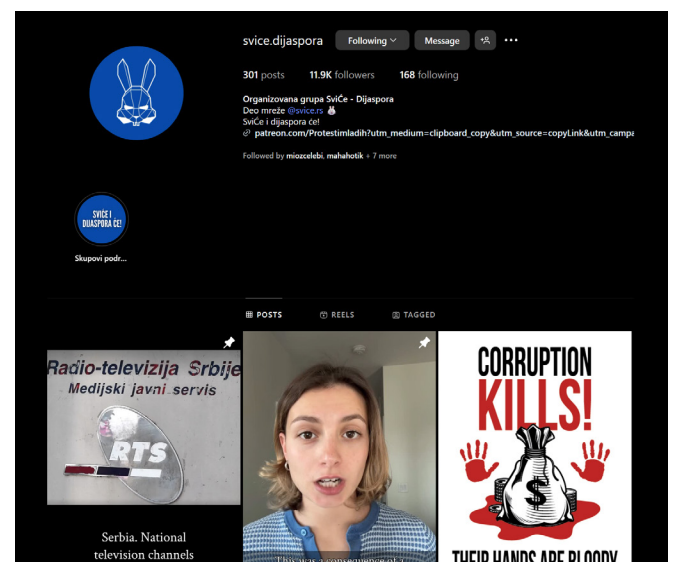
Many young Europeans identify with both their national and a more broad European, global context. Research shows that **youth increasingly embrace a cosmopolitan worldview**, emphasizing European values like human rights, equality, and solidarity as a reason (Ross, 2018).

Programmes like **Erasmus** strengthen transnational identity through cross-border experiences and multi-cultural dialogue (Cores-Bilbao et al., 2020).

A notable example of a transnational political identity is **diaspora engagement**, discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. A notable example of such is “*svice.dijaspورا*”, a Serbian digital platform that informs and mobilizes Serbians across the globe (Svice Dijaspورا Instagram, 2025). The dual identity distinguishes youth from older generations, who

are often tied to more national political frameworks.

Figure 17: *Svice.dijaspورا* platform (Svice Dijaspورا Instagram, 2025)



The changing political identity of youth is **redefining what it means to be political in the 21st century**, shifting from party politics to more expressive, individualised, value-driven and digital-dependent political participation.

2.4 Youth Participation Justification

In 2025 approximately **1.2 billion people compose the age group of 15 to 24 year olds**, which is around 16% of global population (United Nations, 2025). With younger generation drifting away from politics, a large segment of society is therefore left unrepresented in politics.

Besides the representation, youth’s political exclusion can **lower the legitimacy and equity of democratic systems**, with less external checks on decision-makers (O’Neill, 2002). Furthermore, their exclusion increases **political alienation**, a state in which youth feel disempowered, sceptical of institutions, and vulnerable to anti-democratic movements like populism (Norris, 2011).

Therefore, **youth activity is imperative for any healthy democratic system**, a perspective many scholars support. In his work, Farthing (Farthing, 2012) outlines **four key justifications** for youth participation: *democratic, developmental, instrumental, and substantive*.

2.4.1 Four Justifications

- Firstly, **the rights-based justification** argues that young people should have a say in decisions that affect them, aligning with democratic values and international agreements like the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Second, **the empowerment argument** emphasizes that political participation empowers individuals, making the less oppressed and marginalised generation in politics as such.
- Third, **the efficiency justification** implies that participation improves policy outcomes. Involving young people in decision-making can lead to better and more relevant policies. It assumes that youth have a valuable knowledge in areas that affect them in larger proportion than the rest.
- Lastly, **the developmental justification** suggests that participation helps young people grow into responsible adults by developing social and emotional skills.

Figure 18: Four justifications for youth political participation (Farthing, 2012)

Justification Type	Other Labels	Explanation
Rights-based justification	Democratic justification	Youth have a fundamental right to participate in decisions affecting their future.
Empowerment justification	Substantive justification	Youth participation empowers them into becoming less marginalized.
Efficiency justification	Instrumental justification	Youth engagement leads to better, more relevant, and efficient policies for all.
Development justification	Developmental justification	Participation helps develop youth's skills and political identity for the future.

These justifications also influence how stakeholders approach youth engagement.

Governments often focus on developmental and instrumental rationales, with youth education programmes and initiative for lowering voting age to encourage long-term participation (Checkoway, 2011). **NGOs and youth organizations favour rights-based and substantive approaches**, advocating for practices that give youth real influence through co-creation and demonstrations (Cammaerts et al., 2014).

Despite many benefits of youth involvement in politics, **some critics still oppose it**. Critics like Zukin (Zukin, 2006) argue that youth lack the experience to contribute meaningfully to politics, while Thomas suggests youth involvement is often too symbolic and serves adult agendas only (Thomas, 2007). Such critiques often overlook the evolving nature of political engagement and focus on a “one-fits-all” definitions.

2.5 Context Definition

After exploring the domain of youth political participation, I scoped the research to the **context of electoral participation**.

2.5.1 Electoral Participation

Elections refer to the formal decision-making process through which the electorate—citizens eligible to vote—selects individuals or parties to represent them in public office (Gibbins & Webb, 2025).

Electoral participation has been **the cornerstone of democracy since its origins in ancient times**, however since the 17th century, it has become the primary way of **choosing leaders in representative democracies**. Ever since they serve as a mechanism for *political accountability, participation and legitimacy* (Birch, 2011; Norris, 2004).

In representative democracy the electorate has a limited power in deciding policies. Instead, they choose **a group of officials who will represent their interests** by shaping policies (Gibbins & Webb, 2025).

2.5.2 Types of Elections

Elections vary from democracy to democracy and nation to nation; however, they can all be defined based on *voter influence, purpose, and the level of governance involved*.

Based on the **voter influence**, there are two main ways citizens elect their representatives: through **direct elections**, where citizens vote directly for candidates or parties (e.g., parliamentary or presidential elections), or **indirect elections**, where representatives get selected by intermediary bod

ies (e.g., the European Commission members).

Elections can also be categorized by the **level of governance**:

- *local* (e.g., municipal councils),
- *regional* (e.g., provincial assemblies),
- *national* (e.g., parliaments and presidents),
- *supranational* (e.g., European parliament elections).

Furthermore, elections differ by **purpose**:

- **Legislative elections** are used to elect representatives to legislative bodies, such as parliaments or assemblies.
- **Executive elections** are used for citizens to vote for the heads of executive branch, such as presidents or mayors.
- **Referendums** are less common type of elections and operate around specific issues (e.g., Brexit referendum). They are less frequent, but more impactful.
- **Party primaries** are less common in Europe, but still significant for international contexts. For instance, in the USA, they use it to elect party candidates for general elections.

Figure 19: From political participation to elections

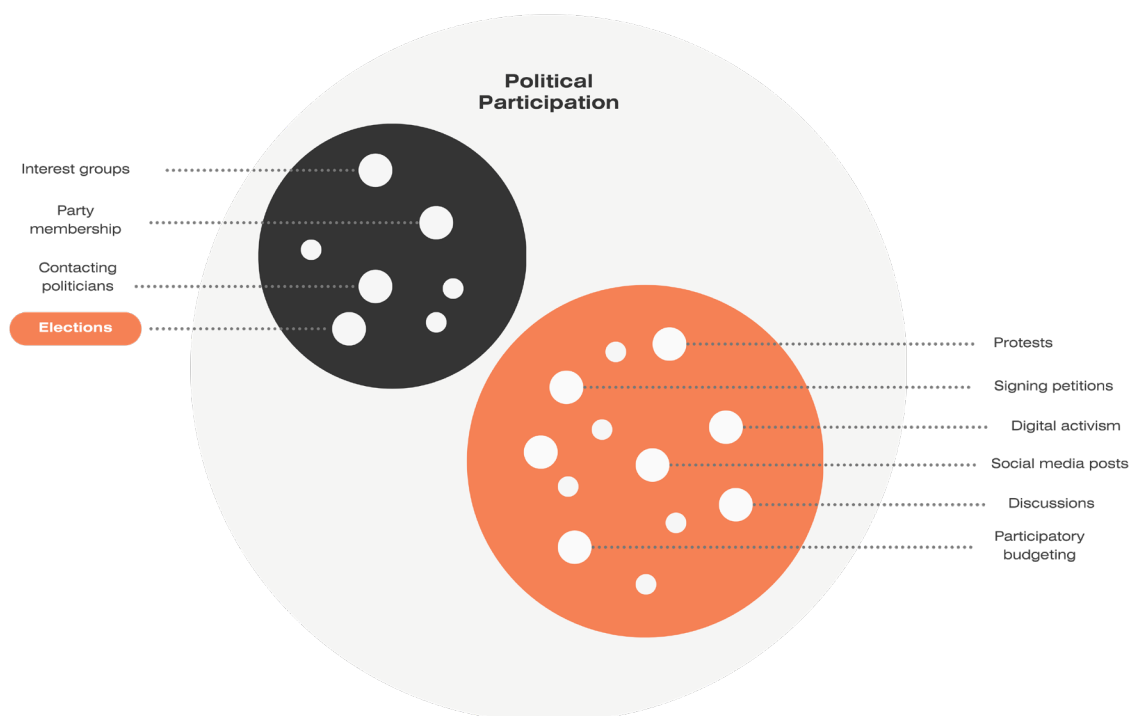
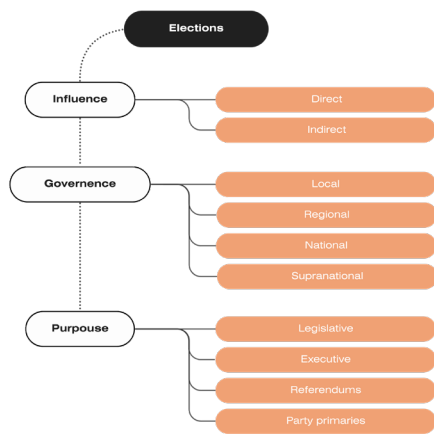


Figure 20: Types of elections



Beyond citizens simply casting their vote every four to five years, **elections also reflect the broader political, social and economic picture of the nation.**

2.5.3 Slovenian and Dutch Elections

Election in Slovenia and the Netherlands differ due to political system. To better understand and compare the two, **election ID cards** were developed for each.

Figure 21: Slovenian and Dutch election ID card

Dutch election ID card		Slovenian election ID card	
Political arrangement	Constitutional Monarchy	Political arrangement	Parliamentary Democratic Republic
Elections	The House of Representatives (4 y), Provincial Council (4 y), Municipal Council (4 y), Water Board (4 y) and European Parliament (5 y)	Elections	President of the Republic (5 y), National Assembly (4 y), European Parliament (5 y), Mayor (4 y), Municipal Councils (4 y)
Election calendar	Mar 2026: City Councils Mar 2027: Provincial Council and Water Board May 2027: Senate Mar 2028: House of Representatives May/Jun 2029: European Parliament	Election calendar	Apr 2026: National Assembly Oct 2027: Presidential May/Jun 2029: European Parliament
Electoral system	Parliamentary elections: Proportional representation (open list with preferential voting)	Electoral system	Parliamentary elections: Proportional representation (open list), Presidential elections: Majoritarian (two-round)
Parliament	Two chambers: House of Representatives (150 seats) and Senate (75 seats)	Parliament	Two chambers: National Assembly (90 seats) and National Council (40 seats)
Compulsory voting	No	Compulsory voting	No
Voter registration	Automatic	Voter registration	Automatic

2.5.4 Why Elections as the Context?

Political participation is a broad concept, and selecting a specific area of focus can be challenging. However, to advance both the research and design phases, it was **essential to define a concrete type of participation**. Elections were chosen as the context for this thesis due to four main reasons:

- **Elections remain the primary form of political engagement for youth.** Even today, as democracies face pressures and young people feel increasingly disconnected from formal politics, elections continue to be the most common av-

- enue of their political engagement Moreover, elections are still perceived as one of the most legitimate channels of political participations by Europeans (European Union, 2024).
- **Elections reflect broader systemic conditions.** State of education, security, or healthcare sectors directly influence citizens' votes. In countries where public systems fail to serve citizens adequately, elections serve as the frustration valve.
- **Elections offer a valuable basis for design intervention.** While elections remain central in democracies, their structure has changed little over time. Expecting younger generations to adapt to outdated political structures, without any modernization, is increasingly unrealistic. A more feasible approach is to redesign aspects of electoral system to better align with young people's identities, thus encouraging re-engagement. Additionally, the structured nature of elections provides a clear and well-defined framework for design exploration.
- **Elections are the most documented form of political participation.** Compared to other forms of civic engagement, elections offer extensive data, making them a rich starting point for contextual factor analysis.

2.6 Conclusion

Key Insights

- **Decline in traditional political participation:** Youth across Europe are stepping away from institutional politics, as seen in lower voter turnout, fewer young MPs and party members, and limited involvement in traditional associations.
- **Rise of alternative, issue-based participation:** Young people are increasingly engaged in non-institutional politics, driven by causes like climate change and racism, setting them apart from previous generations.
- **Blurring of political and personal life:** Political expression is merging with daily life and digital platforms, making the boundary between lifestyle and politics fluid for youth.
- **Elections remain the main channel:** Despite the rise of alternative participation, elections remain the most common form of youth engagement, though this may be skewed by being the most measured form.
- **Non-participation doesn't equal apathy:** Disengagement is not uniform. *The Standby Citizens framework* (Ekman & Amnå) distinguishes four types of political participation: active, standby, unengaged, and disillusioned.
- **Reasons for abstention:** Youth abstain from institutional politics due to disinterest, inexperience, distrust in institutions, or as a protest.
- **Youth political participation matters:** There is broad agreement that youth participation is important, although views differ on its value.
- **Transformation of youth political identity:** Youth aren't apolitical but are engaging differently through informal, issue-based, and digital means.
- **Scoping the domain:** Thesis moves from wide domain of (youth) political participation to context of (youth) electoral participation, the most structured and institutionalized form of political engagement.
- **Elections as design context:** because they are central to democracy, reveal deeper systemic issues, are in urgent need of innovation, and provide a data-rich foundation for further research.

Research Questions

In this chapter the Research Question 1 “How does the relationship between young European citizens and politics look like today?” was explored in detail.

Based on the research, **the following characteristics are visible in youth's current political participation in Europe today:** *decline in traditional political participation, rise of issue-based participation, line between politics and personal life is blurry, elections remain the main channel of expression for youth, youth's non-participation is labeled as apathy by the system, youth seeks digital alternatives for participation.*

Therefore, we can conclude that **the first research question was answered completely and adequately in this chapter.**

Next Steps

In next chapter, “**Exploring Elections as the Context**”, I will explore different aspects of elections, which are potentially causing youth to stray away from traditional politics. **Specifically, I will explore:**

- Electoral system design
- Politicians' behaviour and work
- Voting habits
- Digital media as the agent between youth and elections

03

Exploring Elections as the Context

About

This chapter examines elections as the primary system through which youth are engaging with politics. It investigates how electoral components—such as systems, cycles, and operations—shape access, experience, and trust of young voters. By analysing key elements of Slovenian and Dutch elections, this chapter identifies how design choices in the electoral process contribute to youth disengagement. These insights provide the structural foundation for personal barriers explored in the field research.

Research Focus

Research Questions

The following research questions and sub-questions will be addressed:

Question 2: “What factors contribute to the weakening relationship between young Europeans and politics?”

- “How do young European citizens perceive their relationship with politics today?”
- “What are the main challenges/strengths youth face in engaging with politics?”
- “What factors encourage/discourage youth from political participation?”

3.1 Factors Overview

In this chapter a combination of **structural**, **emotional**, **psychological**, and **societal factors** in the context of elections were explored.

These factors have been identified through the **Contextual Factors method**, which is explained in detail in the Chapter 1, Section “Methodology.”

List of Factors

Elections on Autopilot

- Electoral Systems
- Electoral Cycle
- Election Frequency
- Electoral Rules
- Voting Timing
- Forms of Voting
- Election Timeline

Diverse Voices

- First-Time Voters
- Diaspora Voters
- Voters Based on Participation Patterns

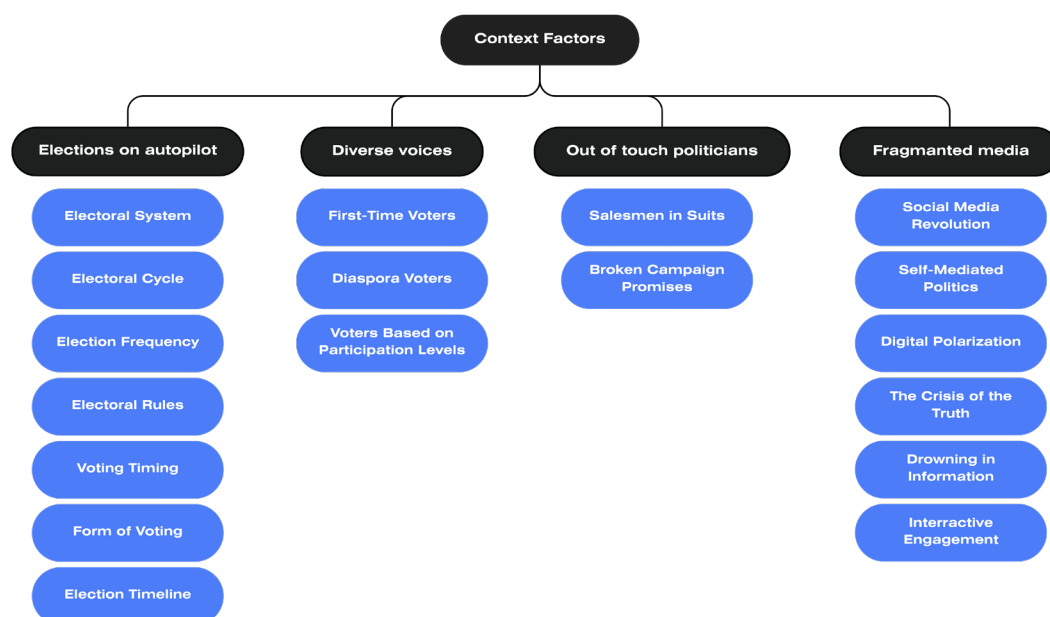
Out of Touch Politicians

- Salesmen in Suits
- Broken Campaign Promises

Fragmented Media

- Social Media Revolution
- Self-Mediated Politics
- Digital Polarization
- The Crisis of the Truth
- Drowning in Information
- Interactive Engagement

Figure 22: Context factors



3.2 Elections on Autopilot

3.2.1 Introduction

While elections are often seen as the cornerstone of democratic participation, their **design and delivery have remained largely unchanged for decades**. Their static structure fails to reflect the evolving needs, habits, and expectations of younger generations. Therefore it is crucial to examine how the design and operation of elections may be contributing to the broken relationship.

3.2.2 Electoral System

The electoral system is the structural foundation of any election, whether regional, national, or European. It determines how votes get translated into seats and how winners are determined (Britannica, 2025). While crucial to democratic functioning, these systems are quite complex and rarely change.

Broadly there are three main electoral systems:

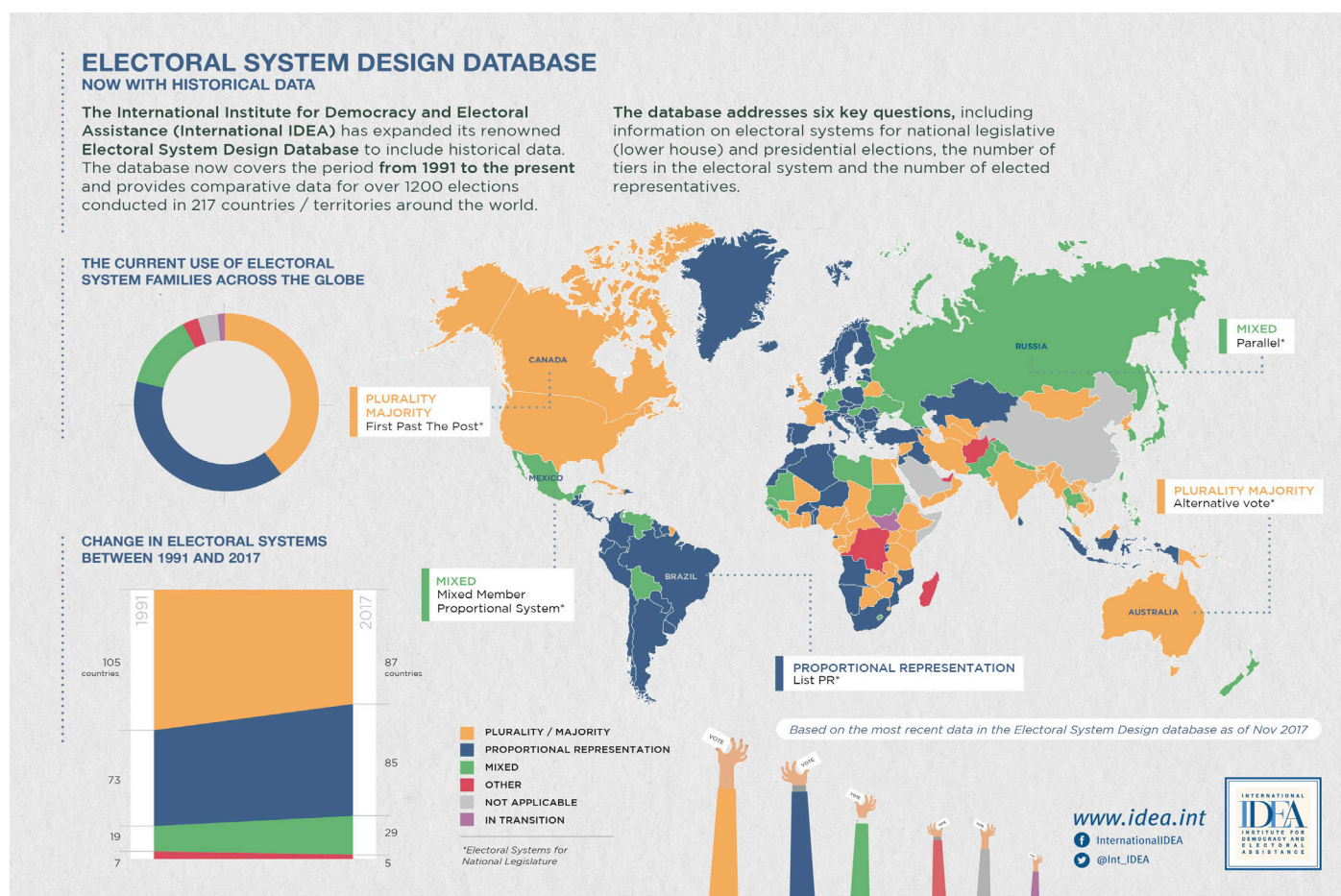
majoritarian, proportional, and mixed system.

The most common one is **the party-list system**, where voters choose their favourite from a list of candidates offered by each party (The Electoral Knowledge Network, 2025c). Both Slovenia and the Netherlands use **open lists** with visible candidate names. The Netherlands also offers a preferential vote, an option to indicate your favourite candidate (Difford, 2022; Twende Kamer, 2025).

In contrast, Slovenia's **presidential elections follow a majoritarian two round system**, where citizens vote directly for a candidate in two rounds. If there is no winner after the first round, the top two candidates proceed to the second one. This system is used in many European countries like France and Portugal (Tiedemann, 2022).

Proportional systems enable **better representation, stimulate compromise, and often produce more diverse legislatures**, whereas majoritarian systems are easier for voters to comprehend.

Figure 23: Global electoral systems (IDEA, 2025)



3.2.3 Electoral Cycle

While the electoral system defines the rules of elections, the electoral cycle outlines how those are implemented. **Elections are not a single-day event, but rather ongoing processes that unfold over time**—from planning and campaigning to voting, counting votes, and follow-up activities. This process is known as the **electoral cycle**.

Electoral system and cycle should not be confused. The system is a fixed framework that allows for elections to function, whereas the cycle is a process of rules implementation determined by the system.

The cycle is typically divided into three main phases: *pre-election*, *election*, and *post-election*, helps structure the work of all stakeholders involved in elections (The Electoral Knowledge Network, 2025c).

Given the broadness of the cycle and the fact it varies between countries, I focused on only the few main components. These include: **term length**, **voter eligibility**, **voter registration**, and **voting operations**.

Figure 24: Electoral cycle (ACE, 2025)



3.2.4 Election Frequency

Term length determines how long elected officials stay in the office, and by extension, how much time they have to fulfil campaign promises. While governments need enough time to implement change and ensure policy continuity, they are also accountable to citizens and must return to the

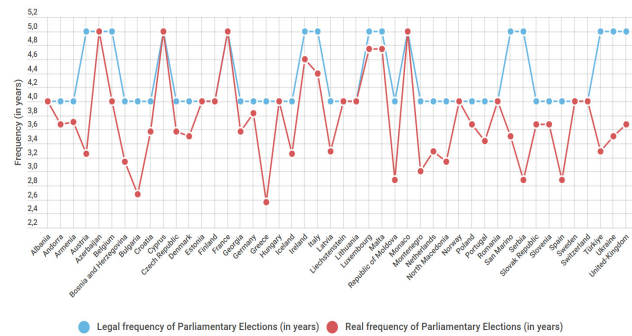
polls at regular intervals (Norris, 2014).

Election terms vary depending on the type (parliamentary vs. presidential) and level (local, regional, national, or European) of the election (Elklit & Reynolds, 2002). These terms can be either **fixed** (as in the U.S.), or **maximum duration**, where elections must be held within a set period, but can happen earlier (like in the Netherlands).

Fixed terms are more common for directly elected officials, such as mayors and presidents. They are **held on a predetermined date**, which typically repeats every four to five years. These terms reduce the risk of election timing being manipulated by the incumbent government.

In contrast, **Slovenia and the Netherlands use maximum-duration terms for parliamentary elections**. These allow for snap elections if the government dissolves before the full-term ends.

Figure 25: Average difference between two Parliamentary Elections since 1999 (ACE, 2025)



3.2.5 Electoral Rules

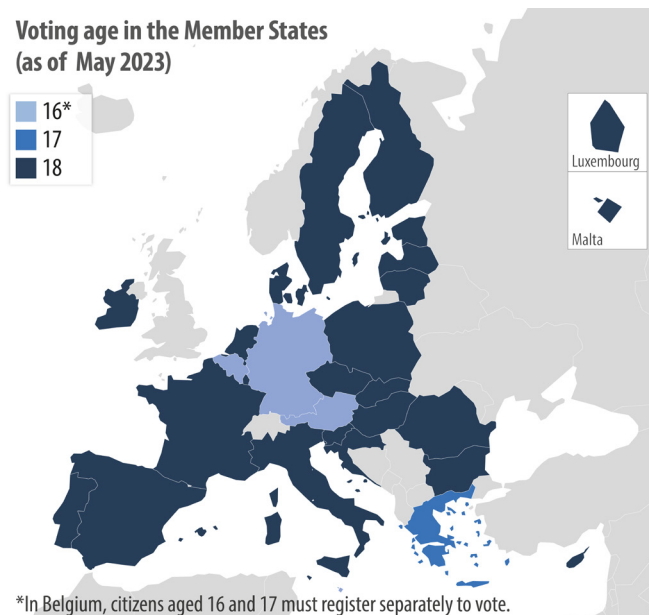
Voter Eligibility

The right to vote is a cornerstone of democratic participation, but it isn't universal. Voter eligibility, defined by age, citizenship, residency, and criminal status, can exclude large groups, especially young people (The Electoral Knowledge Network, 2025b).

Age is a primary barrier. While most European countries, including Slovenian and the Netherlands, set **the minimum voting age at 18**, some—like **Austria**—allow voting from 16. In 2020, about

19% of Dutch population couldn't vote due to age and **6%** due to citizenship status (CBS, 2020).

Figure 26: Voting age in the EU (EPRS, 2023)



Although non-citizens in majority of European countries can vote in local elections after certain year of residency (5 in the Netherlands), national voting remains highly inaccessible, alienating many **international students and mobile youth**. As more young European study and work abroad (Kalofofonos, 2024), this problem grows.

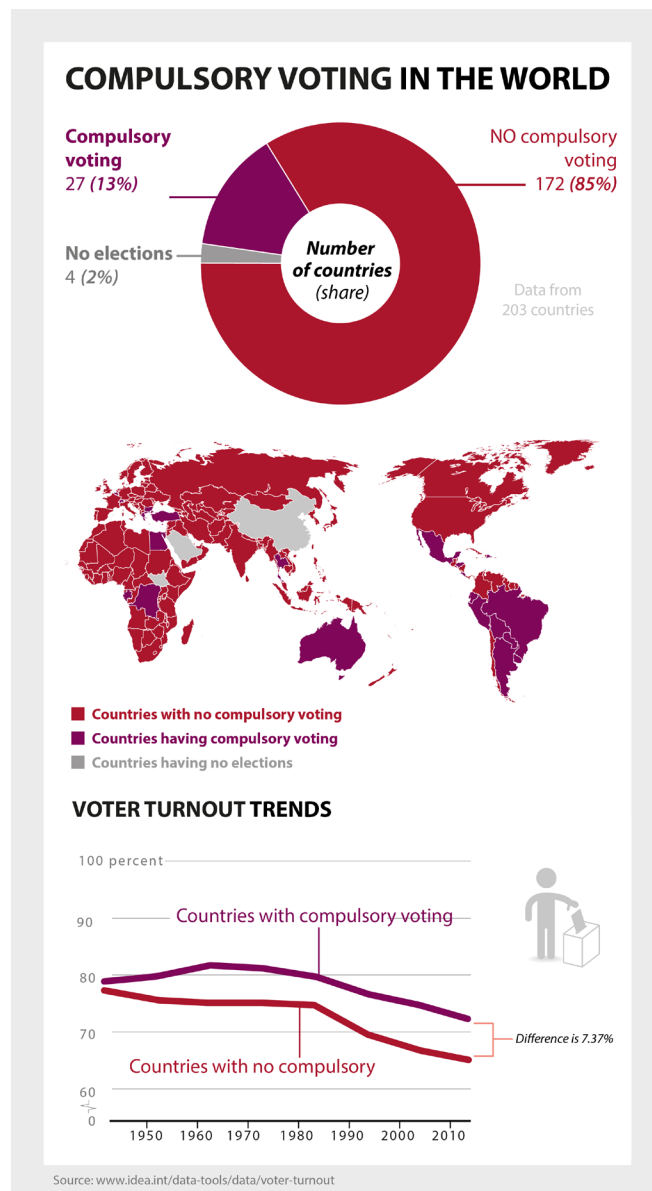
Many instead resort to voting in their home countries, but this often requires physical travelling—creating **logistical and financial barriers**. What's intended as fair representation often ends up excluding significant share of youth today.

Voter Registration

In many countries, **eligible voters need to register** before participating in elections. In some countries, where voting is considered not just a right but also a duty, it is compulsory. European countries with **compulsory voting** include Belgium, Luxembourg and Greece (Compulsory Voting|International IDEA, 2025).

Fact: Countries with compulsory voting have approximately 7% higher turnout rates than those with voluntary voting systems (IDEA, 2025).

Figure 27: Global compulsory voting (IDEA, 2023)



In voluntary voting systems, voter registration can be **automatic** (eligible residents are registered by default) or **manual**, requiring citizen to apply to vote. For first-time voters, this typically happens when they reach voting age (The Electoral Knowledge Network, 2025f).

Fact: In the Netherlands, eligible voters receive a voter card (stempas) and candidate list by mail at least two weeks ahead of election day. Stempas, along with ID, is required to vote and acts as a physical reminder (ProDemos, 2025b).

Both **Slovenia** and the **Netherlands** use **automatic registration**, reducing barriers. However, in European countries without it, youth face challenges

like a lack of registration, in-person registration without digital alternatives, and inconvenience due to temporary housing (dorms, shared apartments).

3.2.6 Voting Timing

The day and period elections are held on can significantly impact voter turnout. To encourage participation, many countries—like Germany, France, Slovenia, and the Netherlands—hold **elections on weekends** (Sundays). In contrast, countries like the U.S. hold elections midweek, more specifically on “a Tuesday next after the first Monday in November.”

Aligning electoral calendars (e.g., national and European elections) can additionally boost turnout, as seen in the increased participation during the 2019 European elections when they coincided with national ones. These elections also recorded higher number of young voters (Deželan, 2022).

3.2.7 Forms of Voting

Despite growing calls for modernization, voting in Europe remains largely **in-person**. Most citizens still vote at designated **polling stations**, such as schools, municipal halls, or libraries (Oxford Dictionary, 2025). Voters usually cast their ballot in the municipality of their permanent residence unless they arranged otherwise (European Parliament, 2024a).

In the **Netherlands**, the assigned voting location is printed on the Stempas and listed online by the Dutch Electoral Council (VNG Realisatie, 2025). In **Slovenia**, polling station information is available via the State Election Commission’s website (Državna volilna komisija, 2025).

For those unable or unwilling to vote in person, **alternatives include postal voting, proxy voting** (authorizing someone else to vote), and, in rare cases, **internet voting**. Both Slovenia and the Netherlands allow all eligible voters to vote by mail. **Dutch citizens abroad** can return their ballot from a postal voting package to The Hague or a Dutch embassy

(Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2021). **Slovenians abroad** mail their ballot paper to the electoral commission in Slovenia or submit it at a Slovenian embassy (Državna volilna komisija, 2025).

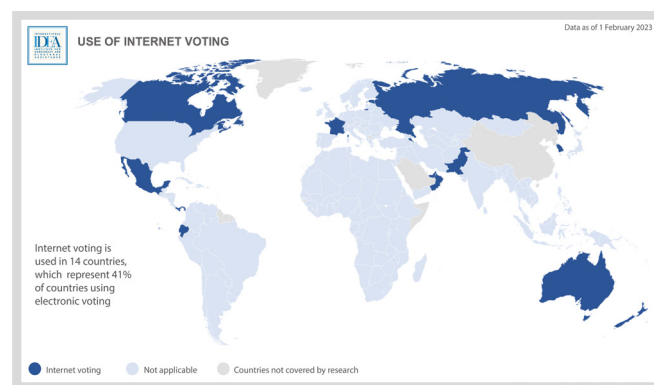
Figure 28: Polling place in Silvolde, a village in the East of the Netherlands.



The only European country that offers **online voting** in all elections is **Estonia**. Since launching in 2005, Estonia has become a leader in digital democracy, with **over half of national votes cast online by 2023** (e-Estonia, 2024). **France** uses it for out-of-country voting only.

Overall, while alternative methods exist, the voting process across **Europe still heavily relies on traditional, physical infrastructure**.

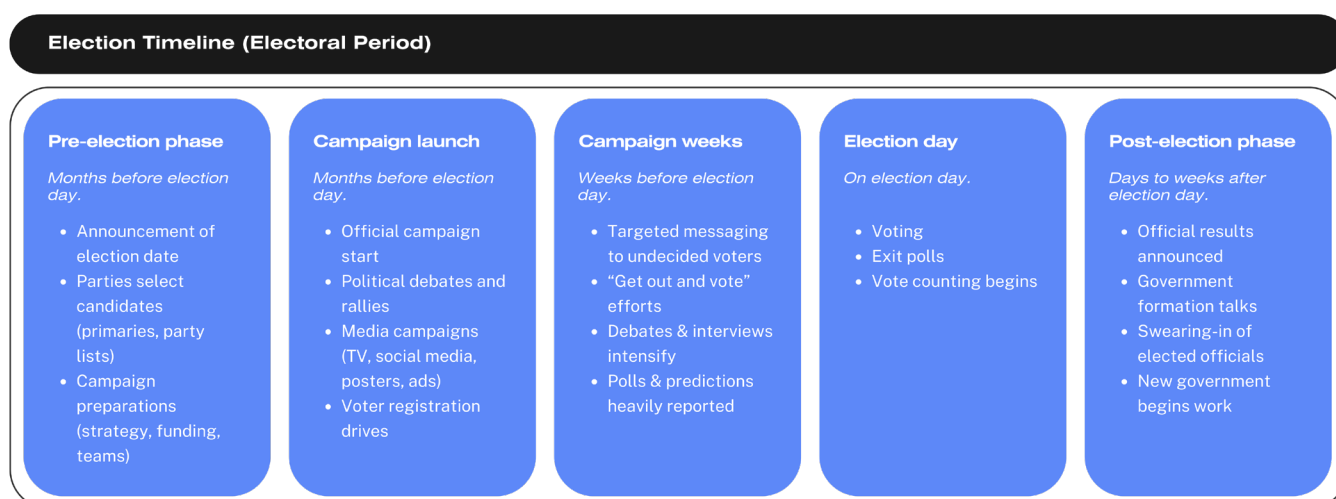
Figure 29: Internet voting around the globe (IDEA, 2023)



3.2.8 Election Timeline

Election procedures and timelines vary across European countries, with each nation following its own set of rules and practices. To illustrate the complexity, length, and segmented nature of it, a **simplified election timeline** was developed.

Figure 30: Election timeline



3.2.9 Key Insights

Elections, as they currently stand, do not adequately reflect the needs or realities of young citizens. Several structural factors contribute to this disconnect.

- **Proportional systems can be confusing for youth** due to abstract vote-to-seat logic and party list voting. **Majoritarian systems** often exclude smaller, youth-aligned parties, pushing voters toward strategic choices.
- **High electoral thresholds limit representation.** Minimum vote quotas benefit broad, established parties—often favored by older voters—leaving smaller issue-based parties out of decision making. This can make youth feel their votes don't matter.
- **Rigid election calendars don't match youth lives.** Academic or work-related commitments make it harder to vote on fixed dates, particularly weekdays.
- **Term length feels disconnected from urgency.** Long political cycles mismatch youth's demand for fast responses on urgent issues like housing and climate change.
- **Frequent elections cause voting fatigue.** Snap and early elections, especially when no real change follows, can overwhelm youth and reduce motivation to vote.
- **Youth mobility clashes with voter eligibility.** Students and young professionals abroad face

- barriers due to citizenship and residency rules, weakening ties to both home and host country politics.
- **Strict eligibility and registration exclude many.** Non-citizens, under-18s, and temporary residents often face legal or bureaucratic blocks to participation, limiting early democratic involvement.
- **Lack of digital voting alienates youth.** Most EU countries rely on in-person voting. Without digital alternatives, politics feels outdated and inaccessible to digital-native generations.
- **Elections are long, exhausting processes.** For youth used to speed and simplicity, the full election cycle—from registration to results—can feel overly complex and waste of time.

Elections, the cornerstone of democracy, have been placed on autopilot for decades. The system and its components have remained largely unchanged since their inception, making it difficult for a generation of dynamic, digitally native, and adaptability-driven youth to meaningfully engage, which is explored further in next section.

3.3 Diverse Voices

Young voters are often grouped together based on *similar age, experience levels, participation patterns, and lifestyles*. However, to understand their unique barriers, it is important to distinguish between different subgroups.

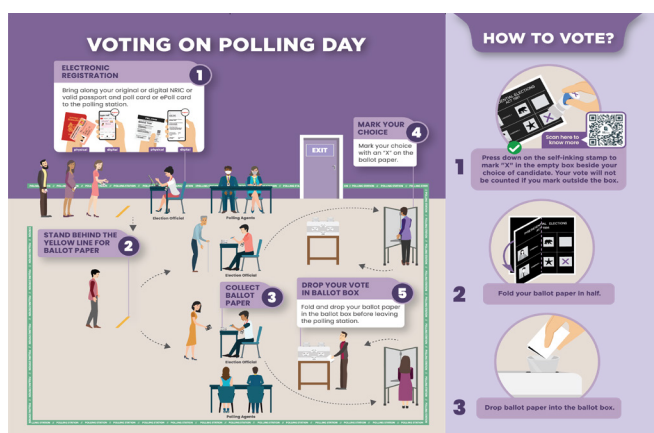
3.3.1 First-time Voters

First-time voters typically refer to individuals who have recently reached the legal age to vote and become eligible. However, the term can also include those who gained the right through citizenship or other legal status. Although this group is not exclusively composed of youth, they are usually the primary target of electoral outreach (The Electoral Knowledge Network, 2025e).

They often have limited experience with politics, which results in lower participation rates and reduced motivation to engage (The Electoral Knowledge Network, 2025e; Yosef Bhatti & Kasper M. Hansen, 2012).

For instance, in the Netherlands, a 2017 ProDemos study found that many first-time voters struggled to understand voting procedures and structures. In response, the organization created targeted educational videos to raise awareness and encourage participation (ProDemos, 2017).

Figure 31: Voting procedure infographic for first-time voters in Singapore (Elections Department Singapore, 2025)



3.3.2 Diaspora voters

Diaspora voters are citizens who live outside their home country but remain eligible to vote in its elections. **Erasmus students, young professionals**, and **international interns** make up a significant part of the group. Due to their similar lifestyle choices, they often face the same logistical barriers such as **voter registration** and **ballot submission** (Wikipedia, 2025b).

Diaspora voting can have a significant impact

in countries with large youth diaspora, such as Ukraine, Romania, and Poland.

For instance, in Romania's 2025 presidential elections, **diaspora voters made up around 10% of the total vote**—most of whom were young individuals (Krupa, 2025).

3.3.3 Voters Based on Participation Pattern

- **Infrequent young voters** vote sporadically, usually when elections involve issues they deeply care about. They are more likely to participate in referendums and regional elections that feel more personal.
- **Habitual young voters** demonstrate consistent voting behaviour, often shaped by higher levels of civic educational or family influence. In the Netherlands, for instance, youth with higher political education levels tend to vote more regularly (NL Times, 2024).
- **Strategic young voters** vote tactically, especially in proportional systems, by supporting larger parties to block those they oppose. In Slovenia's 2011 elections, 30% of mostly urban youth admitted voting for a party they didn't align with, just to prevent another from winning (Pa., 2011).
- **Abstaining young voters** choose not to vote either due to dissatisfaction, disinterest or protest. They often distrust institutions, feel disconnected from party-driven politics, and view voting as ineffective.

3.4 Lost in Participation

3.4.1 Introduction

Earlier, in the section "Election Timeline", the election process was described as it is structured by the system. However, this version reflects the logic of election officials, **not how voters experience it**.

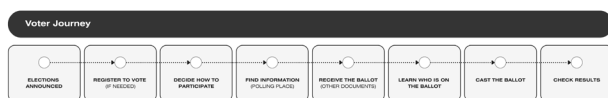
Officials often imagine the voter journey as a linear process. In reality, **it is quite fragmented and complex**, especially for young voters. Most don't begin their journey with the question "Where can I register?" but rather with "Is it even worth it?"

Therefore, to understand where and why youth disengage, it is crucial to look at the voting process from their perspective.

3.4.2 Voter Journey

The **voter journey** refers to the path a citizen follows **from becoming aware of an election to casting a vote and acknowledging the ultimate winner** (Chisnell, 2017). It involves several key stages that influence both the likelihood and quality of participation.

Figure 32: Voter journey



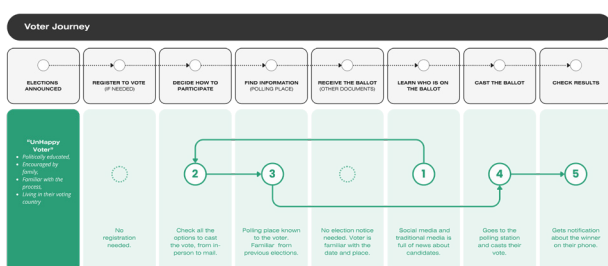
To contrast institutional perspective with voters lived experience, two examples of voter journey were developed: “happy” and “unhappy” journey.

The “Happy” Journey

An experienced young voter—politically educated, supported by family, familiar with the system, and residing in their voting country—most likely follow a smooth, straightforward process:

1. **They learn about the election and who’s on the ballot.** Information reaches them through a social media post weeks before elections.
2. **They know they will vote in-person,** as they live close to a polling station. Mail voting is also an option, but they don’t need it.
3. **They understand the voting procedure** and what to expect in the polling station.
4. **They cast their vote** without complications.
5. **They check the results** on social media and discuss them with friends.

Figure 33: The “happy” journey



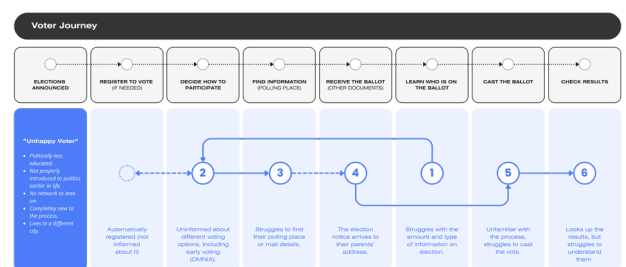
The “Unhappy” Journey

However, **most young voters** (especially *first-time voters, diaspora, and less engaged ones*) **face a more confusing and emotionally draining path**:

1. **They learn about the election quite late,** through accidental exposure on social media. Without political content in their feeds, awareness of candidates and policies is quite low.
2. **Once determined to vote, they struggle to find more information:** Do I need to register? Can I still vote by mail? What do I need?
3. **Official communications miss them.** Materials like voter guides are sent to permanent addresses, not their current residence.
4. **On election day, they arrive unsure and anxious.** Alone in the booth they wonder: Can I use my phone? Do I circle or cross the candidate? What if I mess up? Will my vote still count?
5. **They check who won, but struggle to understand the result:** What do all these seat numbers mean? Did my candidate succeed or did I waste my vote?

Their journey is logistically confusing, but also emotionally draining. Many *fear making a mistake during the process, feel disconnected from candidates, fall under peer pressure, tackle misinformation, and lack emotional support throughout.*

Figure 34: The “unhappy” journey



3.4.3 Key Insights

- **Electoral systems assume a logical, linear voter journey,** however young voters often face a more confusing, fragmented and emotionally draining reality.
- **More experienced voters benefit from current structure,** due to familiarity, while less experienced citizens are negatively impacted.

- **Less experienced** (first-time and habitual voters) **encounter unique barriers**, like unclear registration steps, seldom guidance, lack of information when needed the most, and confusing language.
- **Emotions that accompany those individuals only add to the difficulty.** Those include fear of making a mistake, uncertainty about their choice, and lack of confidence.
- **Therefore, many young individuals disengage in the early steps of the process**, before the system recognizes and fixes their absence.

3.5 Out of Touch Politicians

3.5.1 Introduction

While electoral systems shape youth participation, the behaviour of politicians plays an equally important role. Elections are not just about institutions—they are also about the people who represent them. For youth, who are still forming their political identities, how politicians communicate and respond during campaigns, can significantly influence their decisions.

In representative democracies, **politicians are expected to translate public concerns into policy** and serve as a bridge between citizens and the system (Heywood, 2013).

3.5.2 Salesmen in Suits

From Personal to Marketing

Election campaigns have evolved dramatically in recent decades. Once focused on personal, “door-to-door” communication, they are now dominated by highly branded political messages, which often resemble commercial marketing (Enli, 2017; Mancini & Swanson, 1996; Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018; Norris, 2000).

This emotionally charged, short, but simple language, also known as **propaganda**, has become a central figure of elections (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2006). Examples include campaign slogans like “Make America Great Again” and “We Can Do It.”

Figure 35: Presidential campaign of Donald Trump in 2020 (NPR, 2020)



Dutch right-wing populist parties like PVV and FvD often use emotionally charged messages in their campaigns (Cokelaere & Hartog, 2024; NOS News, 2021). For instance, PVV' 2023 campaign was built on simple, yet fear-based slogans focusing on migration and national identity. Messages resonated more with older and conservative voters, but alienated many young people who seek more pragmatic and honest conversation in politics.

Figure 36: PVV propaganda during 2024 European elections showing “real Netherlands” (Feitsma, 2024)



Youth Reaction

Youth, often less loyal to political ideologies and more driven by issues, tend to **reject branded campaigns** (Sloam & Henn, 2017).

However, with youth turnout decreasing, many politicians invest limited resources in youth-pleasing communication. Instead, they deploy **symbolic gestures to draw attention** without committing to policy change (Sloam & Henn, 2017). For example, a French politician Jordan Bardella, often posts viral non-political content on TikTok to appear relatable to youth, while avoiding policy debate entirely.

3.5.3 Broken Campaign Promises

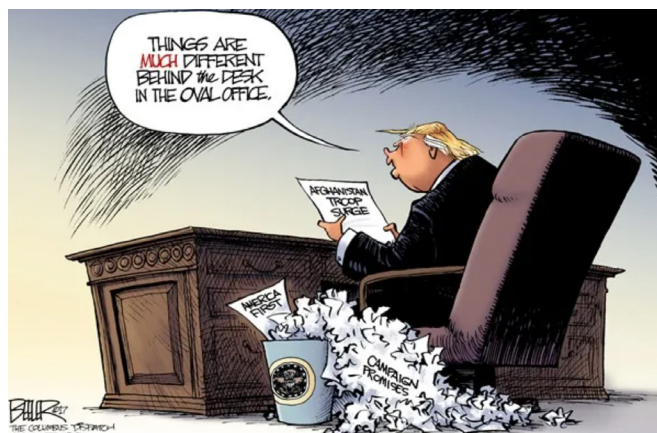
Another big factor in elections are campaign promises and whether politicians deliver on them once in office, especially those impacting young people.

The 2024 European Parliament Youth Survey identified that *rising prices/cost of living* (40%), *climate change* (33%), and *job creation* (31%) are **top three issues for young Europeans**.

Those topics are often part of political campaigns. However, the gap between campaign promises and actual policy outcomes is quite large. Even though it is difficult to measure how “broken the promises” truly are, as parliamentary records fail to link policies with specific outcomes, there are some examples. For instance, the **UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak promised he will pass the EU youth mobility scheme visa**, which would make it easier for many young British citizens to work and study in the EU. However, once in the office, he rejected it (The Guardian, 2024). Similarly, **Dutch government’s repeated failure to address the housing crisis** has left many young people frustrated, especially as promises to build affordable housing have not been met for years (NOS, 2024).

These unfulfilled promises are not isolated cases, but rather a European reality for many young voters. They feel that their governments continuously fail to deliver meaningful solutions to their issues.

Figure 37: A cartoon depicting Donald Trump failing to deliver his campaign promises (The Press Enterprise, 2017)



3.5.4 Key Insights

- **Modern campaigns prioritize spectacle over substance**, with politicians like Wilders and Bardella using emotional messaging and digital stunts, alienating youth who prefer authentic, issue-focused communication.
- **Broken campaign promises on issues like cost of living, climate, and job creation frustrate young voters**. Examples include UK Prime Minister Sunak’s rejection of the EU youth mobility scheme and the Dutch housing crisis, deepening the gap.

3.6 Fragmented Media

In the last two decades, **the digital shift has transformed how youth access political information**. Unlike previous generations relying on traditional media, today’s young Europeans have diverse online sources, creating a **fragmented, pluralistic media environment** (Chadwick, 2017).

3.6.1 Social Media Revolution

Social media and mobile technologies dominate youth media consumption. According to the latest European Parliament Youth Survey (European Parliament, 2024c), **42% of Europeans aged 16 to 30 rely mainly on social media platforms to access news about politics and social issues**.

Figure 38: Popularity of news sources in the EU (European Parliament, 2024c)

Q7 From which of these sources do you get most of your information on political and social issues? Please select up to three responses. [Multiple answers]



Even though **Facebook is the most popular channel globally** (Richard Fletcher et al., 2025), Instagram (47%), TikTok (39%) and YouTube (37%) dominate amongst European youth.

Traditional media still play a significant role, however their central position is continuing to decline, as reported in Reuters Digital News Report 2025 (Richard Fletcher et al., 2025).

3.6.2 Self-Mediated Media

Over the last decade, **the diversity of political content has significantly increased**, largely due to **social media's self-mediated nature**—eliminating the need for traditional media gatekeepers—and **the rise of user-generated content**. This has allowed youth to create and share political content in real time (UNESCO, 2018).

Self-mediated channels have pushed traditional media further into the corner. Journalism has been directly impacted in terms of timing (instant reporting), language (simplified), and format (Woolley & Howard, 2016). As a result, traditional news outlets are distributing content via platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, rather than relying on websites (Richard Fletcher et al., 2023).

Fact: In Slovenia, traditional media like RTV SLO are losing young audiences to social media and podcasts of digital creators. (Prodnik, 2025)

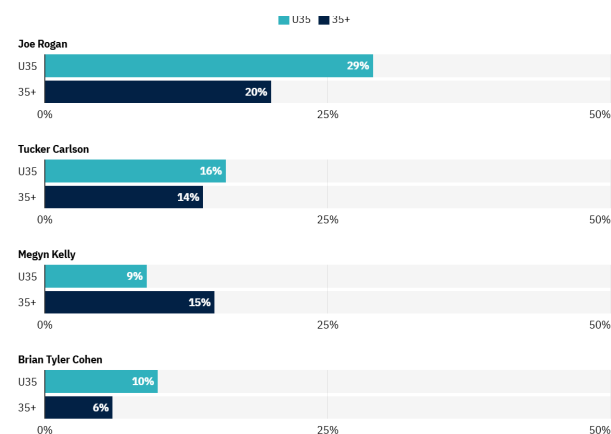
Political information is increasingly simplified into **“bite-sized” news**: short, visual heavy, and optimized for social media, helping youth understand complex political topics.

The self-mediated media empowers youth to engage directly with politics without mediator but also **blurs the line between professional journalism and self-proclaimed “political experts.”**

During the 2024 U.S. elections, both presidential candidates gave exclusive interviews to digital creators. Kamala Harris made an appearance on famous “Call Her Daddy” Podcast with Alex Cooper.

According to Reuters Digital News Study Report 2025, 29% of participants under 35 engaged with political content from digital influencers like Joe Rogan (Richard Fletcher et al., 2025).

Figure 39: Interaction with digital creators in the US in 2025 (Richard Fletcher et al., 2025)



3.6.3 Digital Polarization

While pluralism can enhance media diversity, it can also lead to negative outcomes such as **manipulative algorithms, echo chambers** and **polarization** (UNESCO, 2018).

Digital algorithms play a significant role in shaping news youth encounter. Social media platforms curate personalized experiences that reinforce existing beliefs and limit exposure to diverse viewpoints, creating **echo chambers** (Sunstein, 2017). Over time, **this can fuel political polarization**, with users defending their views, ignoring alternative information (Cinelli et al., 2021). While algorithms don't directly cause polarization, they amplify it (Hargittai, 2015).

This **polarization** is particularly present in *divisive left vs. right politics, majoritarian electoral systems, and regions with stark urban-rural divides*.

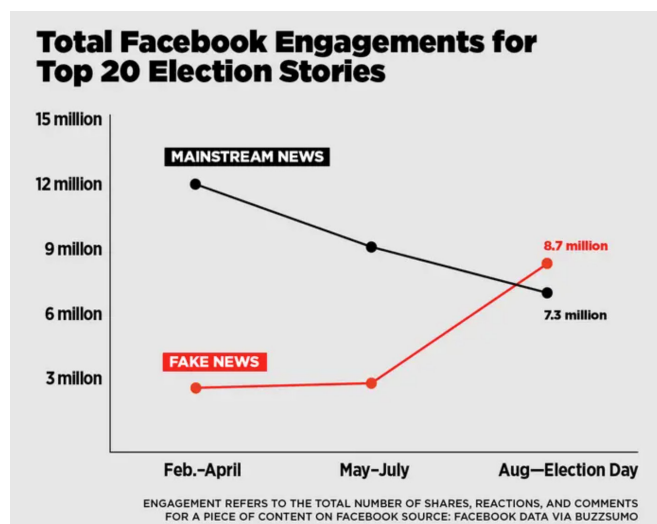
In **Slovenia**, partisan media like Nova24TV created echo chambers for right-leaning youth, spreading misinformation during the 2022 elections (Bulatović, 2022), whereas Dutch politicians like Thierry Baudet amplify polarization with anti-establishment rhetoric and conspiracy theories, as seen in the Farmer-Citizen Movement in the 2023 provincial elections (Loux, 2019).

3.6.4 The Crisis of the Truth

When polarization is high, **misinformation spreads quickly** (Cinelli et al., 2021).

The 2016 US Presidential election marked a key instance where fake news influenced the final outcome. According to BuzzFeed’s Craig Silverman, fake news outperformed mainstream media in shares, reactions and comments on Facebook. In the final three months of campaign, 20 top fake stories connected to elections generated 8.7 million reactions, compared to 7.3 million for verified stories (Silverman, 2016).

Figure 40: Fake news vs. national media news popularity ahead of 2016 US election (Silverman, 2016)



While misinformation isn’t new, **social media has intensified its impact, particularly in politics**. The European Parliament Youth Survey found that 76% of young Europeans were exposed to fake news in the week prior to the survey (European Parliament, 2024c).

3.6.5 Drowning in Information

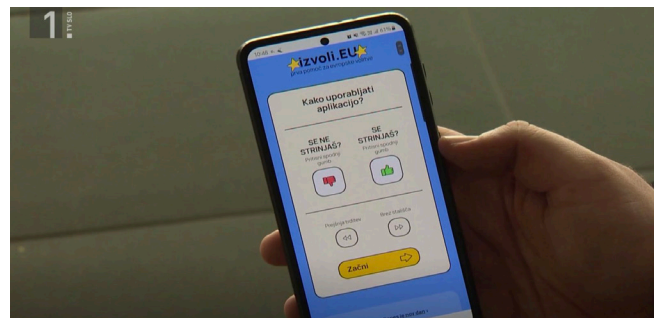
Young Europeans increasingly feel overwhelmed by the constant flow of information.

In the Netherlands, a survey found that 20% of 16 to 24 year olds **avoid news due to exhaustion**, while 58% rely on social media for updates (Elven, 205 C.E.). This “information overload” from notifications, algorithmic feeds, and conflicting viewpoints, causes **information paralysis**. The fragmented media landscape and rise of digital space, make the avoidance even harder, preventing youth from disconnecting when needed.

3.6.6 Entertaining Media

Youth engage better when political content is interactive. Tools like **Voting Advice Applications (VAAs)**, **quizzes**, **political video games**, and **personalized AI tools** help lower engaged youth to connect personal values with political options (Garzia & Marschall, 2014).

Figure 41: Slovenian VAA Izvoli.EU used during European elections (Danes Je Nov Dan, 2024)



In parallel, the success of short-form video explainers, interactive quizzes, and political satire on platforms like TikTok and YouTube reflects the shift toward **infotainment** as a legitimate form of political education (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001). These formats acknowledge youth’s low attention spans, reliance on visual storytelling and humour for processing political messages (Highfield, 2016).

Examples in Slovenia:

- **Volitvomat and Izvoli.EU:** Popular online VAAs that helps voters— especially first-time youth voters—compare their views with party positions.
- **Parlometer:** A platform that analyses parliamentary voting patterns and explains complex procedures in a simple and visual way.
- **Parlamentarna igra (Parliament Game):** Simulation games where youth take on roles of MPs to experience legislative processes.

Examples in the Netherlands:

- **StemWijzer and Kieskompas:** Widely used VAAs that support youth in connecting personal preferences with political party positions.
- **NOS op 3 interactive explainers:** Interactive, short videos breaking down complicated election topics in formats that resonate with young audiences.

3.7 Conclusion

Key Insights

This chapter explored the key contextual factors contributing to the growing gap between young Europeans and politics. These factors include both **systemic** and **personal issues**. Key insights include:

- **Election Design:** Youth feel politically disengaged due to complex electoral systems, burdensome registration processes and outdated systems that don't align with their digital lifestyles. These factors make youth feel *excluded, exhausted* and *question the value of their vote*.
- **Politicians' Disconnect:** Political campaigns often focus on emotionally charged topics, ignoring youth true concerns. Broken promises further *alienate young voters, reinforcing their belief that their issues are continuously overlooked*.
- **Youth Political Identity:** Oversimplified categorization of youth ignores their diverse political expressions, experiences, and lifestyles (e.g., first-time voters, diaspora, protest voters). Additionally, traditional electoral systems fail to align with diverse voting habits, leaving many young voters *feeling confused, overwhelmed, or fearful during the process*.
- **Media Environment:** Social media serves as the primary source of political information for youth but also fosters *confusion, distrust, and polarization* due to misinformation and algorithmic reinforcement of ideological bubbles.
- **Engagement Opportunities:** Youth engage more when politics is made interactive, personalized, and accessible, showing that they aren't rejecting politics; they are rejecting outdated, irrelevant communication methods.

Research Questions

In this chapter the Research Question 2 ***“What factors contribute to the weakening relationship between young Europeans and politics?”*** was addressed.

Even though many factors were explored and the question was addressed, I believe I need more first-hand data to fully answer the question.

Therefore we can say that the second research question **was partially answered in this chapter**.

Next Steps

While this chapter laid the groundwork for understanding what is causing youth to move away from politics, it also highlights areas that require further exploration, mostly first-hand experiences from youth and the system.

In the next chapter, ***“Field Research”***, I will explore how some of these contextual factors manifest in real-world. **Specifically, I will explore how:**

- Youth feel and perceive politics based on collected factors,
- Youth perceive politicians' behaviour and work efficiency,
- Media (social and traditional) shapes youth political behaviour,
- Political identity can be influenced by external factors like national context (Slovenia and the Netherlands), family and peers.

O4

Field Research

About

This chapter presents findings from field research with young citizens and NGOs in Slovenia and the Netherlands, exploring their perceptions of politics, key barriers to engagement, and the shifting role of civil society. It also includes a speculative design workshop conducted with youth, where participants imagined future political systems based on the insights gathered. Together, the research and workshop highlight both current frustrations and future aspirations, laying the foundation for the final design intervention.

Methodology

To gain both grounded and imaginative insight into the issue of youth political participation in Europe, this thesis used a citizen-centred qualitative research approach combining two methods: **semi-structured in-depth interviews** and a **speculative design workshop**. Each method served a distinct purpose and was targeted at different stakeholders to address both the present realities and possible futures of civic engagement.

The **semi-structured interviews** allow for a guided yet flexible conversation around pre-determined topics. This format balances structure and openness, enabling the researcher to explore consistent themes across participants while allowing space for deeper, spontaneous insights from each individual (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). In this thesis, semi-structured interviews were used **to confirm and challenge insights from the literature review** and **to gather rich, personal narratives about political engagement among youth**.

The **speculative design workshop** focused solely on imagination rather than confirmation. Rooted in speculative design methodology, this approach **enabled participants to explore future events, societal shifts, and values that might redefine political participation in 2055**, unconstrained by existing political frameworks. Rather than asking participants to justify their current actions, like in interviews, the workshop allowed them to express what they wished participation could look like, helping to surface desires, and expectations that are harder to unsurfaced with interviews.

Politicians were intentionally excluded from this phase of research to maintain neutrality and avoid reproducing existing power structures. **Together, the two methods acknowledge both the realities of the relationship today, and its transformative potential in the future.**

4.1 Interview Set-Up

4.1.1 Interview Purpose

The purpose of the interviews was to **build on the insights from the literature review** by grounding them in real-world experiences. In specific, I wanted to uncover *how young Europeans perceive politics today, what are the main challenges during the engagement, what motivates/steers them away from politics, and how civil society understands and addresses youth's political engagement*.

4.1.2 Participant Selection and Recruitment

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of youth political engagement in Europe, two main participant groups were selected: *young European citizens* and *NGOs*. Both were selected via **purposeful sampling**, a method ensuring inclusion of respondents who can provide specific, relevant and valuable insights for their respective groups (Stratton, 2024).

For the **citizen interviews**, 10 individuals aged 18-30 were selected with diversity in political engagement levels (low, medium, and high), geographic context (Slovenia and the Netherlands), and gender. The details of all participants are shown in Figure xyz.

Figure 42: Purposeful Sampling

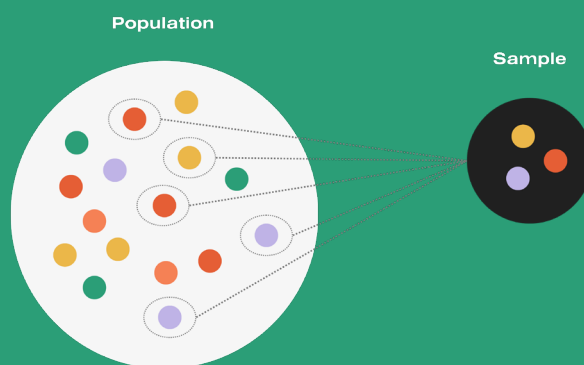


Figure 43: Citizen's data overview.

Citizen	Nationality	Age	Engagement	Gender
Citizen 1	Slovenian	26	Mid	Male
Citizen 2	Slovenian	29	Low	Female
Citizen 3	Slovenian	29	Mid	Male
Citizen 4	Slovenian	27	Mid	Male
Citizen 5	Slovenian	29	Mid	Female
Citizen 6	Dutch	24	High	Male
Citizen 7	Dutch	23	High	Male
Citizen 8	Dutch	22	Mid	Male
Citizen 9	Dutch	24	Low	Female
Citizen 10	Dutch	25	Low	Female

Recruitment was conducted via Instagram and WhatsApp platforms with the **snowball sampling technique**, where selected participants recommended additional individuals who meet the study's criteria (Parker et al., 2019). Although 21 individuals responded, data saturation was reached after ten interviews, with no significant new themes emerging.

To complement individual perspectives, **NGO representatives** were interviewed to offer a critical bridge between formal politics and grassroots participation. In total 12 organizations were approached via email, LinkedIn, and personal networks. These organizations were selected based on their expertise: *digital activism and civic engagement in Slovenia*, *civic education on democracy in the Netherlands*, and *social change advocacy in Slovenia*. Ultimately, **three NGOs** (two Slovenian and one Dutch) were interviewed.

4.1.3 Interview Execution

To guide the semi-structured interviews, a framework of thematic blocks was developed, called **an interview guide**. It differed for young citizens and NGO, as each had a different goal. Both however both progressed from general to specific topics to build trust and gradually ease participants into deeper reflection. The complete guides are available in the appendix.

Figure 44: Interview guides

Citizens	NGOs
Current relationship Definition, perception of politics.	Role of NGOs Position in the relationship.
Political participation Problems/strengths, engagement drivers, voting.	Experiences from the field Problems and strengths, youth's political identity.
Political identity Based on engagement, national context, global trends.	Future engagement Recommendations, wishes.
Future engagement Improvements, wishes, needs.	

All interviews (citizen and NGO) were conducted online via Microsoft Teams, lasted between 45 and 95 minutes, and were held in English for consistency and easier transcription. With consent, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The analysis followed a **thematic analysis approach** using the **ATLAS.ti software**.

4.1.4 Interview Limitations

Recruitment process posed several challenges. With youth, **less politically active individuals often hesitated to participate** or needed extra encouragement to do so, whereas highly engaged ones, particularly activists, were reluctant to join, due to time constraints and doubts over their real-life impact. **Some NGOs were hesitant to discuss political dynamics** in their country openly and therefore decided not to participate in my study. The reluctance likely stemmed from the sensitive nature of the topic and potential implications of sharing opinions about politics in their country.

Due to both sets of interviews being conducted online, **opportunities for spontaneous and deeper rapport were limited**. Interviews were conducted during the summer, which posed challenges for both groups. Many NGOs didn't respond or indicated they could only participate in interviews after several weeks or months. Similar situation occurred with young Europeans.

4.2 Analysis

4.2.1 Thematic Analysis

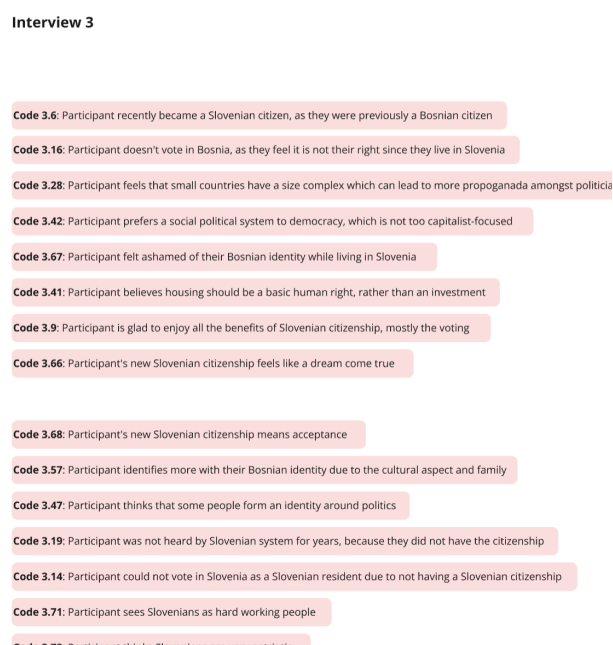
To analyse the interview data, a **thematic analysis approach** was used. It is a qualitative method that enables researchers to identify, interpret, and report patterns (themes) across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis consists of five steps: *data familiarization, initial coding, creating themes, reviewing themes, and naming themes*.

4.2.2 Process

Firstly all interviews were standardized and edited to correcting any inconsistencies and formatting issues. This was particularly necessary in the youth

interviews, where several participants sometimes switched to their native language to express emotions more accurately. The edited data was **coded inductively** in ATLAS.ti software, which allowed for codes to emerge from data, rather than follow a predetermined framework. In total, **1,071 codes were generated from 10 youth interviews**, and **178 codes from 3 NGO interviews**. In both sets, descriptive naming of the codes was used to preserve the depth and nuance of participant responses.

Figure 45: Initial coding process

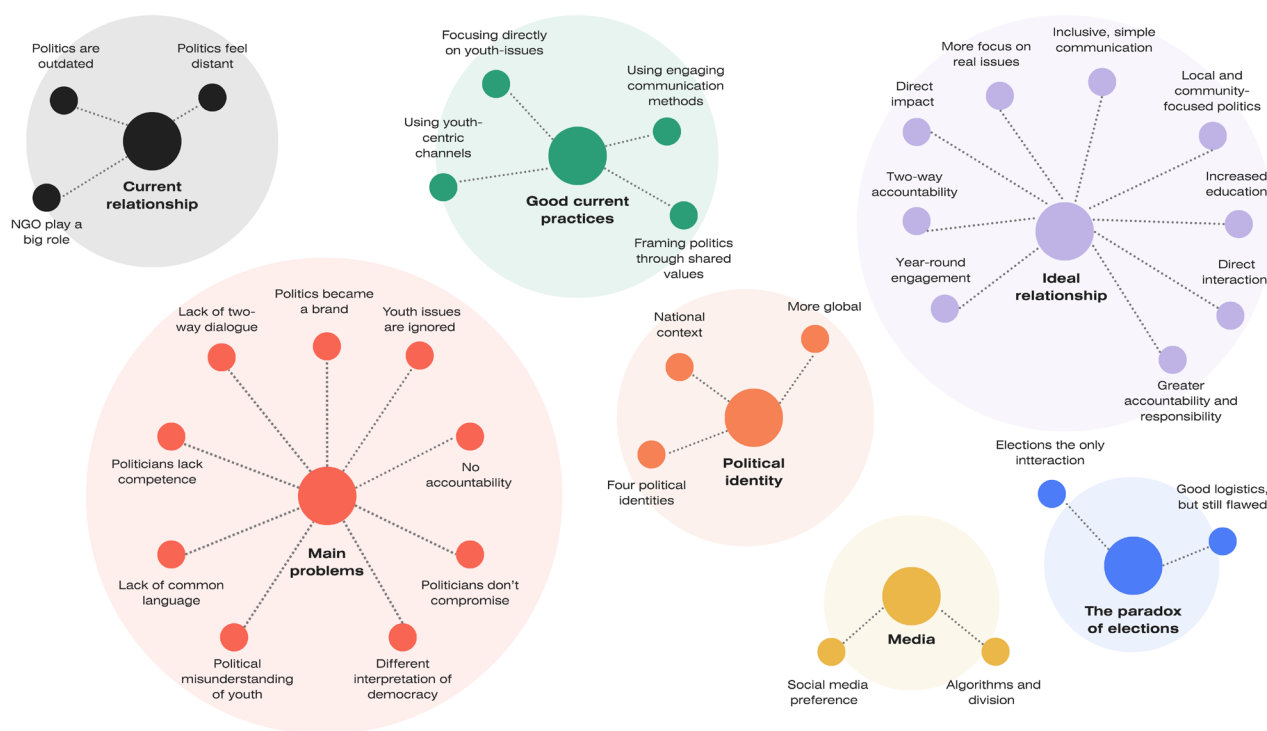


Youth and NGO interviews were coded and clustered separately to account for their different aims, however they were continuously aligned to assure clarity and data coherence.

After the initial coding, codes were reviewed and finalized, and in the next step **clustered into themes** based on underlying patterns. For instance, code *Cit 2.21 "Participant sees politics as ineffective due to overpromising and lack of realistic solutions"* and *Cit 6.3 "Participant interprets politics as a lot of talk and no action"* both hinted at lack of political accountability and were clustered together. This process was repeated with the rest of the codes.

In total **16 themes emerged from citizens' interviews** and **12 themes from NGO interviews**. Both were initially aligned with the interview guide sections and merged together for data reporting.

Figure 46: Interview themes



4.3 Findings

4.3.1 Current Relationship

Initially I explored participants feelings and opinion on current relationship between politics and youth in their respective country.

Politics feel distant, broad and abstract.

Many respondents struggled to define politics, using vague terms like *“a job of politicians”* or *“a system that runs our country.”* Some saw politics as overly broad—*“everything I discuss today is labelled political.”* For many, politics feels foreign and disconnected from daily life, with Cit-2 noting, *“Politics to me are a group of people who sit in parliament and decide my fate.”* NGOs echoed these feelings, explaining youth often don’t know politicians or how impactful their decisions can be. In contrast, more engaged youth described politics as *“a dialogue with peers, family, and friends,”* and *“a price of their morning coffee,”* showing that more local and tangible politics are, closer youth feel to it.

Politics feel outdated and resistant to change.

NGOs experience politicians being out of sync with youth expectations and reluctant to modern ideas like digital voting. As N-13 put it, *“That’s where the*

true tension lies—young minds vs. old men in suits.” Recent progress in regional Slovenian politics is a sign of potential change.

NGO importance grows with youth, shrinks with politicians. NGOs have evolved from passive observers into active agents in youth-politics relationship. As politics struggles to engage young citizens, NGOs increasingly fill the gap—*educating youth on critical topics like democracy and AI, acting as political watchdogs, consulting policymakers, and designing creative tools for political engagement.* While their importance has grown among youth, it decreased with politicians. As one NGO noted, *“We are being increasingly more ignored by politicians who are trying to avoid responsibility, which makes us even more significant for youth.”* NGOs have become the first point of political contact for many respondents.

4.3.2 Main Current Problems

Having established politics feel distant, old and flawed, participants identified **several problems** in their relationship with politics today.

No two-way dialogue. Direct conversations with politicians are rare and typically limited to

elections, as *Cit-10* explained: *"They tell me what my problems are, instead of ever asking me directly."* NGOs agreed with *N-11* saying: *"Young people crave a dialogue outside of elections without agents."*

Cit-12: "It often feels like I am "talked at" rather than "talked to."

Political language feels too complex, formal, and outdated. As *Cit-5* noted, *"I try to read the news, but sometimes I struggle to understand basic text, which makes me feel stupid."* Social media was mentioned as a better alternative due to its simplicity and relatability. NGOs often translate complex political messages into youth-relatable content on their social media to avoid confusion.

Neglect of youth issues. Young citizens feel their needs and concern, like housing, are overlooked and sidelined to satisfy stronger voting groups, like elderly. As *Cit-3* explained, *"Youth have to be persistent or very lucky to get an apartment in Slovenia, which is sad."* Youth is further frustrated when fake care is shown. NGOs agreed, noting that the lack of youth focus is eroding trust in political institutions.

Politicians lack of accountability for their campaign overpromising and under delivering afterwards. As one participant noted, *"Elections should be a check-up, of politician's performance, not a reward for lack of results,"* highlighting the need for more transparency and direct control.

Questioning politicians' experience, competence and integrity. Recent corruption scandals and self-serving behaviour make participants distrust politicians and wonder about the true impact of their vote. As *Cit-3* stated: *"The biggest flaw in the Slovenian system is that someone with a criminal record can run for president. Insane."*

Cit-6: "Politics is a money game, in which citizens loose and politicians set the rules."

Politicians lack of ability to compromise. Excessive party loyalty is perceived as one reason for lack of effective solutions. *Cit-6* explains, *"As much as I don't agree with nuclear plant plan, we need to be realistic. What can we do with the money we have*

today? Make a decision, even if it's a wrong one." Youth want concrete steps, even if imperfect.

Politics increasingly seem like as a brand. Many respondents mentioned politicians focus on emotional and trending issues, rather than real civic concerns, with cheap marketing tricks. As *Cit-10* explained, *"Campaigns during past Dutch elections used emotional immigration messages to confuse and scare voters."* Some admitted that polarization often forces them to vote strategically, casting a vote for the "lesser evil".

Misunderstanding of youth's political engagement. NGOs noted politicians often label youth as apathetic or uninformed, deflecting responsibility for their systemic failures. As *N-12* said, *"Apathy is the wrong word—it shifts blame to youth instead of politicians."* *N-13* added, *"Maybe they share memes instead of watching the news, but that doesn't mean they're uninformed."*

Different interpretation of democracy. NGOs noted a clash in how democracy is understood today. Politicians view it as individualistic—focused on personal success and optional participation—while youth see it as collective, rooted in societal well-being. As *N-12* put it, *"Youth aren't apathetic about issues—they're apathetic about the system."*

4.3.3 The Paradox of Elections

It all revolves around elections. For most participants, politics felt synonymous with elections, with little opportunity to engage outside them. This narrow window creates pressure and confusion. As *Cit-5* shared: *"I feel the pressure of making an informed decision. I get ten pamphlets per party and each has ten pages. It's too much."* NGOs echoed this, noting youth are often treated as a "one time task" rather than long-term partners.

Elections are well organized but still flawed. While many youths praised the structure and accessibility of national and European elections, some highlighted technical flaws. Participants like *Cit-3* and *Cit-5* suggested improvements such as digital voting, extended hours and more locations. *Cit-7* appreciated the multi-level accessibility, saying *"There*

are a lot of opportunities on national and regional level to engage in elections for those who want to." Still, majority felt the logistical strengths don't make up for the lack of continuous engagement.

4.3.4 Media

Youth favour social media. Most participants rely on social media—Instagram, TikTok, and X—for political information due to its simplicity, visual appeal, and relevance. Traditional media was favoured by only a few for its neutrality. Social media also emerged as a key trigger for engagement. As *Cit-4* noted, *"I remember the Water referendum was everywhere. I recall people talking about it on Facebook and I don't use it that often."* Even those preferring traditional channels admitted social media plays a strong role in triggering their engagement.

Algorithmic and divisive nature of social media. Social media's divisive and algorithm-driven nature makes communication between the two sides very hard. NGOs confirmed youth, and themselves, often struggle to find reliable and relevant information in a media landscape dominated by algorithms in hands of politicians and billionaires. Due to youth's dependency on social media for everyday life activities, political engagement is moving to uncontrolled spaces.

4.3.5 Political Identity

This section explores how young people define their political identity and what shapes it. Political identity here refers to how personal experiences, dissatisfaction, and external influences manifest in political behaviour.

Youth political identity is becoming more global. Many participants feel more connected to supranational, especially European, identity than national—often through shared values, events like Brexit, or global issues like climate change. *Cit-4* said, *"I feel the global identity through climate effects mostly,"* while *Cit-9* added, *"We probably need global governance for issues like climate change."* Even though the supranational identity was common across youth, some like *Cit-8* struggled to imagine it. For them, national identity felt more tangible,

tied to everyday concerns like tuition fees or housing, which directly shape their political engagement.

Slovenian vs. Dutch Political Identity

Differences between Slovenian and Dutch political identity was explored to understand regional nuances. Political identity was discussed through participant's self-reflection.

1. Dutch participants often described themselves as "observant," "neutral," or "cautious,". They prefer staying informed without excessive active involvement. As *Cit-10* shared: *"I try to stay informed but rarely join discussions."* *Cit-6* echoed their recent shift of activity: *"I used to be active, now I'm more of an observer."*

2. Slovenian youth often identified themselves as "critical observers" or "active when needed." *Cit-3* explained: *"When something bad happens, I activate. I always observe, but I act when needed."* Their identity blends vigilance with readiness to respond, even if not constantly active.

These differences reflect broader cultural and historical influences, which are discussed in the "Discussion" section.

Four Youth Political Identities

The analysis of interviews revealed four distinct political identity types among respondents. Due to a high variety of engagement levels amongst young participants different identities were visible in connection to interest and political disappointment.

1. Disengaged and Uninterested (*Cit-2*, *Cit-10*)

Participants with lowest levels of interest, engagement, and knowledge reported no intention of becoming more politically involved, citing a lack of personal relevance or benefit. *Cit-2* described themselves as *"the least politically informed person I know"* and stated that politicians *"could do nothing to change that"*. Similarly, *Cit-10* expressed no motivation to stay engaged, describing politics as time-consuming and irrelevant. These participants expressed the least of disappointment by politics—not due to satisfaction, but due to disconnection.

2. Proactive and Interested (Cit-6, Cit-7, Cit-8)

Proactive and highly engaged youth reported being motivated by frustration with current system and a strong sense of civic duty. They participate in protests, discussions, and awareness-raising activities. *Cit-6* explained how debating with others helps them refine their political views, while *Cit-8* initiated political workshops in the past. Although constrained by time and resources, these participants still find space to engage in issues important to them.

3. Neutral Observers (Cit-9)

Minimally engaged participants who attend elections semi-regularly, but avoid additional political contact, reported often feeling overwhelmed and discouraged by political news. *Cit-9*, for example, votes but does not follow political news or participate outside of elections. They rarely signing petitions or attend protests, unless encouraged by others. Their lack of initiative and selective involvement distinguishes them from more proactive peers.

4. Critical Observers (Cit-1, Cit-3, Cit-4, Cit-5)

Politically aware participants engage selectively, with most of them only voting. They follow political developments, and express criticism when necessary. Unlike neutral observers, they are prepared to act when needed. For example, *Cit-3* explained how they attended a referendum recently due to its importance to them.

4.3.6 Good Practices of NGOs

Unlike formal institutions, NGOs often consist of young people themselves and therefore understand youth issues better. Both Slovenian and Dutch representatives shared most successful practices that address youth's main problems:

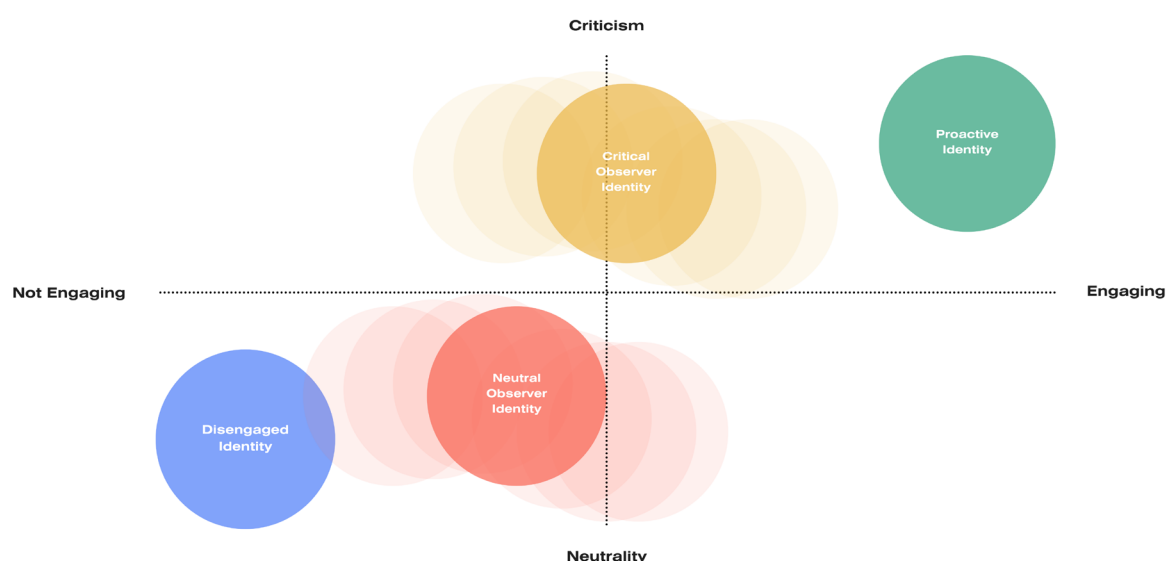
Focusing directly on youth-issues. NGOs break down broad political topics into everyday challenges relevant to young people, making engagement more practical and understandable.

Using engaging communication methods. Instead of formal messaging, NGOs use interactive tools like games and quizzes. For example, one NGO designed a simulation game on immigration; another made voting feel social, comparing it to “a Sunday brunch with friends.”

Using youth-centric channels. Rather than expecting youth to return to traditional media, NGOs meet them on platforms like Instagram and TikTok—ensuring their message is seen and heard.

Framing politics through shared values. NGOs focus on the emotional and everyday impact of policies. During Slovenia's Water Referendum for example, one NGO highlighted how everyday joys—like lake trips—could be lost, making environmental protection feel personal and urgent.

Figure 47: Four political identities



4.3.7 Engagement Drivers and Breaks

Youth's dissatisfaction with current political situation is further reinforced with internal (individual) and external (environmental) drivers.

Internal Drivers and Breaks

- **Sense of Responsibility:** Many participants feel a duty to engage to benefit their community and future generations (e.g., Cit-5).
- **National Identity:** Political engagement is also driven by youth's connection to national values (e.g., Dutch youth mentioned democracy, Slovenian youth talked about natural resources).
- **Fear of Judgment:** Participants who feel uninformed avoid engaging in political discussions or protests due to fear of being criticized (e.g., Cit-2, Cit-9).
- **Fear of Polarization:** Concerns about protests or online discussions being polarizing lead some youth to avoid them (e.g., Cit-4, Cit-3).
- **Political Interest:** Youth with low interest in politics often experience a "negative engagement loop," where lack of knowledge discourages further involvement (e.g., Cit-2). In contrast, those with interest are more likely to engage actively and step into the "positive engagement loop" (e.g., Cit-8).
- **Lack of Time/Energy:** Voting was seen as manageable, but more demanding actions like protests are deprioritized due to time constraints (e.g., Cit-5, Cit-8).

External Drivers and Breaks

- **Family and Friends:** Youth political behaviour is influenced by the political engagement or lack thereof in their close circles (e.g., Cit-2, Cit-5).
- **Media Representation:** Negative portrayals of politics in the media discourage youth participation. Social media, in particular, fosters a polarized and discouraging atmosphere (e.g., Cit-7).
- **Systems:** Dutch youth, with a stable political system, show minimal engagement beyond voting, while Slovenian youth engage more due to dissatisfaction and a sense of urgency (e.g., Cit-7, Cit-5).

- **Perceived Impact:** Youth engagement is often hindered by a lack of visible impact from politics in their daily lives. While Dutch youth report feeling disconnected from political changes, Slovenian youth, despite facing instability, also struggle with the lack of tangible effects from politics (e.g., Cit-6, Cit-4).

4.3.8 Ideal Future Relationship

When asked to imagine a future relationship with politics, youth shared visions shaped by their current frustrations, needs and hopes.

Greater accountability and responsibility. Participants emphasized the need for politicians to deliver on promises and be held accountable year-round, rather than just on election day. As Cit-9 stated: *"If you've kept your promises, then I know I'm voting for you again and the other way around in contrary case."*

Increased education of young citizens. Youth reflected on their role in improving relationship with increased education. As Cit-7 said, *"I hope we'll be better at understanding societal problems and solutions... like learning how to spot fake news."* Cit-4 stressed that participation must become a shared duty, not an exception.

Inclusive and simple communication. Participants want politics to feel more familiar and less intimidating. They called for simpler language and clearer communication to prevent confusion. As Cit-4 explained, this shift would make politics *"less reserved for the upper class"* and more welcoming for youth.

Direct interaction with politicians was a common wish. Digital platforms and tools—especially online voting—were seen as key to making participation more appealing. Cit-1 said, *"A lot more young people would vote if they could do it from the comfort of their home."*

Two-way accountability from politicians by sharing reports on progress throughout the mandate to confirm youth's vote matters. More accountability from youth by responding to politicians' effort.

Year-round engagement. Youth called for more regular and lower-threshold opportunities to engage. *Cit-9* noted, “I don’t want elections to be the only engagement opportunity.” They proposed shorter voting cycles and ongoing digital participation as potential solutions.

Direct impact. Some hoped for more direct influence in decision-making, questioning the effectiveness of today’s representative democracy. *Cit-4* advocated for a shift from system-centred to citizen-centred governance.

More focus on real issues. Youth expressed fatigue with polarized, emotionally manipulative politics. They want more policy-based discourse, especially on housing, climate, and education. *Cit-3* stressed, “We need more topical politics focused on young people.”

More local and community-focused politics, such as cities or municipalities, over national and European structures. In-person, community-rooted participation felt more appropriate and manageable to participants like *Cit-2* and *Cit-13*.

NGOs echoed many youth priorities, suggesting four core changes:

- **Concrete and relatable solutions,** not grand emotional narratives.
- **Immersive digital political experiences** to show real-world impact.
- **Less participation pressure,** more focused engagement.
- **Acceptance of youth’s political identity** and adaptation to modern youth needs.

NGOs warned that if politics doesn’t evolve, youth will simply walk away.

4.4 Discussion

4.4.1 Link to Research Findings

The findings from this research reveal several crucial insights into the current state of youth political participation in Europe.

While the literature often portrays youth engagement as minimal, the field research indicates that **youth are, in fact, more politically active than generally acknowledged.** Despite a common narrative of apathy, the **majority of participants report voting regularly,** but they are highly selective in their choices. With several people mentioning **preference for referendums and issue-based elections,** I concluded that they vote, when elections matter to them. This aligns with the 2024 Youth Survey that identifies elections as the primary channel for youth political engagement.

However, the relationship youth have with this channel is far from positive, with **many acknowledging that the political system is broken.** This leads to disengagement not because youth do not care or lack interest, but because **they feel their concerns are ignored, unaddressed, or exploited by politicians.** As Deželan (2022) pointed out, young Slovenians follow news, form their own opinions, but reject systems that are causing their issues with voting.

Many of my participants expressed frustration with empty promises and unfulfilled commitments by politicians. This aligns with my earlier research on the context factor of “branded politics,” where fake promises and propaganda were identified as central issues in contemporary political campaigns. Participants voiced strong **disappointment with overpromising during campaigns and the subsequent lack of substantial action post-election.** This systemic failure to address youth issues has pushed them further away from formal politics.

What emerged from the research was **a significant contradiction to the narrative of youth apathy.** Many participants were not disinterested in politics but were instead actively engaged with political issues through social media, petitions, and discussions, especially around topics like climate change and social justice. This finding aligns with the work of Ekman and Amnå (2012), who argue that youth are not apathetic, but are instead misunderstood by the system, that doesn’t differentiate between levels of engagement and disappointment.

In my study, even participants with mid-level political engagement reported **following global events via social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram**. Their engagement, however, is **issue-based and digital-first**. This highlights the ongoing shift towards digital, decentralized forms of political involvement that has been discussed in literature review (R. J. Dalton, 2008; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Norris, 2002).

Moreover, the findings reveal that **the voting process itself is often overwhelming for youth**. The complexity of the system—understanding candidates, their political programs, and evaluating trustworthy information—was a consistent theme among participants. This concern was also highlighted in my context research, particularly in the “Voter Journey” and “Drowning in Information” sections. The overwhelming nature of the election process can discourage less experienced voters, but **even highly engaged individuals expressed frustration with the sheer volume of information and the difficulty of making informed choices**. This suggests that while youth may be engaged, the current voting system is not adequately designed to support them.

Additionally, **youth feel largely underrepresented in the political sphere**. Few candidates address issues that resonate with young people the most, such as affordable housing, youth employment, and the rising cost of living, something that the 2024 European Parliament Youth Survey identified as **top three issues for young Europeans**. This finding echoes the “broken promises” context factor, where a lack of youth-centric policies was identified as a significant issue.

The research also found that the electoral cycle itself was a major issue. **Youth perceive the relationship with politics as too infrequent and exhausting**, with engagement often concentrated around election time. This resonates with findings from the “Electoral Cycle” context factor, where the focus on elections, without consistent engagement throughout the cycle, frustrates youth. One participant articulated this frustration, saying that politics feels “unbalanced” and tiring due to the high f

ocus on elections and no focus between them. The issue is not just the infrequency of elections, **but their intensity**. Elections have become emotionally charged events, overloaded with promises and slogans, leaving youth feeling disconnected.

Perhaps one of the most significant revelations from the field research was the emotional exploitation of youth. Many participants expressed frustration with politicians hijacking emotional issues, such as migration, for electoral gain. This aligns with the “Salesmen in Suits” context factor, which highlights the marketing-driven nature of political campaigns that exploit youth emotions rather than addressing their genuine concerns.

Interestingly, while much of the literature suggests that youth are increasingly adopting a cosmopolitan worldview—emphasizing European values like human rights and solidarity—my findings revealed a more nuanced view. While Dutch participants expressed a desire for more European-focused politics, many respondents, **particularly those from smaller countries, emphasized the need for localized solutions**. They expressed a desire for **visible, tangible change in their neighborhoods**, and felt disconnected from the broader, global focus of current political discourse. This suggests that while youth are concerned with global issues, they also seek local solutions that directly impact their daily lives, echoing calls for more regional engagement.

Finally, NGOs play a crucial role in amplifying the voices of youth. Many highlighted that they felt heard by NGOs, but not by political institutions. NGOs say that youth are informed, engaged, and not apathetic, but simply engaged differently. They argue that the **political system must adapt to meet youth where they are**—on social media, using language that resonates with them, and addressing the issues they care about. **Mostly importantly, they need to start listening and stop talking.**

4.4.2 Design Implications

In conclusion, these findings suggest several critical implications for design.

First, **political engagement tools must recognize the emotional and practical disconnect youth feel from the political system.**

Design interventions should aim to bridge this gap by creating platforms and tools that engage youth in a way that **acknowledges their frustration, respects their values, and empowers them to make informed decisions.** This includes leveraging digital platforms, simplifying the voting process, and ensuring that political engagement is ongoing, interactive, and not limited to high-stakes election moments.

Most importantly, **youth should be given a platform to voice their concerns and feel heard,** fostering a sense of belonging and trust in the democratic process. These insights directly informed the design part of this thesis.

4.5 Workshop Set-Up

4.5.1 Workshop Purpose

A speculative design workshop was organized to **explore how young people from Slovenia and the Netherlands envision future political engagement in Europe by 2055.** The workshop had two primary objectives: to test key findings from research and to explore future scenarios.

Figure 48: Workshop overview



4.5.2 Workshop Overview

The workshop, **“Imagining the Future of Political Engagement in 2055,”** took place on August 30, 2024, with **six participants** (three from Slovenia and three from the Netherlands). The session was hosted in a comfortable, informal setting, which encouraged open discussion and creative exploration. The session lasted approximately **2.5 hours**, including activities, scheduled breaks, and concluding discussions.

The workshop was structured to engage participants in speculative design activities, such as **“The Headline Story”** and **“Timeline,”** encouraging them to think critically about possible future political scenarios and their implications. These activities aimed to challenge participants’ assumptions about youth engagement in politics and explore alternative political futures.

4.5.3 Workshop Methodology

Participatory design methodology was used which “seeks to democratize the design process by engaging stakeholders as equal partners in imagining, shaping, and evaluating future systems and practices” (Stappers & Sanders, 2008).

4.6 Workshop Process

4.6.1 Participant Recruitment

Participants were selected using purposeful sampling to ensure balanced representation of **Slovenian and Dutch youth, focusing on individuals with lower levels of political engagement**. A total of five participants (two Slovenian, three Dutch) took part. Recruitment was done through Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook, with five participants confirmed out of thirteen interested. **The gender and nationality imbalance** impacted the workshop's dynamics, as discussed in the "Conclusion" section.

Figure 49: Workshop participants details

Participant	Nationality	Age	Engagement	Gender
Participant 1	Slovenian	29	Mid	Female
Participant 2	Slovenian	27	Mid	Female
Participant 3	Dutch	25	Low	Male
Participant 4	Dutch	29	Mid	Male
Participant 5	Dutch	27	Mid	Male

4.6.2 Workshop Division

The workshop was divided in **two sections**: *World Building* and *Prototyping*. However, due to various limitations (discussed in Conclusion section), the focus shifted towards **Worldbuilding part** only. The insights gained, though different from initial expectations, were valuable and shaped the final speculative design process.

4.6.3 Activities

Introduction and Icebreaker

The workshop began with an **introduction to speculative design**, explaining its methods and goals. An icebreaker, **"The Headline Story,"** encouraged participants to imagine a 2055 news headline, setting the stage for future thinking.

Worldbuilding

The "Worldbuilding" session involved **several interactive exercises** to envision Europe in 2055:

- **"News Cards"**: Participants brainstormed potential political, societal, and technological changes using news printouts.

- **"My 2055 World"**: Participants imagined plausible and implausible futures for 2055, discussing their ideas after completing the exercise.
- **"Timeline"**: A collaborative activity where participants mapped speculative events from 2024 to 2055, using insights from "News Cards" and "My 2055 World."
- **"Value Mapping"**: Participants identified and debated core values shaping the present and future, creating value pyramids for 2024 and 2055.
- **"World Bio"**: Participants synthesized their findings into a shared "World Bio," a concise digital profile of their imagined 2055 world, detailing systems like economy, resources, and healthcare. The session ended with storytelling from a first-person perspective.

Figure 50: Participants during the "My 2055 World" activity



4.7 Analysis & Discussion

In this section the outcomes of the workshop will be explained in short and presented per activity for clarity and consistency.

4.7.1 Headline Story

In this activity, participants crafted fictional 2055 headlines, primarily focused on **climate governance and technological innovation**. Many headlines reflected fears over climate change and digital security, such as “Now or Never: Deadline for Our Planet” and “Only 50 Animal Species Left!” These pessimistic responses were balanced by hopes for technological progress. The activity surfaced **key generational anxieties** regarding climate change, space exploration, and misinformation, particularly among **Dutch participants**.

Figure 51: Participants during the Icebreaker “Headline” activity



4.7.2 “My 2025 World”

Participants envisioned speculative futures for Europe in 2055. Some focused on **technological advancements**, while others imagined **localized, community-based economies**. These visions reflect the spectrum of youth hopes and concerns—some desire a return to simpler, community-focused values, while others see technology and global issues as central to

future political engagement. One participant described a world where people lived in small, self-sustaining communities, rejecting capitalist

Figure 52: “My World” activity explainer for youth

My World 2055

Objective:
To individually envision a world in 2055 considering economy, environment, technology etc.

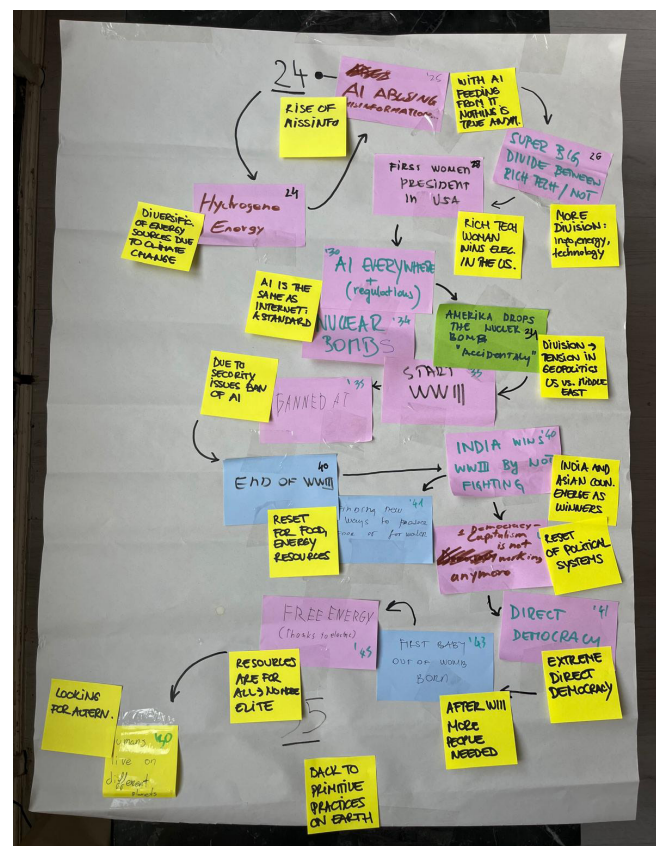
Materials:
“My World 2055” sheet, markers, pens.

- 1 Visualize the future**
Close your eyes and imagine stepping into the world of 2055. What do you see, hear, and feel?
- 2 Create your world**
Use the provided materials to draw or write about your future world.
- 3 Share and discuss**
After completing your vision, share it with your group. Discuss the common themes and unique ideas that arise.

4.7.3 “Timeline”

Using curated “News Cards,” participants co-created a **timeline of potential events from 2024 to 2055**. The cards were curated signals of change from my parallel design research. Key predictions included **escalating inequality by 2026**, the **depletion of natural resources by the mid-2030s**,

Figure 53: Timeline sheet



and a **potential third world war in the late 2030s**. These events would culminate in the emergence of a **direct democracy model** post-conflict. The timeline revealed a **deep concern for global security**, including climate change and technology, and a desire for **more participatory, accountable forms of governance**.

4.7.4 “Value Mapping”

This exercise **allowed participants to reflect on shifting values from 2024 to 2055**. For 2024, *power, time, and freedom* were deemed as dominant values, while for 2055, *survival, transparency, and long-termism* took precedence. **The shift reflects a rejection of today’s fast-paced, power-driven systems** in favor of more sustainable, collective approaches to decision-making.

This transition also highlights the generational critique of present-day values and the **desire for a more balanced and authentic future**.

Figure 54: Value Mapping sheet



4.7.5 “World Bio”

In the final activity, **participants synthesized their visions into a collective “World Bio” for 2055**. The result of the activity was a narrative of a world in first person. It emphasized climate action, **citizen empowerment**, and **decentralized, direct democracy**. Participants envisioned a world without borders, where people are united by shared values and work together in self-sustaining communities. **Technology** was seen as both an enabler and a potential threat, but the threat was

radical transparency and **collective decision making**. This vision was grounded in a desire for a **more honest, resilient future**.

Figure 55: World Bio outcome

Hello, I am world in 2055!

You may not recognize me at first glance—but I’m still you, just reshaped by the choices you made and the challenges you faced.

I was born out of urgency—**climate breakdown** left no room for denial. It forced you (the citizens) to restructure everything: *how you govern, how you live, and how you relate to each other*. Fossil fuels became relics. **Energy** now comes from diverse, clean sources. Every policy, every innovation, is filtered through the lens of **ecological survival**.

Politics? You wouldn’t call it that anymore. Power doesn’t sit in capitals or wait for election day. **Citizens like you make decisions continuously, every day**. Through **digital platforms, direct democracy became the norm**. People don’t just vote for someone, they vote with each other, shaping the world in real time.

Borders? Gone. Passports? Obsolete. I’m not divided into **nations**—I’m shared. My people are **global citizens**, united by values, not flags. You speak **one common language**, not because someone forced you to, but because **cooperation** became more powerful than patriotism. Economies no longer chase growth. They are circular and local. **Communities grow what they need**, build what they use, and exchange what they can. Independence now means mutual care, not isolation. I am technological, but cautiously so. You use **technology** to educate, to connect, to share truth. But you also watched how easily it could control you. So now, nothing is hidden. **Radical transparency rules**. Every action, every decision, every use of power is visible. It’s not perfect, but it’s honest.

So, here I am—your future. I came from your hopes and fears. The question now is: *will you make sure I become reality?*

4.8 Reflection & Limitations

The speculative design workshop yielded valuable **insights into how youth from Slovenia and the Netherlands envision the future of political engagement**. Several key conclusions emerged regarding both the process and the content of the workshop, providing a deeper understanding of youth perspectives on politics.

Struggles with abstraction and openness

Some **participants struggled with the abstract nature of speculative design**, preferring more structured and focused discussions, particularly around elections. This indicates that speculative design may need to be adjusted for **less politically engaged youth, requiring clearer guidance and more scaffolded activities for future workshops**.

Surprising alignment across national identities

Despite expectations of cultural or political differences, **Slovenian and Dutch participants showed strong agreement on values** like transparency, sustainability, and community. This highlights the increasingly **transnational nature of youth political identities**, where shared values transcend national boundaries.

Awakening to future-oriented political thinking

The **workshop successfully expanded participants' views** beyond immediate political issues to long-term concerns such as climate change, technology, and education. This **shift in perspective** was described as eye-opening, with many participants expressing **an increased interest in future-oriented political engagement**.

Figure 56: Reflection activity



4.8.1 Key Content Outcomes

- **Citizen power is central:** Youth expect ongoing civic involvement through decentralized governance and direct democracy.
- **Technology is double-edged:** Technology is

- seen as both enabler of participation and potentially increasing surveillance.
- **Climate change is a political driver:** Youth demand ecologically grounded governance systems.
- **Increased and more frequent engagement:** Participants want a more daily democracy where politics become part of everyday conversation.
- **Transparency is essential:** They envision fully open systems with accessible decision-making processes.
- **Value shifts are underway:** Today's values of power, time, and freedom are expected to shift toward survival, long-termism, and community by 2055.

4.8.2 Workshop Limitations

- **Time Constraint:** The limited duration (2.5 hours) restricted the depth of discussion. Additional sessions could have enhanced exploration.
- **Participant Limitations:** With the final number of participants changing last-minute, the diversity of insights was affected. With lower representation of Slovenian perspective the Dutch perspective often took charge in conversation.
- **Speculative Design Familiarity:** Many participants had limited prior experience with speculative design, which affected engagement in abstract activities. Future workshops may benefit from more structured activities.
- **Political Engagement and Context:** Some participants found it challenging to articulate their political engagement, and differences in political systems between countries occasionally led to misunderstandings.
- **Facilitator Bias:** As both the researcher and facilitator, my prior knowledge and interests may have influenced the workshop's outcomes, though efforts were made to minimize bias.

4.9 Conclusion

The field research, including both interviews and the speculative design workshop, has provided a wealth of insights into the current political engagement of European youth, as well as their visions for future political systems.

Key Insights

- **Youth's Disengagement is Driven by Disappointment, Not Apathy:** The interviews reveal that youth are not disengaged due to apathy but because they feel excluded and ignored by the political system. This disconnect stems from persistent disappointment with empty promises, overpromising during elections, and the failure of politicians to address issues that matter to young people. Youth still vote, but their engagement is selective and driven by frustration with the current system.
- **Digital-First and Issue-Oriented Engagement:** Both the interviews and the workshop highlighted a shift toward digital-first and issue-driven political participation. Youth want to engage in politics via issues, instead of political faces, in the future. Additionally, both groups expressed a need for more digital and adaptable platforms for participation. This indicates a need for the political system to adapt to these new forms of engagement.
- **Desire for Transparency and Decentralization:** Through both interviews and workshop exercises, youth emphasized the importance of transparency, decentralization, and citizen empowerment in future political systems. They envision a future where political decision-making is more inclusive, ongoing, and transparent, as opposed to the traditional election-focused systems that feel disconnected, hierarchical, and distant.
- **Frustration with Complex Voting Systems:** Many interview participants expressed difficulty in navigating the complexities of the voting process, highlighting the overwhelming amount of information and the struggle to detect relevant information for issues that concern them. This issue of complexity and

- information overload surfaced both in interviews and workshop activities, pointing to the need for simpler, more accessible electoral systems.
- **Youth Seeks More Frequent and Balanced Engagement:** Both interview and workshop participants expressed a desire for more engagement opportunities. Participants voiced frustration with the current unbalanced electoral cycle, speculating that voting may become more frequent in the future to ensure greater transparency and enable citizens to check up on politicians.
- **Youth's Emotions are Exploited but Not Acknowledged:** Interview participants reported feeling that their emotions are being exploited by politicians. Politicians use these emotions in campaigns but fail to address them when youth feel deeply about political issues—anger, sadness, frustration, or disappointment. The current system offers no outlet for these emotions, with voting or signing petitions feeling inadequate as expressions of political feelings.

Research Questions

Field research insights and Contextual research insights from Chapter 2 adequately address both the Research Question 2 and 3. **Therefore we can conclude that both question were answered.**

Next Steps

Building on these insights, the next step in this thesis will be to develop a speculative design intervention that responds to these key findings. The intervention will aim to:

- Address the emotional disconnect and frustration youth feel towards the political system.
- Offer a new way of political engagement that is more transparent and in line with youth's digital-first, issue-oriented preferences.
- Propose a new tool, platform, or system that will empower youth to engage meaningfully in political decision-making, with a focus on issues that matter most to them.
- Remove the apathy misconceptions.

*“The future of politics shouldn’t
be about convincing youth
to participate, but creating
systems that invite them to
engage.”*

NGO representative, 2024

05

Concepts and Specula- tive De- sign

About

This chapter narrows the focus to a defined design context by exploring future changes in political participation through speculative design. By scanning signals of change and analyzing tensions between them, three distinct future worlds were created. Ultimately, one world was chosen as the most suitable context, leading to the development of “Civic Mirror,” a new channel for political participation designed to address the identified tensions.

Research Focus

Research Questions

The following research question will be addressed:
“What kind of design can improve youth’s relationship with politics in the future?”

5.1 Restructuring Context

This research reveals that the issue is not youth rejecting institutional politics, but more reasons why they are stepping away. Their political identities—shaped by new behaviours, values, and expectations—don’t align with the outdated structures of institutional politics anymore, especially elections. These structures are composed of “broken” components: performative politicians, exhausting electoral calendars, and rigid national systems that fail to resonate with **digitally native and issue-driven generations**.

These elements don’t operate in isolation; they form a chain reaction that amplifies youth’s existing disappointment, distrust, and anxiety. One of the most significant insights from this research is how youth disappointment is framed as “apathy”. My friends Marko and Jaka hinted at this early on, expressing how their disengagement was labelled as a “privilege” or “lack of care.” Similarly, interview participants highlighted how the system often labels them as apathic, using it as a scapegoat for its own shortcomings. It is no surprise, politicians’ attempt to address this “lack of care” typically fail, because they treat it as a flaw that needs fixing, rather than a signal—or even an opportunity. Insights from the Silent Citizen framework, EU surveys, interviews, and workshop converge on one key finding: European youth are not apathetic but misread as such by systems too broken to accommodate new forms of political identity and expression. In a sense, youth’s perceived apathy has become a mirror for the current shortcomings of the political system.

This leads to a crucial question: **What if, instead of attempting to eliminate youth apathy, political systems reframed it as a valuable political stance in the future?**

5.1.1 New Target Group

The original target group for this thesis, **European youth**, turned out to be much more heterogeneous than initially expected. Research revealed significant variation in age, habits, values, beliefs, and **methods of political engagement**. The latter proved to be the central focus of the majority of my findings. As a result, **I decided to narrow the scope to focus specifically on the group often labelled as apathetic youth**. However, it’s crucial to note that these individuals should not be treated as completely disengaged; rather, a more nuanced understanding of their engagement is needed.

Therefore, the new target group is defined as **the perceived apathetic European youth**.

This group includes:

- **Protest voters:** Youth who attend elections but deliberately cast invalid votes or abstain as a form of political statement.
- **Critical non-voters:** Youth who consciously skip elections out of frustration with candidates, institutions, or the system as a whole.
- **Alternative participants:** Youth who express political engagement through other channels—such as activism, art, digital platforms, climate movements, or community organizing—rather than through traditional forms like party politics or voting.

Despite being labelled as apathetic, these young people often demonstrate high levels of interest, awareness, emotional investment, and **critical reflection on political matters**.

5.1.2 Definition of Apathy

To address the perceived apathy among youth, it is important to first **understand the true apathy meaning**. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025), apathy is *“a behaviour that shows no interest or energy, and indicates unwillingness to take action, especially over something important.”* In the political context, apathy refers to *“a lack of interest or engagement in political processes, which can hinder the development of democratic societies”* (Froiland, 2021), or simply *“lack of motivation to engage with politics.”*

Additionally, it is crucial to distinguish between “apathy” and “abstention.”

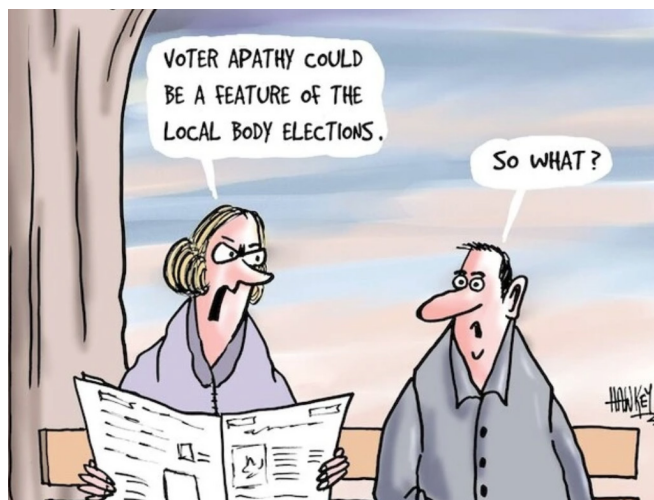
- **Apathy** refers to a lack of interest, enthusiasm, or concern for something—in this case, politics. In terms of political participation, apathy means that an individual does not care enough about politics to engage in any way, such as voting, discussing political matters, or following current events.
- **Abstention**, on the other hand, refers specifically to the act of deliberately choosing not to vote in an election. Abstention can be a conscious decision, driven by factors like frustration with candidates or political systems, or because the individual believes their vote will not make a difference. Abstention may occur even if someone is politically aware or active but feels that voting is not a meaningful or effective form of participation.

Based on this distinction, it is clear that politicians often perceive youth as apathetic due to their abstention in political activities like elections. However, **abstention can actually reflect a high level of political awareness and motivation**, standing in stark contrast to true apathy.

5.1.3 Apathy Paradox

The paradox of apathy plays out in youth political engagement as **an invisible journey**, one where a young European citizen is moving, feeling, reacting—but **the system interprets their behaviour as stillness or indifference**.

Figure 57: Apathy cartoon (Hawkey, 2002)



The following “user journey” shows how **perceived apathy is often a series of rational steps**, actions, or emotional responses that don’t fit within the traditional political framework—especially elections.

Stage 1: Observation of politics

- **Trigger for abstention:** Exposure to scandals, news about failed policies etc.
- **Thoughts of youth:** *“Something feels wrong.”*
- **Feelings:** Initially hope, later frustration and disappointment.
- **Actions:** Citizen discusses scandals with friends, shares a story about it on social media
- **System interpretation:** *“They share stories, but don’t support us when it counts.”*

Stage 2: Evaluation & meaning making

- **Trigger:** Upcoming elections, seeing politicians campaigning, voting ads.
- **Thoughts:** *“Why care if they never deliver?”, “None of them speak to me,” or “They only fight.”*
- **Feelings:** Cynicism, emotional fatigue, distrust.
- **Actions:** Voter debates campaign with peers, reads or watches content—or completely avoids it out of self-protection.
- **System interpretation:** *“They don’t respond to our policies.”*

Stage 3: Choosing silence or protest

- **Trigger:** Election day or a major political moment (referendum, EU Parliament, etc.)
- **Thoughts:** *“I’ll go but spoil the ballot,” “I’m not voting in protest.” or “I’m just too overwhelmed.”*
- **Feelings:** Powerlessness, protectiveness, quiet resistance
- **Actions:** Citizen doesn’t vote, votes blank or turns to alternatives.
- **System interpretation:** *“They don’t vote, so they don’t care.”*

Stage 4: Aftermath

- **Trigger:** Election results, media coverage, outcomes contradict expectations.
- **Thoughts:** *“They still don’t get it.” “My voice doesn’t matter.”*
- **Feelings:** Alienation, disappointment, even guilt.
- **Actions:** Citizen withdraws further from institutional processes, but might continue activism, mutual aid, content creation, art etc.

Clearly the tension between perception of apathy and true apathy is at the core of the apathy problem. Therefore, I formulated a design question which would steer the continuation of speculative design process and keep apathy in the center of it.

5.2 Speculative Worlds

The speculative design process began with **signal scanning**, using the DESTEP framework, a process explained in more detail in Section 1.2.6. to identify **early signs of change related to political participation and voting**. To ensure a variety in content, following criteria was established:

- ## Collection of Signals

From the initial collection, I filtered and clustered signals that most strongly aligned with my **design context**. Signals were selected not only for their novelty, but also for their potential to disrupt and reshape current civic dynamics.

Signal context	Name	Signal summary	Signal description	Type	Link	Type of signal	Examples	Speculative design implication
Political	ACTION DRIVES VOTER NUMBERS	Focus on what drives voters to vote or abstain in public or online registration	Young people who are interested in registering to vote are not getting the information they need about the actual process of registering	<div> <div> Information </div> <div> Opportunity </div> <div> Problem </div> </div>	https://www.voter.gov/	Green	<p>How do we ensure that the information that people need to get involved in the political process is available to them in a way that is accessible and easy to use?</p>	<p>What's The design implications of the fact that young people are not getting the information they need to get involved in the political process?</p>
Technological	GEOPOLITICS OF QUANTUM COMPUTING	United States sign on "Open-source Quantum" agreement with the UK and Australia as a geopolitical tool	Quantum computing has the potential to revolutionize computing and national governments are engaged in a global race to produce it	<div> <div> Information </div> <div> Opportunity </div> <div> Problem </div> </div>	https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2021/05/11/us-uk-australia-open-source-quantum-computing-agreement/	Green	<p>How do we ensure that the information that people need to get involved in the political process is available to them in a way that is accessible and easy to use?</p>	<p>What's The design implications of the fact that young people are not getting the information they need to get involved in the political process?</p>
Economic	REVERSE REGULATION • (GLOBALIZATION • LOCALIZATION)	Local competitors are reversing the trend of globalization and global supply chains	Due to global supply chain issues, local manufacturers are reversing the trend of globalization and global supply chains	<div> <div> Information </div> <div> Opportunity </div> <div> Problem </div> </div>	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/11/business/economy/covid-19-global-supply-chains.html	Green	<p>How do we ensure that the information that people need to get involved in the political process is available to them in a way that is accessible and easy to use?</p>	<p>What's The design implications of the fact that young people are not getting the information they need to get involved in the political process?</p>
Political	INCREASED REGISTRATION OF ELECTION FRAUD	Politicians and governments are increasing the number of people who are registered to vote by using social media and other digital tools	Politicians are using digital tools to increase the number of people who are registered to vote by using social media and other digital tools	<div> <div> Information </div> <div> Opportunity </div> <div> Problem </div> </div>	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/11/business/economy/covid-19-global-supply-chains.html	Green	<p>How do we ensure that the information that people need to get involved in the political process is available to them in a way that is accessible and easy to use?</p>	<p>What's The design implications of the fact that young people are not getting the information they need to get involved in the political process?</p>

The infographic depicts a political cycle through several stages, each with a central event and associated public sentiment:

- Government gets elected:** A politician is elected on promises: 01. More student housing, 02. Innovation in higher education, 03. More opportunities for first employment, 04. Freedom and security, 05. Return trust in institutions and democracy.
- Politicians break the promise:** A new policy is introduced: "NEW! 1% 'HOUSING POLICY' INTRODUCED. A suggestion for building additional 1000 student housing units in 2021 (2020 has been officially declared by the parliament earlier today)." This leads to a **SCANDAL**: "PM caught in a corruption scandal!" and voter disappointment: "They already broke their first promise!"
- Politician caught in a scandal:** A **REFERENCE** is made: "Should we allow private businesses to build an artificial food recycling factory?" This leads to a **SCANDAL**: "Minister spends national money for personal travel!" and youth concern: "I care about our environment!"
- Politicians break more promises:** A new policy is introduced: "NEW! 2% 'BRIGHT CITY FOR UNIVERSITY'! Government announced significant budget cuts for universities starting from next semester. They say that the money is needed for other sectors." This leads to a **SCANDAL**: "Minister spends national money for personal travel!" and youth concern: "I need to share this on Instagram!"
- Politicians present their new campaign:** A new policy is introduced: "NEW! 3% 'UNEMPLOYMENT NUMBER REDUCTION'! Due to inflation and geopolitical crisis unemployment rates jumped up significantly in last year. Especially among younger generations." This leads to a **SCANDAL**: "Minister spends national money for personal travel!" and voter frustration: "I am fed up with them not delivering!"
- Elections announced:** A **SCANDAL** is reported: "Oppositions start paying taxes!" This leads to a **SCANDAL**: "Minister spends national money for personal travel!" and voter frustration: "I am so tired of fake promises once again!"
- Politicians fight with each other:** A **SCANDAL** is reported: "The other side is evil!" and "My opponent is lying. I am telling the truth!" This leads to a **SCANDAL**: "Minister spends national money for personal travel!" and youth exhaustion: "They are only arguing!" and "This polarization is exhausting!"
- "New" government gets elected:** A **SCANDAL** is reported: "The other side is evil!" and "My opponent is lying. I am telling the truth!" This leads to a **SCANDAL**: "Minister spends national money for personal travel!" and youth exhaustion: "Only 10% Youth doesn't care about politics!" and "I don't want to reward broken promises!"

Figure 60: Signals of Change per domain

	Weak	Strong	Wild
Demographic	1	2	1
Economic	0	2	0
Sociological	1	0	4
Technological	0	5	3
Environmental	1	1	1
Political	0	9	0

"What if..." Sentences

For each signal, I developed speculative "What if..." questions to explore the signal's implications in more radical or surprising way. This technique—commonly used in speculative and critical design—serves as a **tool to examine potential consequences, ethics, or systemic shifts** that may not be immediately visible (Shivamallu, 2024).

For instance, **the signal addressing the delay in climate discourse** examines the growing hesitation of governments to act on climate change prevention. Recently many politicians expressed doubts about the possibility of avoiding the consequences of climate change, sifting focus to adaptation rather than prevention.

This signal prompted the following "What if..." questions for the future:

- "What if climate would be given political power to self-govern?"
- "What if governments openly shifted from prevention to adaptation strategy only?"
- "What if climate despair became a political party?"
- "What if eco-fatalism was a valid political stance?"
- "What if politicians had to publicly share their opinion on climate-change mitigation strategy ahead of elections?"

These **speculative prompts** helped me move from what is likely to what is imaginable, creating a

Figure 61: Signals of Change cards

SIGNAL 1

Climate discourse delay

Governments express doubt about the possibility to mitigate climate change consequences.

> Details

Theme: Environmental **STRONG**

WHAT IF...

- climate would be given political power to self-govern?
- governments openly shifted from prevention to adaptation strategy only?
- climate despair became a political party?
- "eco-fatalism" was a valid political stance?
- politicians had to publicly share their opinion on climate-change mitigation strategy?

Theme: Environmental **STRONG**

SIGNAL 7

Decentralised autonomous organisations

Decentralized organizations where members make all decisions by voting. Decisions are automatically processed by a digital code.

> Details

Theme: Political **STRONG**

WHAT IF...

- all business decisions needed to be voted on by all employees?
- if citizenship meant owning governance tokens?
- if every policy had to pass a real-time public vote before being accepted in the parliament?
- if code was law, and politicians were replaced by algorithms?
- citizens entered into a smart-contract relationship with their candidate on election day?

Theme: Political **STRONG**

SIGNAL 6

TikTok influencers main information source

Youth bypass traditional news and get political information from influencers on social media channels, like TikTok.

> Details

Theme: Technological **STRONG**

WHAT IF...

- your voting rights were affected by your digital behavior?
- viral political trends on TikTok triggered public hearings?
- if traditional news channels lost accreditation, news were entirely broadcast via livestreams and social platforms?
- influencers had to register as political agents when sharing political content online?

Theme: Technological **STRONG**

SIGNAL 11

Radical transparency

Radical transparency will become a new norm, with citizens, businesses and governments openly sharing their personal data.

> Details

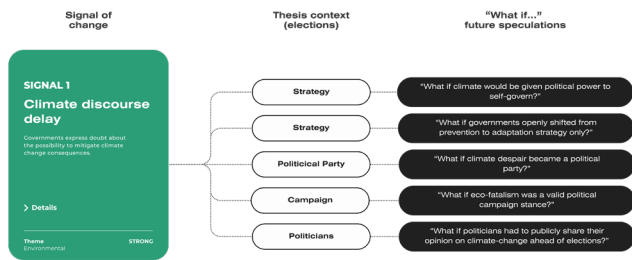
Theme: Sociological **MEDIUM**

WHAT IF...

- anonymity was illegal?
- your voting history was publicly accessible by everyone?
- politician's work was live streamed 24/7?
- you needed to publicly share your voting decision before casting a vote?

Theme: Sociological **MEDIUM**

Figure 62: “What if...” sentence development



bridge between today's weak signals and tomorrow's possible worlds.

After drafting “What if...” sentences for all the signals, I selected **those most relevant for electoral dynamics**.

The **chosen signal cards** for the following step were *radical transparency*, *gamified voting*, *storyliving*, *wireless body area networks*, *generalised population decline*, *climate discourse delay*, *personal resource quotas*, *politainment*, and *extension of citizenship*.

5.2.2 Tensions and Future Scenarios

To construct the future scenarios of political participation, I used **tension-building**, a key speculative design technique.

According to Dunne & Raby (Dunne & Raby, 2013) and Hesselgren et al. (Hesselgren et al., 2018), **tensions are central to speculative design** because they **generate friction between competing logics**, beliefs, or expectations of today—exposing the political, ethical, and emotional stakes of possible futures. As Dunne & Raby explain in their book, the perspective of what is normal shifts: “By making the familiar strange and the strange familiar, speculative design helps people think differently about the world. Tensions are a tool for provoking these shifts in thinking.”

Rather than developing each signal independently into a new future vision, **I began pairing them to create tensions**. Examples include:

- *Increased accusations of election fraud (lack of transparency) vs. Radical transparency*
- *“Politainment” vs. Authenticity as top priority*

- *Storyliving vs. Silent citizenship*
- *Generalised population decline vs. Womb fare*
- *Silent citizenship vs. Gamified voting*
- ...

Figure 63: Tensions framework

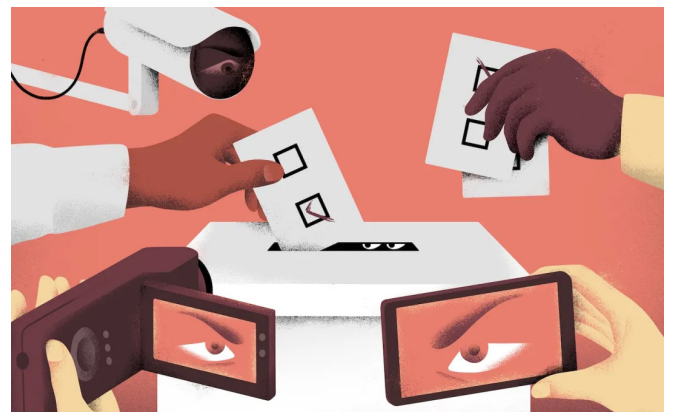
Thesis Domain	Political participation of European youth
Thesis Context	Elections
Design Context	Voting
Thematic Undercurrent	Apathy
Design Question	"How might a future voting system look like where political apathy is a valuable attribute rather than a negative driver?"
Speculative World Drivers	Tensions

Each pair of signal cards was analyzed using “What if...” questions and narrative prototyping, with **apathy serving as the central interpretive lens**. Rather than treating apathy as a signal on its own, I framed it as a **thematic undercurrent** throughout the process. In simpler terms, each speculative scenario revealed a different interpretation of apathy—whether as *absence*, *resistance*, *emotional overload*, *disempowerment*, or even a *form of control*.

Tension 1: Increased Accusations of Election Fraud vs. Radical Transparency

Signal 1: Growing accusations of election fraud reflect a **rising distrust in institutions**, especially in polarized settings, as seen during the 2020 US elections when Donald Trump called the results fraudulent for example. Mis/disinformation fuels these doubts even more.

Figure 64: Tension 1



“What if...” sentences for signal 1:

- *What if no one trusted election outcomes anymore?*
- *What if election results depended on your algorithmic bubble?*
- *What if elections required a “trust score” for legitimacy?*
- *What if AI fact-checkers replaced human election commissions?*
- *What if voters verified their own votes with biometric tracking?*

Signal 2: Radical transparency means full access to data, decisions, and processes, aiming to eliminate doubt. However, it can erode trust by overwhelming citizens with too much information.

“What if...” sentences for signal 2:

- *What if anonymity was illegal?*
- *What if your voting history was publicly accessible?*
- *What if politicians were live-streamed 24/7?*
- *What if you had to publicly share your vote before casting it?*

Tension: Despite full transparency, election fraud accusations persist, as transparency overloads the public with conflicting information.

Core friction: What if anonymity was illegal, but trust in elections remained?

Apathy lens: Disengaging becomes a form of resistance to overwhelming exposure (silence in noise).

Tension 2: Storyliving vs. Silent Citizenship

Signal 1: Storyliving implies deep immersion in political experiences (VR protests, AI-guided empathy journeys etc.). It is becoming more and more popular to experience the story, rather than listen to it. Storyliving tries to stimulate empathy and action.

“What if sentences” for signal 1:

- *What if youth instead of listening about politics (and policies) in politician campaign and media, could live them?*
- *What if citizens could feel policies before voting on them?*
- *What if civic empathy on specific topic (like migration) could be designed rather than thought?*

Signal 2: Silent citizenship reflects refusal to engage in politics—apathy, abstention, passive observation, or resistance through silence. Silent citizens resist participation, sometimes as critique or disillusionment.

“What if...” sentences for signal 2:

- *What if Europe not only created spaces for deliberation but also spaces that stimulated silence as a new form of political participation?*
- *What if democratic systems were built not around participation, but around careful listening to absence?*
- *What if ultimate civic duty was silence, stillness, or deliberate absence?*
- *What if silence was part of political language?*
- *What if citizen’s silence was their loudest political act?*

Tension: In a world where political participation means experiencing policy—walking in someone else’s shoes before casting your vote—silence becomes rebellion. People unplug, mute, opt out. Not because they don’t care, but because they reject the engineered emotions built into the system.

Core friction: What happens when political engagement is immersive and emotional, yet many

Figure 65: Tension 2



choose silence as their mode of participation?

Apathy lens: Apathy may evolve into *a deliberate refusal to feel*, a shield against the overwhelming emotional labour of immersive politics.

Tension 3: TikTok Political Influence vs. Digital Voting Infrastructure

Signal 1: TikTok is becoming the main information source and political engagement channel for youth. Social media favour instant emotion, virality, and brevity over nuance or fact-checking.

“What if sentences” for signal 1:

- *What if your voting rights were affected by your digital behaviour?*
- *What if viral political trends on TikTok triggered public hearings?*
- *What if traditional news channels lost accreditation, news were entirely broadcast via livestreams and social platforms?*
- *What if influencers had to register as political agents when sharing political content online?*

Signal 2: Digital voting infrastructure has been rising across the world. It aims to be more secure, rational, and accountable, to match the strength of in-person voting.

“What if...” sentences for signal 2:

- *What if your digital ID could vote, shop, travel, and protest for you?*
- *What if losing your digital wallet would mean losing your digital identity?*
- *What if digital citizenship replaced national one?*
- *What if your digital ID automatically enrolled you into political decision-making?*

Figure 66: Tension 3



Tension Created: Politics is consumed like entertainment, but voting still operates like a bureaucracy. The way people emotionally engage with political content does not match the formal act of casting a vote.

Core friction: What happens when democratic infrastructure can no longer control or even contain the speed and volume of performative political expression?

Apathy Lens: Apathy may become *a login/log out option* with users choosing which vote to like and which policy to share.

The mentioned tensions are just **three out of seven I developed**. The rest are available in the Appendix. All proved especially useful for imagining how apathy may manifest in different future worlds. The three tensions served as the foundation for 3 distinct future worlds.

5.2.3 Worldbuilding

I designed three different future worlds for Europe in 2055, all based on previously discussed signals of change and tensions: **The Glass Horizon**, **Soma** and **DemoFeed**.

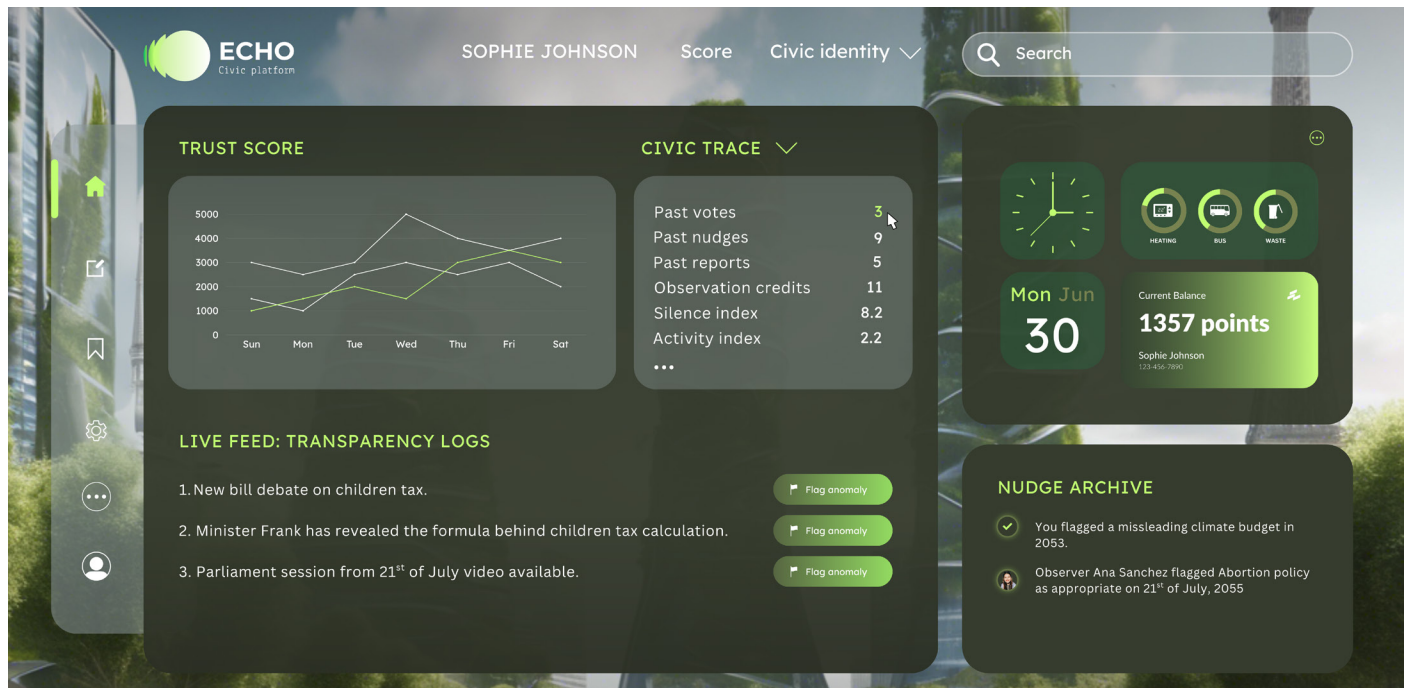
The Glass Horizon

Tagline: “When everything became visible, silence became power.”

World summary:

Europe in 2055 has transitioned to new systems after **years of environmental crises** and **political turbulences**. Glass Horizon is marked by **transparency in governance, technology, and society**—metaphorically (open data, radical transparency) and literally (smart cities with glass architecture and visible infrastructure). Society operates around advanced public monitoring technologies. **Citizens can choose between active political participation or deliberate political withdrawal**—each seen as an equally valuable civic role. Elections are redesigned to **include apathy as a structural feedback signal** that influences outcomes and candidate legitimacy.

Figure 67: “The Echo Vote” prototype



The Echo Vote:

A future-facing **election system that recognizes silence, neutrality, and action as equally meaningful political choices**. It allows citizens to choose how they engage with democratic processes—with voting reimagined as a multi-modal participation spectrum, not a binary act.

Civic Roles:

- **Active voter:** Votes on policies alone or via a proxy vote (a trusted individual or expert on a specific topic). Their voting history is visible to others on request, building trust.
- **Civic observer:** Opts-out of direct voting. Instead, they monitor politicians through GovTrace Programme (public ledger showing promises, statements, actions). Their Echo Dashboard allows them to issue civic nudges, which stimulate politicians to react.
- **Silent citizen:** Declines to vote or observe, but agrees to have personal impact data (behavior, lifestyle, ecological footprint, tax contributions, etc.) published. This reflects their civic impact outside the electoral process. Their absence is treated as political presence, but not action.

System of elections:

- **Civic Digital Wallet:** Stores voter civic role, voting records, and Eco credits.

- **GovTrace Platform:** All policies, political promises, decisions, and public spending are tracked in real time, viewable to all citizens—especially observers and abstainers.
- **Echo Dashboard for citizens:** Personalized interface depending on civic role. Voters see campaign inputs, simulation tools, voting breakdowns. Observers see consistency timelines, nudge features, and follow-the-vote pathways. Abstainers see their personal trace and societal footprint.

How the system operates?

- **Citizens chosen their civic mode**
- **Apathy is a calibrated political signal.**
- **Non-voters aren't ignored**, instead they're interpreted as system pressure points. This allows pressure of participating to taken of their shoulders.
- **Accountability flows both ways:** Politicians are transparent, but so are citizens. Everyone leaves a civic trace, visible to others.
- **Decision-making adapts to collective modes:** If abstention (non-voters) spikes, AI governance assistants flag the need for participatory redesign. The system is self-reflective, not rigid.

The remaining two worlds are described in Appendix in more detail.

Figure 68: The Glass Horizon world

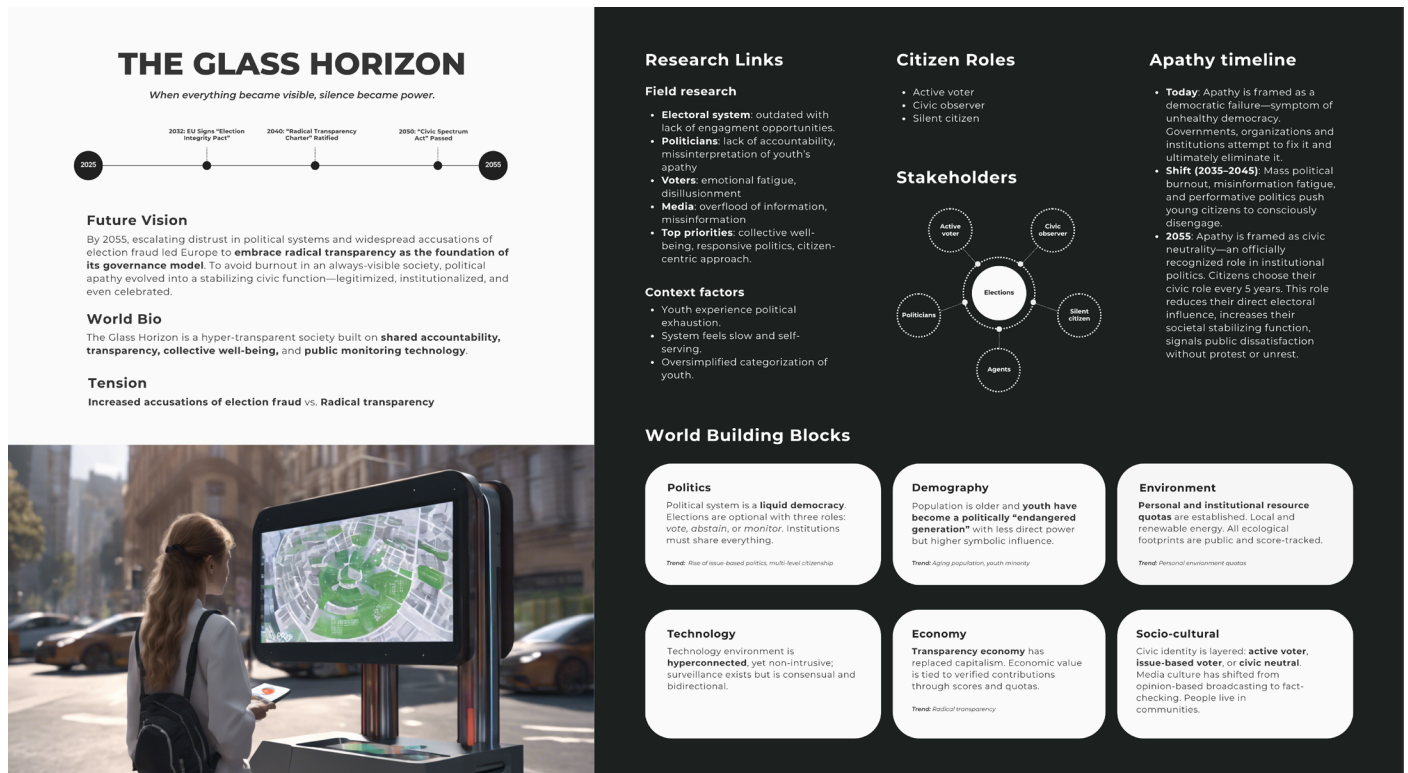


Figure 69: Soma world

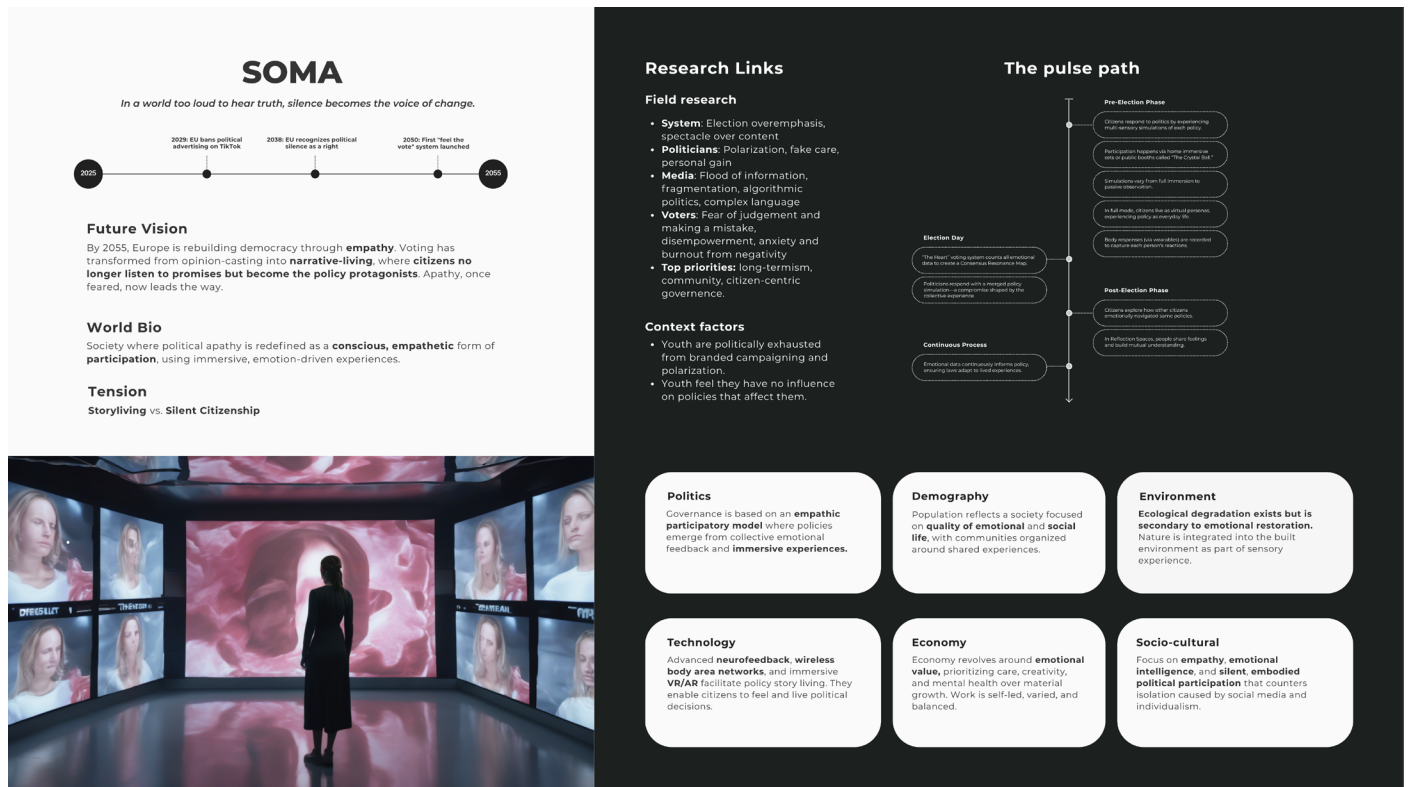


Figure 70: DemoFeed world

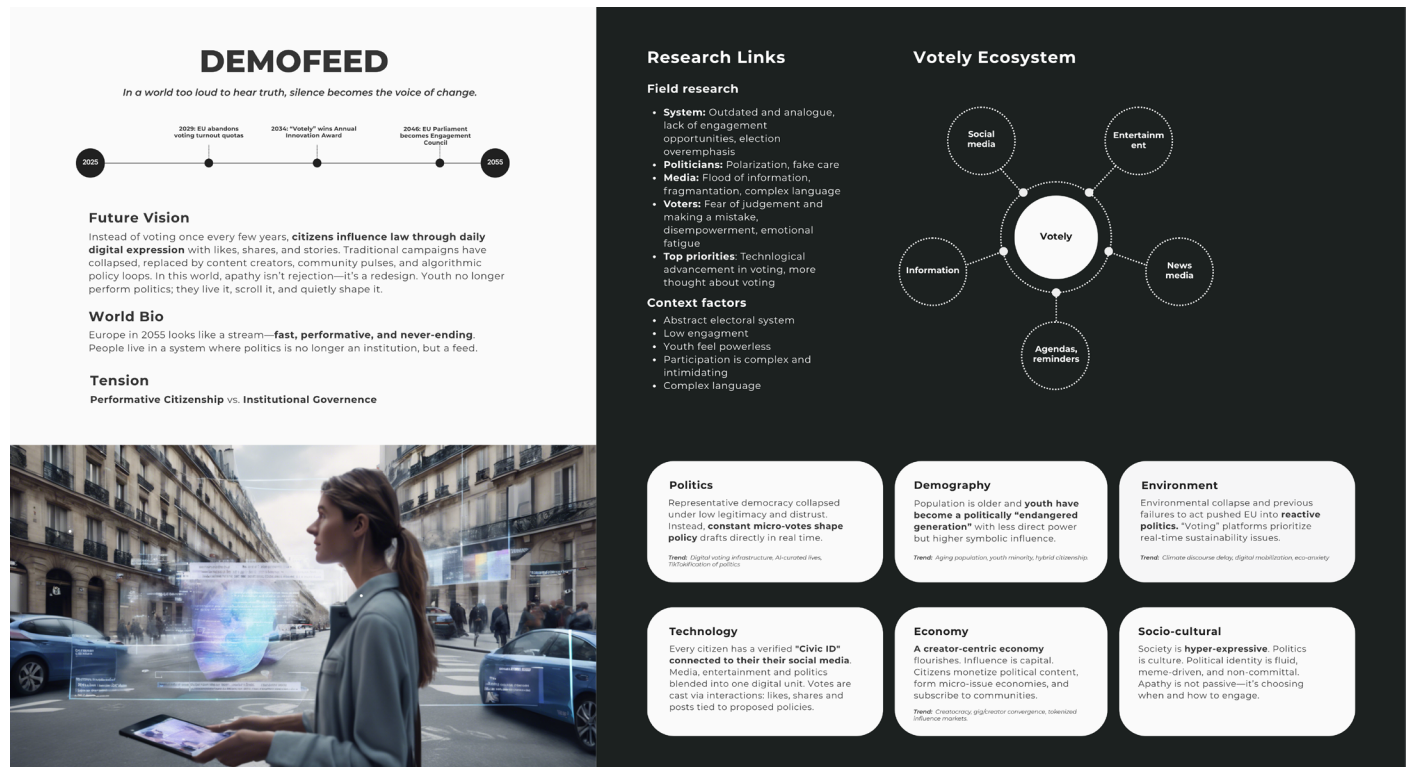
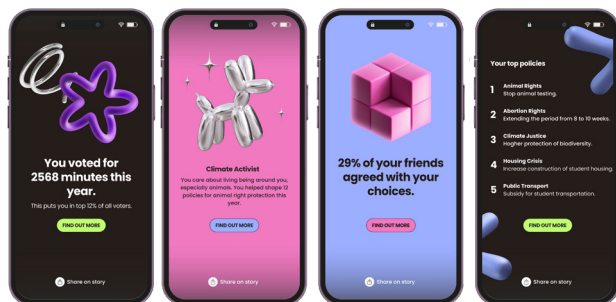


Figure 71: DemoFeed prototype



5.3 Conclusion

In the conceptualization phase, I developed **three distinct speculative worlds**, each addressing a different aspect of youth disengagement with politics: *emotional disconnect*, *distrust in politics*, and *unbalanced engagement*. **Each world and its prototype offered unique insights into potential solutions for bridging the gap** between European youth and political systems by 2055.

However, it became clear that no single world could fully answer the design question of “*How might a future voting system look like where political apathy is a valuable attribute rather than a negative driver?*” To answer the question adequately and create a unified solution, I synthesized elements from each world—**emotional recognition and acknowledgment, transparency, and daily engagement**—and developed a final design, **The Civic Mirror**.

In the following section, I will present the Civic Mirror as **the final design prototype**, detailing how it integrates these insights to foster a more inclusive form of political participation by 2055.

06

Civic Mirror

About

This chapter explores the design and functionality of a future voting system that empowers youth to engage with politics in a more personalized, emotional, and accessible way. It delves into the concept's components, how it aligns with key insights from research, and the journey users experience, from emotional input to policy influence, reshaping political participation for the youth of 2055.

6.1 Civic Mirror Introduction

The final speculative design artefact to bridge the gap between young citizens and their political system in Europe in 2055 is called “The Civic Mirror”.

6.1.1 What is Civic Mirror?

In 2055, voting is no longer just about what citizens think after weeks of political campaigning, but about **how they feel about the system on a daily basis**. Youth’s political participation begins with “how” rather than “who”, “what” or “why”, transforming politics from a reactive activity into a **reflective expression**.

By **embracing a spectrum of emotions** (including apathy), the Civic Mirror fosters a reciprocal, ongoing relationship between youth and politicians, where **citizens’ emotions are recognized, acknowledged and directly reflected into meaningful political actions**.

The Civic Mirror consists of three main parts: a *digital world* (**The Civic Mirror app** and **The Society Mirror interface**), a *social media world* (**The Civic Mirror Instagram account**), and a physical world (**The Civic Street Mirror**).

6.1.2 Context and Design Problem

The Civic Mirror directly addresses the common misinterpretation of youth political **apathy** (lack of motivation and interest) and **abstention** (lack of participation) today. Rather than treating these as problems to be fixed, this concept **reframes apathy as a spectrum of civic emotions that contribute meaningfully to everyday politics**. Feelings such as indifference, frustration, helplessness, and ambiguity are recognized and acknowledged without trying to transform them into more conventional emotions like excitement or enthusiasm in the context of voting.

Therefore, the answer to the design question, “How might a future voting system look like where political apathy is a valuable attribute rather than a negative driver?” is that a **future voting system no longer views apathy as the abandonment of politics, but instead as a valid form of political input**.

Europe in 2055

By 2055, Europe has undergone a political, social, and technological transformation. After three turbulent decades marked by political division, disinformation, hyper partisanship, and public disappointment, **European society has shifted**

Figure 72: Civic Mirror Ecosystem

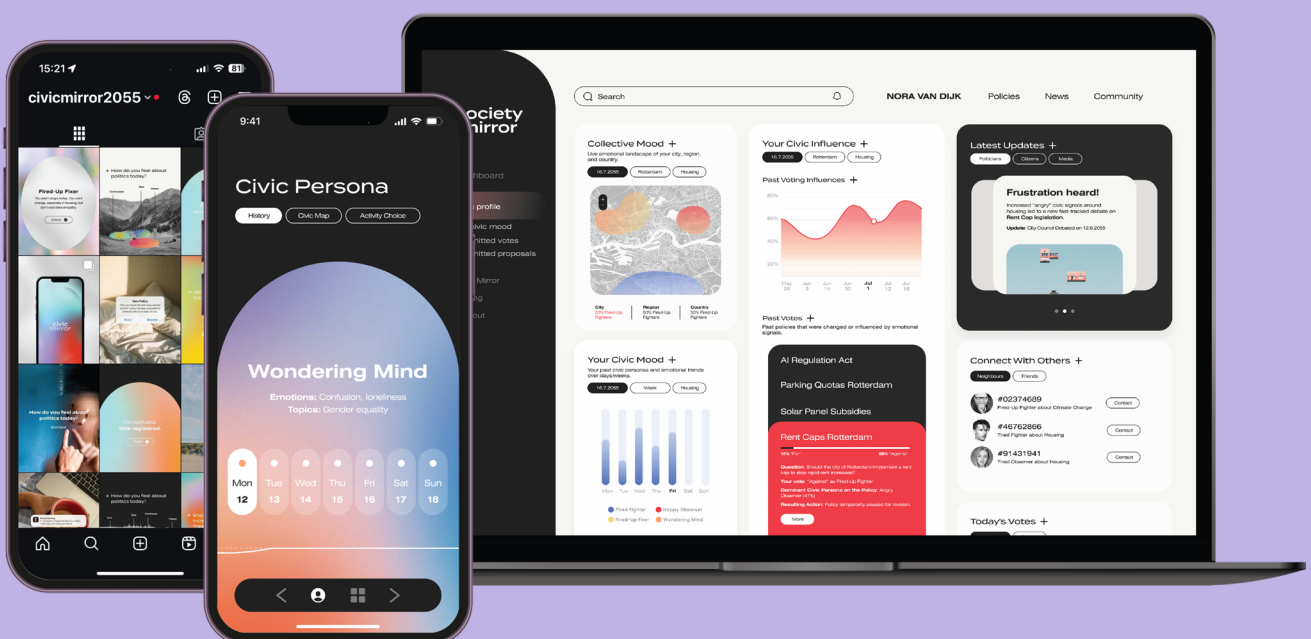
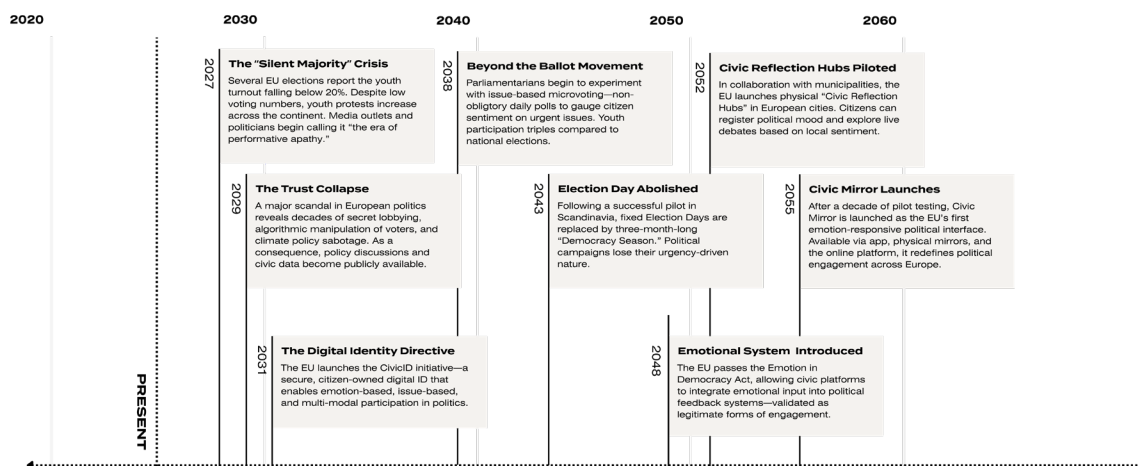


Figure 73: Timeline



towards political transparency and continuous political engagement. Nations have seen a decline in political decision making, now dominated by a combination of **regional and European-level authorities**. This layered political landscape reflects the new reality: **local concerns matter more than ever**, while **supranational is present mostly in complex challenges** like climate change, migration, and wars. Technological development has led to **hyper-connected, digitally integrated lives**, where citizens expect real-time access to information, open data, and **emotionally intelligent digital platforms**.

Honesty is no longer an option—it is built through continuous feedback, a visible decision-making, and **shared emotional insight between institutions and citizens**. As a result, values like openness, truth, and personal integrity have become cornerstones of European political life. Institutions are now expected to respond to citizen's emotions—not just shape opinions.

A Timeline Towards 2055

In the thirty years leading to the Civic Mirror's launch in 2055, Europe underwent a political transformation driven by citizen disillusionment, technological advancement, and a growing demand for transparency.

From **mass youth disengagement in 2027** to the **formal recognition of emotions as valid civic input by 2048**, each step pushed the system to adapt. By 2055, emotional honesty, daily participa-

tion, and reflective engagement replace binary choices and performative campaigns allowing The Civic Mirror to emerge as **the default system of local governance and political participation across Europe**.

6.2 Civic Mirror Ecosystem

The ecosystem of Civic Mirror app, Civic Street Mirror booths, Society Mirror platform, and Civic Mirror social media is **an entry point into regional politics of 2055**. Through all four components, young Europeans can communicate their feelings to politicians in real time.

6.2.1 Overview of Components

The Civic Mirror App

What?

The Civic Mirror app serves as the **primary digital interface for users**, where they can **express their daily emotions regarding political and social issues**. It allows users to *track their mood, share emotional responses, and influence policy discussions* by reflecting on how they feel about current and proposed issues in their community.

Who?

The Civic Mirror app is for **youth who are perceived as apathetic but actually care about politics**. It is designed for individuals who are frustrated and disappointed with politics but have no channel to voice their feelings. Those who are truly apathetic are unlikely to use the app;

however, the primary focus is on those who are mislabelled as such or those who abstain from the current voting process. These individuals typically include:

- **Protest voters** who attend elections but deliberately cast a blank vote.
- **Protest abstainers** who don't attend elections, due to a statement against the system.
- **Critical non-voters** who consciously choose to skip elections out of frustration with candidates, institutions, or the system itself.
- **Alternative participants** who express their political engagement through other channels—rather than through voting.

Role within the Ecosystem

As the central component of the Civic Mirror ecosystem, the app offers a space for emotional expression and reflection, which can directly influence political participation. By connecting emotions to action, the app transforms political engagement into a more personal and meaningful experience.

Figure 74: The Civic Mirror app



The Society Mirror Interface

What?

The Society Mirror Interface serves as **a shared platform between citizens and political institutions at the regional level**. It functions as a two-way communication tool where both citizens and politicians can interact and provide feedback. Citizens can express their emotional responses to policies, while politicians can update the public on policy changes, receive real-time emotional reactions,

and gain insights into public sentiment.

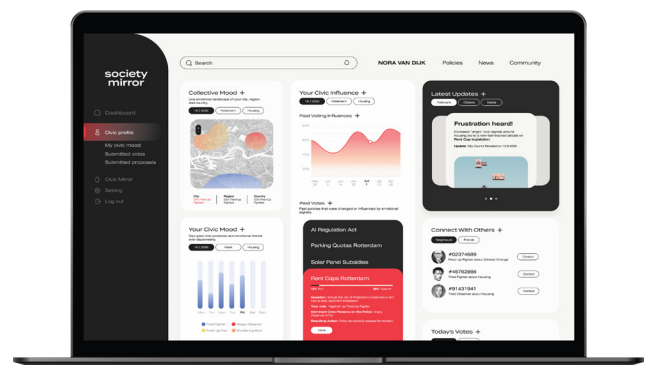
Who?

The target audience for the Society Mirror Interface includes both young citizens and politicians. **Citizens** use the platform to *track current policies, check status of previously voted on issues, and see how others in their community are feeling about ongoing political discussions*. **Politicians**, on the other hand, use the platform to *gauge public opinion, engage with their electorate, and ensure that their actions align with the emotional and practical needs of the population*.

Role within the Ecosystem

The Society Mirror creates **a more direct and transparent link between the citizens and political institutions**, allowing for continuous dialogue and feedback. It strengthens the connection between regional policymakers and their residents by providing real-time emotional data and fostering transparency in decision-making processes.

Figure 75: The Society Mirror platform



The Civic Street Mirror

What?

The Civic Street Mirror introduces **a physical element** to the Civic Mirror ecosystem, providing a public space for engagement. Located in public areas around the city, it functions as **a kiosk or display where citizens can quickly check in on current political topics, reflect on their emotional responses, and vote or provide feedback**. It serves as a bridge between the digital and

physical realms, making political engagement more accessible and immediate.

Who?

The Civic Street Mirror is designed **for all citizens**, but it particularly targets individuals who may not have easy access to digital devices or those who prefer face-to-face interaction. It invites people to engage with politics in a more spontaneous and “accidental” way, making political participation even more accessible.

Role within the Ecosystem

This physical interaction complements the digital experience provided by the app and the Society Mirror, ensuring that political participation is accessible to a wider audience, regardless of location or technological access.

Figure 76: The Civic Street Mirror



The Civic Mirror social media

What?

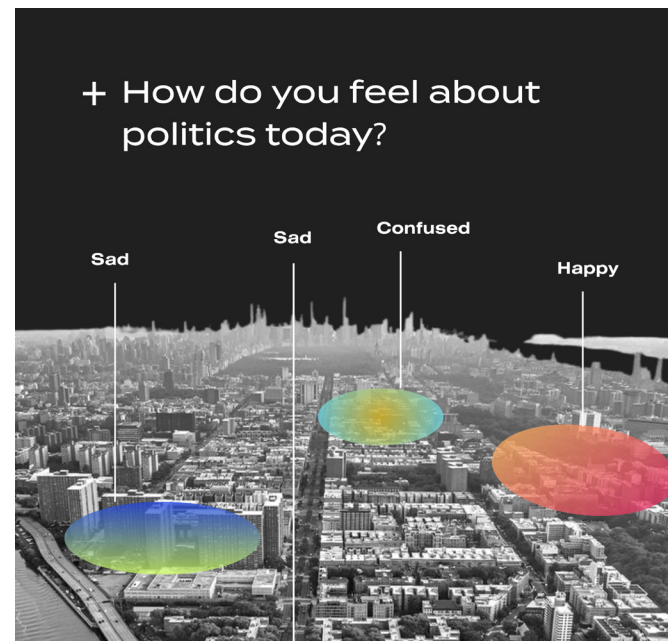
The fourth component is social media. This addition is an **outward-facing communication and storytelling channel**, that serves as a bridge between the app and the broader public. Posts include mood snapshots, participatory milestones, and collective emotional maps.

Who?

It is used by **both citizens and political system**. Governments use it to attract citizens to vote and

politically engage, whereas citizens use it to follow political developments, create political communities, shape their political identities and inform themselves on recent developments.

Figure 77: The Civic Mirror Instagram post example



6.3 Civic Mirror App

6.3.1 Introduction

Civic Mirror is a **political mobile application available in several European municipalities in 2055**, designed for young citizens who feel emotionally distant, overwhelmed, or unheard by their political systems.

Instead of forcing users to vote for a candidate or party, **the app invites them to reflect on their daily emotions and connects them with politically relevant topics**, like housing, climate, or education.

Civic Mirror transforms raw emotions of citizens into political action by:

- *Collecting user's emotional input,*
- *Assigning a daily civic persona based on user's emotional input,*
- *Guiding the citizen into policy spaces where they can either react or refrain from participation,*
- *Communicating civic responses to elected officials.*

Therefore, the gap between citizens and system is addressed through **political outreach to citizens, recognition of their apathy spectrum, offering different political participation journeys based on that spectrum, and acknowledgment of citizens as the main experts of their political issues.**

6.3.2 Function and Purpose

The Civic Mirror app has several functions in making civic political participation more meaningful.

Emotional Recognition and Validation

Through: **Civic Lens**

The Civic Mirror invites and supports European youth in **recognizing their political feelings** by acknowledging apathy as a spectrum of emotions. Rather than expecting fully formed opinions, the system treats emotional states—like confusion, numbness, or frustration—as valid inputs. This function responds directly to insights from the thesis that youth struggle to express their political feelings due to systems ignorance for them and their problems.

Adaptive Civic Participation

Through: **Persona Recognition + Emotion-Adaptive Design**

The app adjusts the voting experience to fit each user's emotional readiness, attention span, and energy. This addresses the problem of one-size-fits-all model of voting identified during contextual research. Instead, Civic Mirror app acknowledges that confusion and feeling of insecurity are a valid part of every voting journey and nothing to be ashamed about.

Emotion-Based Voting Interface

Through: **Influence Zone**

The app redefines the act of casting a vote. Instead of party loyalty or highly emotional and divisive topic, focus is placed on policies that emotionally resonate with the user. Instead of forcing binary selections between candidates, Civic Mirror app gives youth the freedom to vote on issues they truly want to.

Continuous Micro-Participation

Through: **Daily Notification & Invitation**

Participation becomes an everyday, lightweight habit that reflects how one feels—without pressure to perform on a specific day. This addresses youth burnout and guilt they currently feel, by reframing participation as regular self-reflection rather than high-stakes decisions.

Emotional Transparency and Shared Climate

Through: **Mood of the Nation Map**

By visualizing collective emotional data (how the community feels on a specific day), the app restores **a sense of belonging and shared civic experience**. It reassures users that political emotions—sadness, anger or frustration—are widely felt and valid. This addressed the problem detected in research, where youth often feel alone and isolated during the voting process, thinking they are the only ones who feel a certain way.

Empowerment Through Signal Contribution

Through: **Submit Your Signal**

The Civic Mirror ensures youth voices matter—even if they come as short, confused, or emotional signals. These contributions are aggregated, preserved, and shared with policymakers as real political input. It shifts the definition of legitimacy from clarity to honesty.

Trust Through Impact Tracking

Through: **Contribution Explainer**

The system shows how feelings—not just votes—lead to policy influence. By letting youth trace their emotional responses and history, it rebuilds trust in institutions and affirms that their voice, even if uncertain, has weight.

6.3.3 Level of Governance

In the Europe of 2055, **regional politics have gained significant influence as youth seek more immediate, impactful ways to engage** with politics. The Civic Mirror app was launched and operates on local level of governance.

This focus on regional governance addresses a key insight from the research: youth often feel

disconnected from national politics, especially on issues like climate change, where decisions don't always feel relevant to their daily lives. By shifting to a regional focus, **Civic Mirror makes politics more tangible and impactful**, allowing youth to directly influence decisions in their communities and feel the effects of their actions.

While the Civic Mirror app initially focuses on **regional politics**, it is designed to expand to **national and European elections** in the future. The regional level serves as a testing ground, where the system can be refined and perfected before scaling up to larger political contexts.

6.3.4 Key Components of the App

The process begins with the individual downloading the app on their mobile device. Once they download it, they make an account and can use the app normally.

First Interaction: Login and Welcome

When users open the Civic Mirror app, they are first **greeted by a friendly notification reminding them to engage with the platform**. This daily reminder functions similarly to other apps that require consistent interaction, encouraging citizens to reflect on their emotions and political feelings. Users can choose to either participate in the reflection process through the "Political Mirror" or

simply skip the session—there's no pressure to engage if they're not ready.

Once they choose to engage, users land on the **login screen, where they enter their civic information**—either a civic number or email address. This quick and simple process helps avoid overwhelming the user with unnecessary steps. After logging in, **users are welcomed by name**, creating a personalized experience right from the start. This introduction is designed to make the user feel comfortable and connected to the app, setting the tone for a more meaningful political relationship.

Civic Lens: Emotional Input

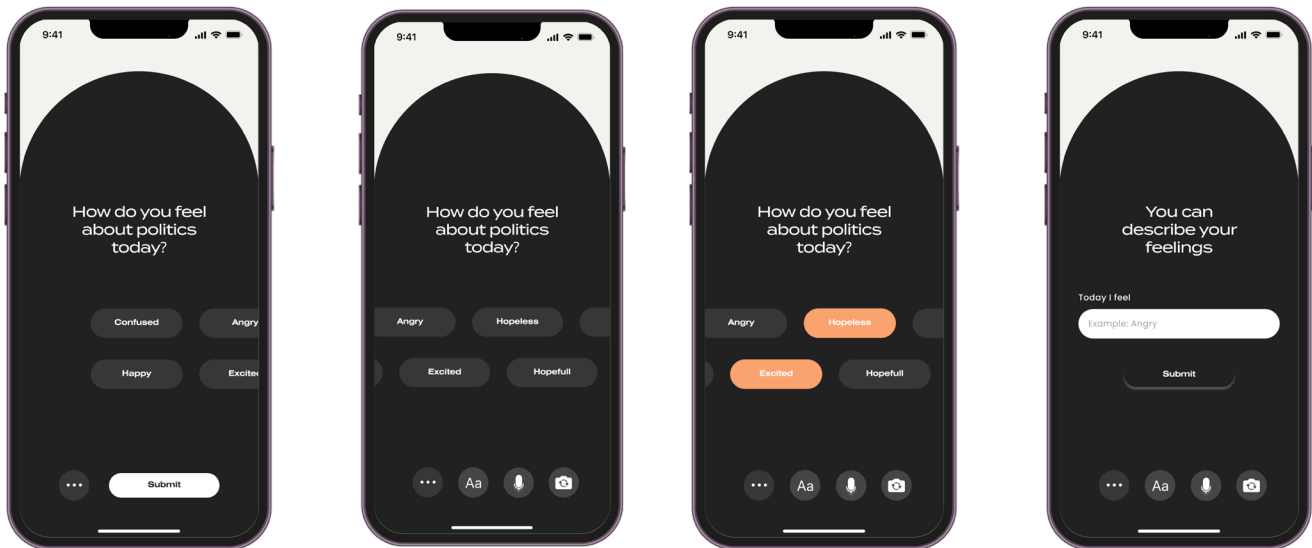
The next step in the Civic Mirror app is **the Civic Lens**, where users are invited to reflect on how they feel about politics that day. They are presented with the question, *"How do you feel about politics today?"* Users have **multiple options to express their emotions**, addressing the insight from research that youth often struggle to articulate their political feelings. They can choose from **a list of predefined emotions, type their own feelings, use sliders to gauge their mood**, or even **record a voice message**, which the system will then convert into emotional input.

This variety of input methods ensures that users can communicate their emotions in a way that

Figure 78: Login and Welcome



Figure 79: Civic Lens



feels comfortable for them. **The Civic Lens sets the tone for the user's engagement**, guiding their voting journey and validating their current emotion as meaningful political data. This step emphasizes the importance of feelings as legitimate input into the political system, giving youth a platform to engage on their own terms.

Civic Lens: Emotional Input

The next step in the Civic Mirror app is **the Civic Lens**, where users are invited to reflect on how they feel about politics that day. They are presented with the question, "*How do you feel about politics today?*" Users have **multiple options to express their emotions**, addressing the insight from research that youth often struggle to articulate their political feelings. They can choose from **a list of predefined emotions**, **type their own feelings**, **use sliders to gauge their mood**, or even **record a voice message**, which the system will then convert into emotional input.

This variety of input methods ensures that users can communicate their emotions in a way that

Civic Lens: Connecting Emotions to Issues

Following the initial emotional input, the Civic Mirror app prompts users with the question, "*What made you feel this way?*" **This step connects their feelings to specific political issues**, allowing us-

ers to **reflect on the concrete factors that have shaped their mood**. Users are given the option to select from suggested topics such as "housing," "climate change," or "transportation."

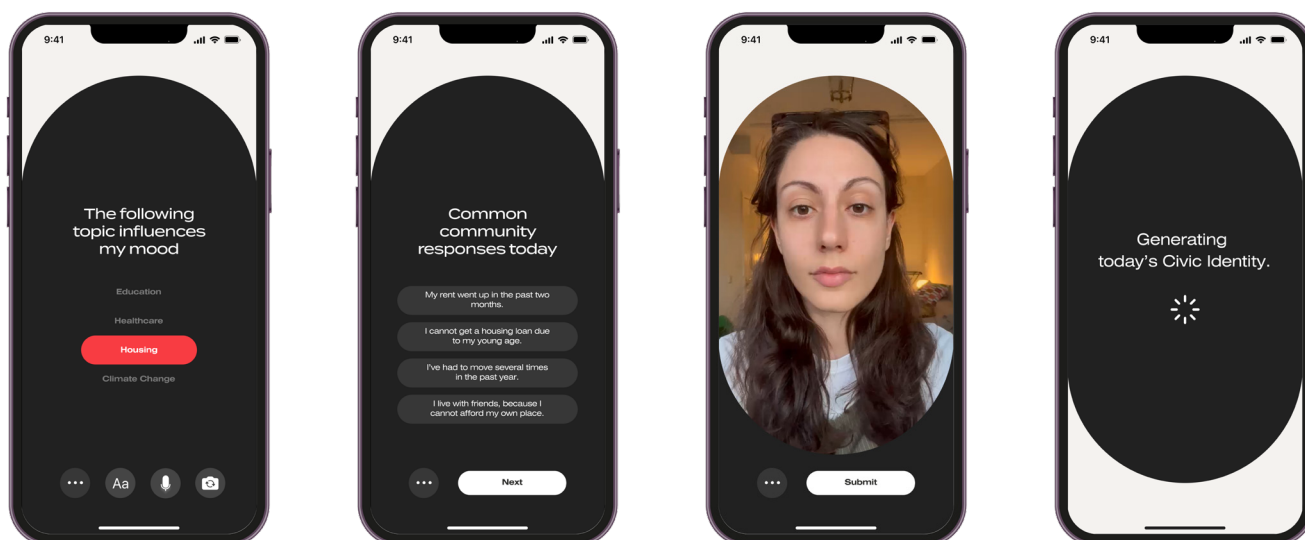
Once the user selects a topic that resonates most with their current emotion, they are asked to **elaborate on what happened**. They can express their thoughts by typing, filming a short video, or selecting from the most popular community responses on the issue.

This marks the completion of the Civic Lens process. The app then **calculates the input and generates a Civic Persona**, which presents the user's emotional state and concerns in a concise, engaging way.

Civic Persona: Reflecting Emotional Identity

Once users have shared their feelings and linked them to specific issues, the Civic Mirror app generates a **temporary Civic Persona that encapsulates their emotional state and political disposition for the day**. For example, the app might label the user as "The Angry Architect" or "The Disoriented Observer," offering a playful yet insightful representation of their current political feeling. This persona helps guide users to relevant policies in next steps.

Figure 80: Connecting emotions to issues



There are approximately **20 Civic Personas**, which act as archetypes of political emotions and engagement. Some examples include “The Fired-Up Fixer,” “The Lost Learner,” and “The Tired Fighter.” These personas adapt and change based on the user’s emotional input. Therefore, one day you may be “The Fired-Up Fixer,” and the next day, you may become “The Tired Fighter.” **Users can also view a history of their Civic Personas**, reflecting on how their political emotions have evolved over time.

This model was inspired by the understanding that youth political identity is fluid and exists on a spectrum, much like apathy itself. Drawing from both the Citizens Framework, which categorizes voters by their interest and activity levels, and the findings from field research, **the Civic Persona system**

ensures that every user is recognized and their feelings are validated.

Civic Map: Connecting Emotions to Community

The Civic Map is designed to **help users see how their emotions align with others in real time**, addressing the **common feeling of isolation in political emotions**. By visualizing how many people in a given area share the same sentiment, users can see their emotions reflected across their community, fostering a sense of connection.

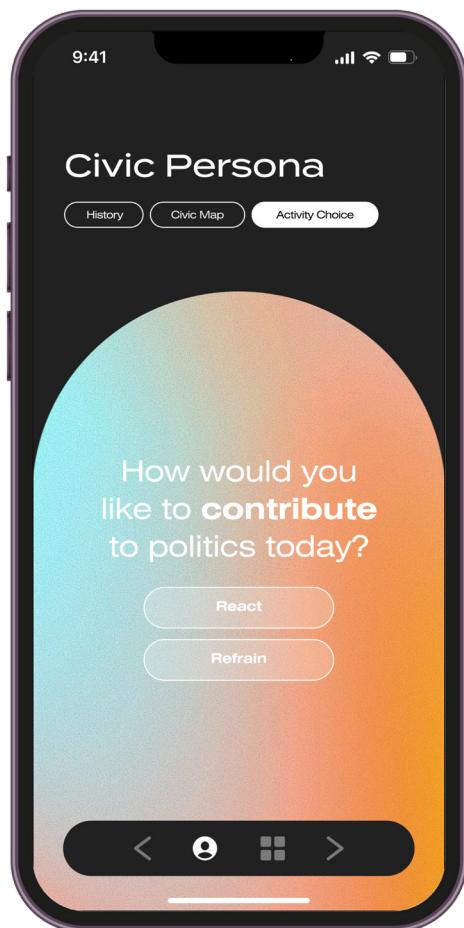
Key features:

- *Real-time emotional mapping*
- *Regional comparison*
- *Community engagement*
- *Persona visibility*

Figure 81: Civic Persona and Civic Map



Figure 82: Engage or Refrain option



Engage or Refrain: Empowering Choice

Next users are given the freedom to **decide how they want to engage with politics that day**. They are presented with two options: **React** or **Refrain**.

- **React:** If users decide to vote, they are redirected to the **Civic Influence Zone**. Here, their emotional state guides them to the most relevant policies that match their mood or frustration (e.g., an angry user may be matched with housing reform content).
- **Refrain:** If users opt not to engage by voting that day, the app still records their emotional input, acknowledging their feelings as valid political participation. This helps users feel heard, even when they choose not to vote.

This feature ensures that **not every day requires voting**. On some days, simply reflecting on emotions is enough to contribute meaningfully, fostering a more flexible and personalized experience of political participation.

Civic Influence Zone: Policy Voting

Upon entering the **Civic Influence Zone**, users can engage with **policies that are most relevant to them**. Rather than overwhelming them with all topics, the system filters and presents **only the most critical issues related to their mood and selected in the Civic Lens**. For example, if a user is frustrated with the housing situation, policies related to housing reform are prioritized, aligning with the issue-first generation—a key finding from research that highlights youth's preference for issue-based engagement rather than candidate-focused politics.

In the Civic Influence Zone, users can:

- **Vote on Trending Policies:** Choose from a curated list of relevant policies.
- **Check Status of Recently Voted Policies:** View updates on the policies they've previously voted on.
- **Submit Their Own Proposal:** Share their own policy ideas, contributing to the civic discourse.

Figure 83: Influence Zone home page

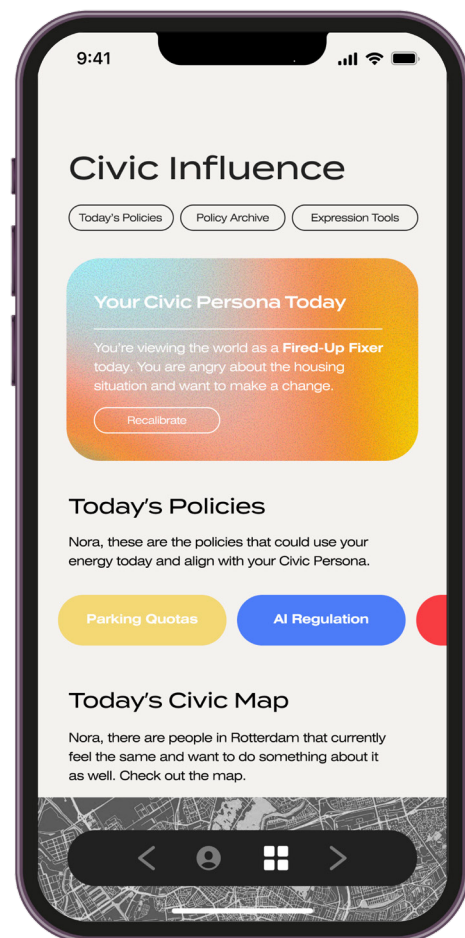
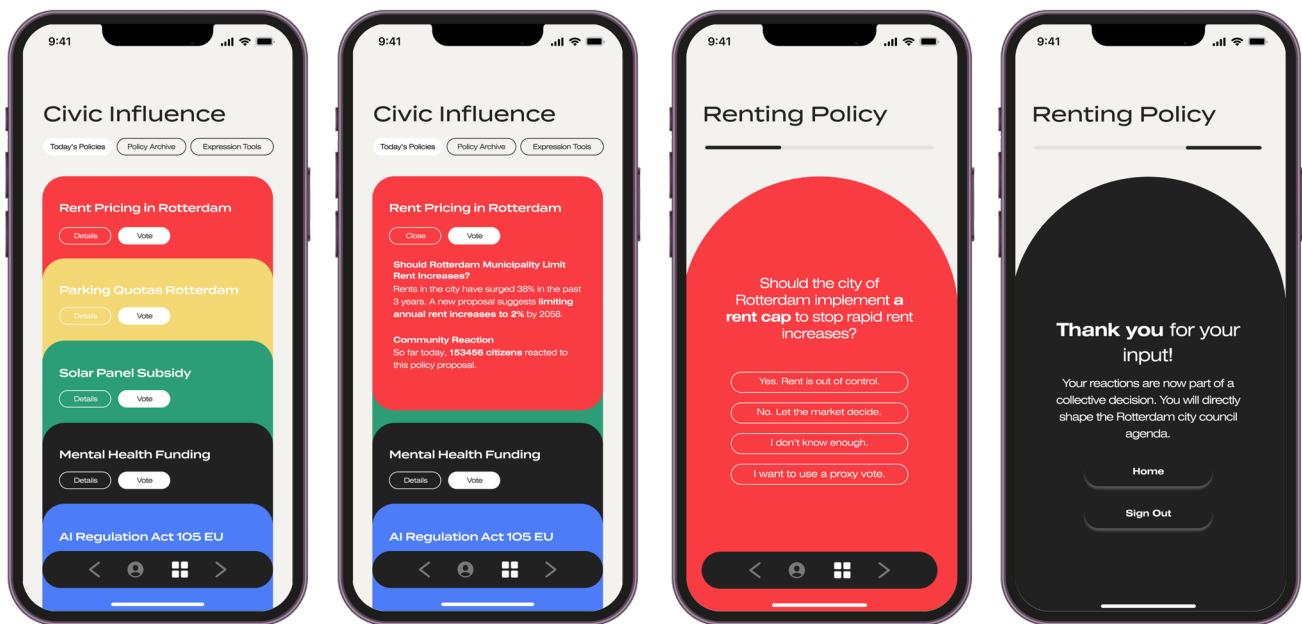


Figure 84: Policy cards



Each policy is displayed in a **card format**, labeled with the domain it belongs to (e.g., housing, climate, transportation), and **shows the number of people who have already voted on it**. This layout makes policies easy to read and understand.

When voting on a policy, users have **four response options to choose from**, moving beyond the binary nature of current systems:

- **Agree** with the proposal.
- **Reject** the proposal.
- **Appoint a Proxy Vote**: Appoint an expert or trusted individual to vote in their name.
- **Not Ready to Vote**: If the user wants more information before making a decision, they can choose to read more. In this case, they are redirected to the Society Mirror, where they can explore more in-depth details on the policy.

This approach ensures that **youth are not pressured to vote on every topic** but are given the opportunity to **engage with politics at their own pace**, on the issues that matter most to them.

Submit Proposals: Empowering Citizens

The final feature in the Civic Influence Zone allows users to **submit their own proposal**. This option was added to ensure that citizens, especially those with pressing issues that may not yet be addressed in the current political landscape, have the opportunity

to raise their concerns. **If users feel strongly about an issue that isn't currently discussed, they can create and submit their own policy card to the system.**

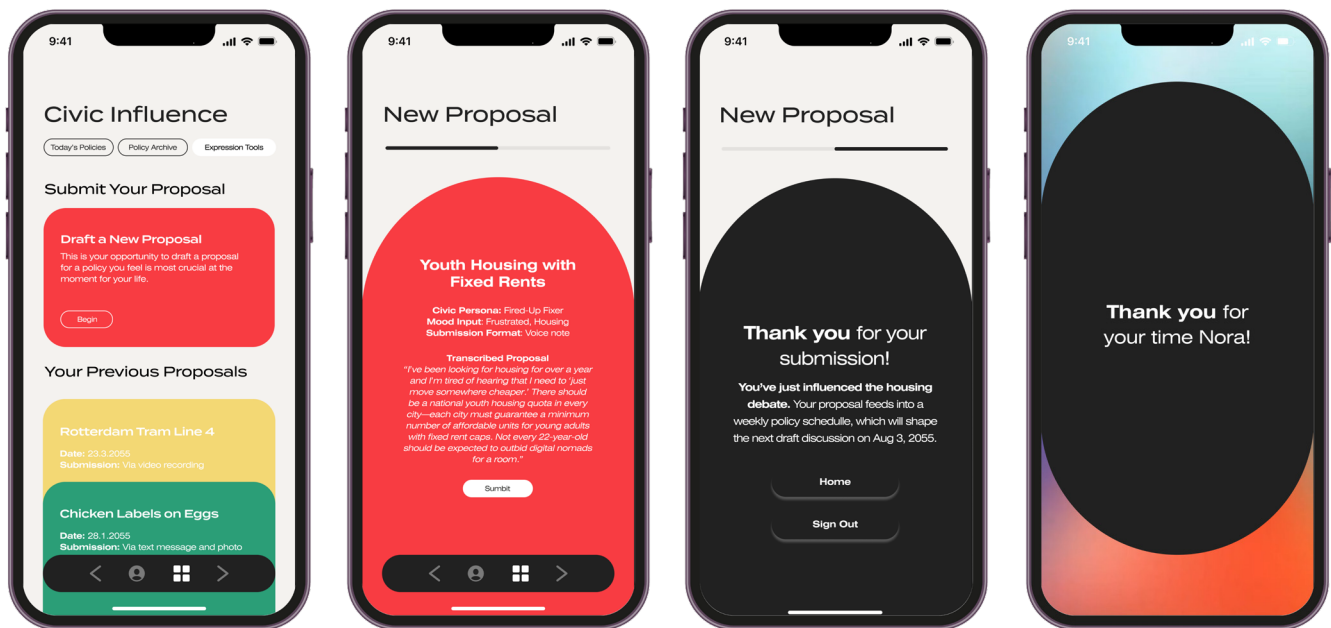
Once submitted, the **proposal is reviewed and sent to the Society Mirror**, where it is made visible to other users and eventually sent to the relevant city council or governing body for further discussion and potential action. **This empowers citizens to initiate change**, particularly for those whose issues may be overlooked by the system.

This feature was influenced by key research insights indicating that **youth often feel that their issues are not adequately addressed in the current political system**. By allowing them to submit their own proposals, Civic Mirror offers a platform for youth to feel more represented and actively involved in shaping the policies that impact them.

Appreciation: Closing the Cycle

Once the user has completed their voting, the process concludes with a **thank you message** from the app, expressing appreciation. This final step ensures the user feels valued for their participation. With this, **app prepares to restart the cycle the following day**, with new opportunities for reflection, engagement, and voting.

Figure 85: Submitting proposals



6.3.4 Why Would Someone Who Is Politically Distant Use the Civic Mirror App?

- **The system doesn't ask citizens to engage politically;** it asks them to engage with themselves. Instead of asking, "Who will you vote for?" it asks, "How do you feel today about the world you live in?" This shift to personal reflection makes the process feel lighter and more meaningful for more apathetic individuals.
- **It doesn't demand a choice.** The system doesn't penalize confusion or detachment; instead, it affirms, "Whatever you're feeling today is politically relevant."
- **Citizens contribute to shaping the system without needing to be "experts."** Their emotional input feeds policy dialogue, instead of knowledge of the policy alone. In this way, even those who don't vote or feel disconnected can nudge the system forward just by checking in.
- **It removes feelings of guilt.** Many young people currently feel like "bad citizens" for not voting or being unsure about politics. The Civic Mirror lets them release that guilt, affirming, *"I showed up honestly. That's enough for today."*
- **It's seamlessly integrated into daily life, making it feel natural.** Civic Mirror stations can be found in cafés and public transport, giving it a feeling of a daily activity rather than a bureaucratic task.

- **Participation becomes a habit,** not a rare or heroic act. Instead of being told, "This is your once-in-four-years moment," users hear, "This is a daily check-in, as natural as tracking your sleep or mood."

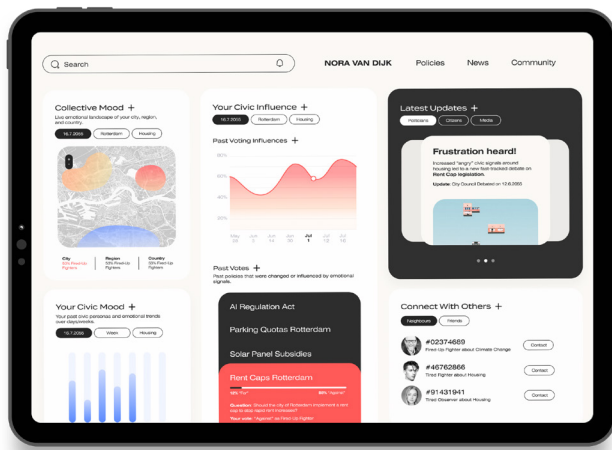
6.4 Society Mirror

The Society Mirror is a **shared political space**, where citizens and politicians **interact, observe, reflect, and co-navigate policy futures**. It is **not a campaign tool or political webpage**, but rather an ever-evolving political dashboard, embedding public mood into legislative discourse.

6.4.1 Key Functions

- **Collects and visualizes emotional data** submitted through the Civic Mirror app and Civic Street Mirror booth.
- **Offers an interactive policy dashboard**, allowing citizens to track, explore, and influence ongoing policy debates.
- **Enables politicians to respond to emotions**, fostering a more empathetic political dialogue.
- **Translates apathy into actionable policy signals**, capturing not only how citizens vote but also how they feel while voting.
- **Promotes transparency and accountability** by making patterns of political emotion publicly available.

Figure 86: Society Mirror dashboard



6.4.2 Key Components

- **Collective Mood Map:** Shows live emotional responses to policies per region, topic, and time. It highlights which policies are triggering strongest reactions.
- **Policy Environment:** Overview of all active policies being debated or reformed.
- **Proposal Space** (from Influence Zone): Selected proposals that gained momentum in the Civic Mirror App become visible here and tracked.
- **Contribution Explainer:** Shows how previous emotional signals and proposals led to specific policy outcomes.
- **Politician Performance:** Shows how politicians responded to signals, whether they adapted proposals, and their empathy alignment with citizen moods.
- **Community:** Citizens can gently connect with citizens who supported similar policy or shared a similar emotion on a specific day.

6.5 Civic Street Mirror

The Civic Street Mirror is **a tactile, public-facing extension of the Civic Mirror ecosystem**. Designed to bring the intimacy of self-reflection into physical space, these booths are placed in libraries, train stations, schools, public squares, and urban hubs around cities.

Where the app offers convenience and daily engagement, **the booth offers more presence and sensory connection**.

It functions as a mirror of society, inviting passersby to reflect on their relationship with politics. Equipped with **a screen** and emotion-sensing technology, it offers **a more immersive reflection**.

Users can answer through visual sliders, speech, or silence. Their input is sent to their personal Civic Mirror account (App) and later Social Mirror platform, to be processed.

6.5.1 Key Components

- **Emotion-Sensing Mirror:** A translucent smart screen helping users reflect both physically and emotionally.
- **Mood Entry Interface:** Users indicate how they feel using sliders or colour gradients. The process is the same as in the Civic Mirror app. The system adapts next steps based on the personal input.
- **Sensory Interaction:** Citizens can respond using touch, voice notes, or remain silent. Additional data can be collected through wearable devices and body sensors.
- **Civic Persona Reveal:** After reflection, the screen briefly shows the user their Civic Persona of the day and an invitation to explore relevant policies at home or on their mobile phone.
- **Private and Calm Design:** Booths are sound-proof, semi-transparent and lit with soft gradient colours. This design provides emotional comfort, countering the cold and aggressive feeling of past political spaces (e.g., voting polls, propaganda material, rallies).

6.6 Civic Mirror Social Media

Political identity of young Europeans today is increasingly shaped by **digital culture, emotional expression, and networked interaction**. For many, citizenship is not only practiced at the ballot box—but on screens, in feeds, stories, reactions, and shared content. Social media is no longer just a space for entertainment or socializing; it is **a space where political identity is formed, challenged, expressed, and witnessed**. It is a mirror of ourselves, and increasingly, a mirror of the collective.

By the year 2055, social media has become the default arena where citizens form, express, and share their political identities. Civic Mirror's social media presence (primarily on platforms like Instagram and TikTok) serves not as a promotional tool, but as a civic stage: one that mirrors the collective emotional landscape of youth politics.

The purpose of the Civic Mirror social media is threefold:

- **Normalize emotional engagement with politics and validate non-rational responses** (e.g., confusion, numbness, anger) as part of civic participation.
- **Humanize the political process** by cantering citizens rather than politicians.
- **Extend the Civic Mirror experience into everyday digital life**, so that political expression happens not just in voting moments, but as part of one's scrolling, sharing, and interacting online.

6.6.1 Instagram Account

For the purpose to show how social media would be integrated into the concept, an Instagram account **@civictimirror2055** was created. Different posts can be found on the account, each highlighting a different angle of the new voting system.

Post Examples

Meet Your Civic Persona:

- Introduces personas like "The Fogwalker", "The Mind Wonderer", "The Happy Contributor".
- Purpose is to draw attention to spectrum of civic identities recognized by the new system.
- Example: *"Mirror mirror, who am I today?"*

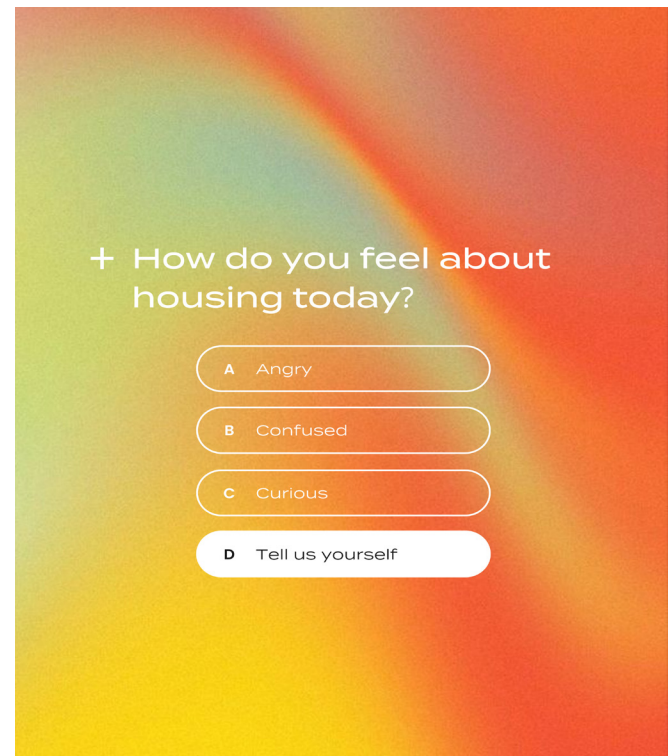
Voting Prompt:

- Showcases policies, instead of politicians. It highlights policy-first mentality and different feeling citizens have about issues.
- Connects to emotions and personas.
- Example: *"How do you feel about housing today?"*

Shared mood:

- Data visual posts showing city-wide civic mood with highlighted emotional islands.
- Example: *"Most common feeling about housing in Rotterdam? Angry. Rent rage is real."*

Figure 87: Civic Mirror Instagram post



Citizen Proposals:

- Showcases real proposals submitted via the Civic Mirror system from citizens.
- It highlights the option of citizens submitting their own political ideas and provokes general public.
- Example: *"Should Rotterdam increase the number of free speech zones? Armin, 21"*

Daily reminders:

- Highlights daily voting feature of the new system. This is done by illustrating the habit through mobile notifications and alerts during a daily task like having a cup of coffee or doing laundry.
- Example: *"Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is ready to be political of them all?"*

Behind the Mirror (System Transparency):

- Explains how Civic Mirror works (algorithms, persona engine, data privacy).
- Example: *"What does your mirror not see?"*

6.6.2 Visual Language

In contrast to traditional political social media pages, dominated by leader portraits, party logos and campaign slogans, **The Civic Mirror Instagram account removes the presence of politicians entirely.** Instead, it shifts the visual focus on citizen's

emotional state, their daily experiences, and their mood as a form of input.

6.7 Research Connection

The Civic Mirror concept is directly informed by the insights gained from the research conducted throughout this thesis, especially through **the context factors research, the speculative design workshop and interviews with youth**. These insights helped shape the concept's features, interactions, and core values, aligning them with the needs and emotional experiences of young Europeans.

Below is a breakdown of how each key research insight from chapters 2,3,4 and 5 is reflected in the design of the Civic Mirror.

Civic Central Role

Research Insight: During the speculative design workshop, participants emphasized that youth should hold more central power in future electoral systems. Young people today expect more continuous and personalized civic involvement, beyond the limited act of voting. They envision decentralized, responsive, and dialogic political models.

- **Connection to Civic Mirror:** Civic Mirror centres the citizen, not just as a voter, but as a continuously involved civic actor. Through daily emotional feedback, mood-based participation, and the ability to vote, reflect, or propose at any point, the system decentralizes participation. It gives agency to citizens by initiating dialogue based on how they feel, rather than demanding an immediate political choice.

Increased Transparency

Research Insight: Youth in the workshop identified radical transparency as a future civic norm. They imagined fully open systems where political processes and emotional inputs are made visible to everyone. Additionally, interview participants expressed frustration with politician's "behind the closed door" decision-making, stating that policies that affect everyone should be passed in a more

transparent way.

- **Connection to Civic Mirror:** Civic Mirror responds with a fully transparent system. Citizens can track not only how their own emotions evolve over time, but also how others feel on a local and national level. Policy changes are transparently linked to collective emotional feedback, and even politician reactions are made visible in Society Mirror platform, creating an open loop of influence and accountability.

Faster Feedback Loops

Research Insight: Across interviews and contextual research, political processes were identified as "too slow," especially on topics like housing, climate change, and social justice. Delayed implementation often meant the solution arrived too late to be relevant.

- **Connection to Civic Mirror:** By shifting the entry point of participation to the present emotional state, Civic Mirror accelerates feedback loops between citizens and decision-makers. If enough young people express urgency and frustration, the system flags this sentiment, amplifies it, and increases pressure on policymakers to respond.

Simplified Political Language

Research Insight: Participants often said they felt alienated or confused by traditional political language, which rarely speaks to their everyday experience. They crave formats that are simpler, emotionally honest, and less coded in party or institutional jargon.

- **Connection to Civic Mirror:** The Influence Zone replaces dense political party manifestos with emotional entry points, real stories, and clear policy overviews. It doesn't require prior knowledge of political systems or candidates. This significantly lowers the cognitive threshold for participation and brings political engagement closer to lived realities.

Daily Voting

Research Insight: Youth often feel disconnected from politics due to long electoral cycles and the

pressure of making major decisions during election days.

- **Connection to Civic Mirror:** By making voting a daily, low-pressure activity, Civic Mirror reduces anxiety around voting. It provides frequent, personalized opportunities for citizens to engage in politics, making them feel that their input matters.

Removal of Guilt

Research Insight: Many young people feel guilty for not voting or not being fully informed about political issues, seeing themselves as “bad citizens.”

- **Connection to Civic Mirror:** Civic Mirror eliminates this guilt by offering personalized policy suggestions based on the user’s interests and emotional state. It allows users to appoint proxy votes, and voting is a daily habit, so users never feel like they’ve missed something important.

No More Performative Politics

Research insight: Lately politics feel more like theatre, driven by faces, slogans, and viral soundbites, than a system of ideas and impact.

- **Connection to Civic Mirror:** Civic Mirror removes performative politics entirely. There are no politician faces, slogans, or campaigns—just content shaped by citizens. This de-spectacularized interface returns focus to content, letting young citizens steer the agenda rather than consume it passively.

Acknowledging Youth’s Identity Spectrum

Research Insight: Political expression among youth varies widely—from sharing on social media, talking to peers, or reflecting privately. Yet, traditional systems only recognize voting as legitimate participation.

- **Connection to Civic Mirror:** Civic Mirror validates multi-modal expressions of political engagement, allowing users to express their feelings through text, voice messages, or video. This flexibility frames voting as a personal act.

Non-Binary Decisions

Research Insight: Participants expressed that elections force them to choose a single option, even when they feel emotionally mixed or uncertain. This binary framing ignores the complexity of their lived experience.

- **Connection to Civic Mirror:** By showing users their emotional history over time, the system normalizes political ambiguity. Instead of demanding a binary decision, it reflects on users emotions and offers different voting responses to policies.

Community and Local Politics

Research Insight: Youth want to feel more connected to local, community-based politics where their voice can have a visible impact. They feel disconnected from national politics and often miss the sense of belonging in political discussions

- **Connection to Civic Mirror:** Civic Mirror focuses on regional politics, allowing users to engage with policies that directly affect their community. By keeping the focus local, it makes political participation feel more personal and impactful, fostering a sense of community and shared responsibility. With Civic Maps and Communitis spaces users also feel a larger sense of belonging to local community.

6.8 Visual Identity

The Civic Mirror brand is built around **the metaphor of reflection**—visual, emotional, and civic. Its aesthetic uses blurred gradients and **mirror-like effects** to convey the multifaceted nature of political emotion. Transparency is never literal—it’s hazy, layered, and personal. Throughout the system, the **oval mirror shape** recurs as a frame, reminding users that what they see is not a candidate’s story, but their own.

6.8.1 Name inspiration

The name draws inspiration from a simple, daily ritual: **looking at yourself in the mirror every morning**. This is often the first moment in the day when we pause and ask ourselves, “How do I feel

Figure 88: Civic Mirror alignment with Ccore thesis insights

Thesis Insight	Civic Mirror Response	Example	Design Principle
Youth apathy is misread as disinterest for politics by the system.	Reframes apathy as a valuable input and signal to the system. It is not a void, but a reflection of system failure.	User selects "Numb" as their daily feeling. Instead of shame, the app renders their emotion into a civic persona.	Apathy is a signal, not silence.
Current voting systems are binary.	Allows emotional, partial, multi-answer political expression.	User is not forced to pick a side with their vote, but offered different response options.	Voting is non-binary.
Informed citizenship is a high barrier.	The app adapts to user's cognitive load through simple policy language and emotional voting.	User selects "overwhelmed" as their daily emotion, so the app suggests low number of policies aligning with their emotion.	Low-threshold participation is still participation.
Young people feel unheard by politicians.	Politicians receive dashboards showing population mood maps and civic trends instead of cold polling data.	Politicians see rising frustration among Rotterdam renters. They must issue responses to emotions.	Governance starts with listening, rather than talking.
Disconnection from traditional elections.	The app reframes voting as daily, lived, felt—not a rare event.	User casts several votes throughout the week. Voting is tied to emotion, not dates.	From event voting to ritual voting.
Politics feels impersonal and distant.	"Civic Persona" personalizes engagement; past moods, emotional map, policies based on it.	User sees they have been angry about housing three times in the past two months.	Self-recognition creates political belonging.
Social media amplifies extremes, not subtlety.	Civic Mirror's Instagram asks provocative yet personal questions to build emotional civic culture.	"What if numb is your loudest vote?" appears on user's feed. They share their mood with friends.	Culture is the gateway to participation.
Youth have nonlinear political identities.	System supports fluid personas—not locked into parties, positions, or ideologies.	User is "Angry" today, "Hopeful" next week. The Civic History shows the trajectory and values its fluidity.	Consistency is not a requirement for legitimacy.
Politicians campaign, but do not co-govern.	Society Mirror reports public's feelings to politicians and demands public response.	Politicians cannot ignore emotional trends. They respond to mood-driven feedback loops, not just votes.	Participation reshapes governance feedback.

feel today?”—noticing fatigue, sadness, or hope in our reflection. This quiet self-assessment became the metaphor for recognition of emotions in politics in my design.

6.8.2 Visual Elements

Typography:

- Termina Test (for bold, futuristic headlines)
- Helios Extended (for clean, modern headlines and labels)
- Poppins – (for clean and simple body text)

Colour Palette:

- Matte Black
- Light Gray
- Blue (technology policy)
- Orange (education policy)
- Green (climate change policy)
- Red (Housing)
- Yellow (Mobility, Urbanism)
- Purple (Economy)
- Blue (Technology)

Patterns:

Different patterns used for different civic personas.

Shapes & Layouts:

Mirror shapes (oval, rounded edges) are used throughout UI and physical materials to subtly reinforce the idea of reflection and self-recognition.

The visual identity is intentionally clean, bold in expression, and emotionally resonant, to counter the overwhelming, noise-saturated branding of past political systems.

Figure 89: Civic Mirror visual identity

Typography

Aa

Helios Extended
Regular
Medium
Medium

Aa

Poppins
Regular
Medium

Aa

Helios Extended
Regular
Bold

Colors



Light Grey
RBG: 244, 242, 239



Black
RBG: 31,31,31



Blue
RBG: 76, 124, 248



Orange
RBG: 250, 163, 110



Purple
RBG: 190, 179, 228



Yellow
RBG: 243, 216, 116



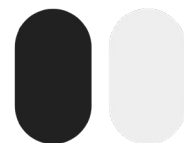
Green
RBG: 43, 158, 119



Red
RBG: 248, 60, 66

Shape

Oval shape resembling a mirror.

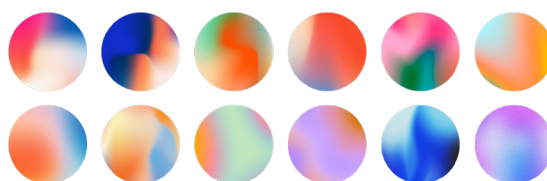


Logo

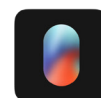
**civic
mirror**

Patterns

Custom gradients of different opacities, colors and flows for Civic Persona



App Icon



07

Discussion and Reflection

About

This chapter presents discussion on research process and reflection on methodology used in the thesis. Later thesis limitations and further recommended steps are discussed. The chapter ends with personal reflection.

7.1 Research Discussion

In this section, a brief recap of **the research questions, the insights obtained through this thesis, and critically reflect on the design goals and methodology.**

7.1.1 Recap of Research Findings

The thesis set out to *explore youth political engagement in Europe*, focusing particularly on the **misinterpretation of apathy** and how this can be **reframed as a valuable form of political participation.**

The research questions **aimed to uncover why youth abstain from traditional politics, what their emotional relationship with politics looks like today, and how a new design could help bridge the gap between the two.**

Youth Feel Excluded from the Political System

Throughout the interviews and workshops, participants consistently reported feeling sidelined by politicians who fail to address youth-specific concerns or engage with them meaningfully. Youth see the political system as slow, self-serving, and distant. This lack of responsiveness deepens their frustration and leads them to seek alternative channels of participation.

Misinterpretation of Youth Apathy

One of the primary insights was the widespread misinterpretation of youth political apathy. Youth are not disengaged because they do not care, but rather because they feel unheard and disconnected from the political system. The current system does not offer a platform where youth can engage based on their emotional states, creating a barrier to participation.

Desire for More Frequent Engagement

Another key finding was that youth crave a more personal and continuous engagement with politics. They want to feel that their emotions are acknowledged and that they have the power to influence decisions. This was evident both in the

speculative workshop and the interviews, where participants expressed frustration with traditional systems that only offer a singular opportunity for participation (i.e., elections).

The Need for Transparency and Responsiveness

The research highlighted that transparency and responsiveness are essential to re-engage youth. Youth want to see real-time responses to their concerns and demands, not just during election periods but as an ongoing process. They expressed dissatisfaction with politicians who fail to act on urgent issues like climate change, housing, and social justice.

Regional Politics as a More Relatable Space

Finally, many participants noted a preference for regional politics over national or supranational systems. The perception of local politics as being more relevant to their daily lives helped create a stronger connection between youth and political processes.

Simplified Communication and Relatable Content

Traditional political language often feels inaccessible and frustrating to youth. Civic Mirror was designed to present policies in simple, everyday language, making political engagement feel more relatable. The system also allows for multi-modal expression, acknowledging that youth communicate in various ways—through text, voice, video, and social media—by incorporating these forms of expression into the platform.

7.1.2 Reflection on Design Goals

The **design goals of the thesis** were heavily shaped by these insights. A clear **tension between politician's perception of apathy and true apathy is at the core of the problem**, that is causing the gap in relationship.

Therefore, a primary objective became, how to design **a solution that would acknowledge apathy as a valuable attribute of politics.** Design aimed to shift the focus from the focus from traditional

perspective of voting, high-stakes and occasional event, to **a more dynamic interaction that aligns with youth's needs for recognition, agency, and emotional validation.**

This was achieved through **the concept of the Civic Mirror**, where users can reflect on their emotional state, choose how they wish to participate, and engage with political content that resonates with their personal experiences.

7.1.3 Reflection on Methodology

The methodology used to develop the Civic Mirror was **a blend of qualitative (strategic) design and speculative design.** The combination allowed for both a deep understanding of the problem and the exploration of potential solutions in a future context. While some proved very valuable there were also some challenges.

Context Factors

Context factors were particularly valuable for **exploring the broader structural and systemic issues** surrounding political participation (elections).

They allowed me to consider **evolving factors** such as misinformation, the rise of echo chambers, and changes in political media during election cycles. By analysing factors such as electoral systems, registration processes, and regulations, I was able to examine the **commonalities and differences between countries like Slovenia and the Netherlands.**

The use of context factors **helped me avoid narrowing the focus to a single electoral system or national context**, offering a more expansive and dynamic view of political participation. These factors **helped illuminate the systemic issues at play**, such as how electoral systems function across different countries, and the obstacles that hinder youth from fully engaging with the political system.

Interviews

While they were extremely valuable, they also presented challenges. Conducting in-depth interviews is an excellent method for exploring personal perspectives on political participation, but they can be **difficult to control in the domain of politics**, especially for an inexperienced design researcher. The amount of data gathered from the interviews was vast, and the diversity of political systems, such as those in Slovenia and the Netherlands, made it **challenging to extract consistent insights.**

However, **interviews proved essential in uncovering the core insights** that shaped the Civic Mirror concept. For example, insights about the misinterpretation of apathy, the need for more frequent engagement, and the preference for elections as a channel for participation emerged directly from these conversations. Without these targeted questions around feelings and perceptions, many of the insights would not have surfaced through context factors alone.

Speculative Design

This method was the most challenging in this thesis, particularly given my limited experience with the method.

Speculative design offered a broad degree of freedom, which, while useful for exploration, at times led to **difficulty in defining clear boundaries within the conceptualization process.** This challenge was particularly evident during the stages of signal scanning and worldbuilding. It was hard to find relevant signals of change in the political participation domain, and the vast amount of content I had to process for worldbuilding resulted in an overwhelming conceptualization phase. The abstract nature of speculative design also made it **difficult to develop concrete tensions**, as the concepts often felt too open-ended.

Despite these difficulties, **speculative design did contribute to the final outcome.** It allowed me to imagine and prototype new ways of engaging

youth in politics and gave clarity to the focus of the design question: “How might a future voting system look like where political apathy is a valuable attribute rather than a negative driver?” This question helped define the direction of the design, keeping the focus on emotional engagement rather than traditional political actions.

Conclusion

While speculative design presented significant challenges, it ultimately guided me in identifying the key focus areas for the design of the Civic Mirror. The combination of methods, despite their limitations, allowed for a more holistic exploration of the issues at hand and provided a solid foundation for the final design solution. In future work, more refined speculative design methods would provide further clarity and refinement to the concept.

7.2 Thesis Limitations

This thesis faced **several limitations throughout the research and design process**, which impacted both the final development of the Civic Mirror and the scope of the study.

Absence of a Client and Limited Access to Political Data

A significant limitation stemmed from the decision not to work with a client. Without direct access to political institutions or relevant governmental data, I struggled to gather necessary insights on their perspectives and the real-world application of policies. The absence of client feedback and political data delayed the process, as it became difficult to access key resources that would have informed and shaped the design.

Politics as a Complex and Broad Domain

Focusing on politics as the primary research domain was another limitation. Politics is an inherently vast and complex field, particularly in Europe, where each country has its own governance system.

As a non-expert in political science, this posed challenges in narrowing down the scope and ensuring a clear, actionable focus. The sheer breadth of data from various political systems across Europe led to a lengthy and at times overwhelming literature review. The challenge of processing such vast and diverse data slowed the analysis.

Speculative Design Methodology and Lack of Experience

The speculative design methodology presented a further challenge. Given my lack of prior experience with this approach, the process of applying speculative design was slower than anticipated. Preparing and executing the methodology required significant time, and at times the outcomes did not meet the expected level of refinement, as with speculative workshop. Despite these hurdles, I was able to complete the speculative design process, though the lack of experience delayed its execution.

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Prototyping and Limited Technological Resources

The final design, Civic Mirror, was developed as a basic prototype rather than a fully functional system due to limited technological and knowledge resources. Time constraints further limited the possibility of conducting user testing, leaving the design unrefined and unvalidated from a practical standpoint. This is a key limitation as the feedback loop necessary for improving the design was not completed.

Personal Circumstances

Personal circumstances affected the final stages of this thesis, requiring me to complete the project within a shortened time frame. As a result, key steps—such as user testing and validation—were sacrificed. The final design was delivered at a conceptual level without the opportunity to test it with real users, limiting its development.

Personal Bias

The inherently subjective nature of politics introduced another limitation: personal bias. As a researcher with experience in the Slovenian political context, I found it difficult to fully detach from my own views when researching political systems, particularly in Slovenia. While efforts were made to minimize bias, it was impossible to completely remove personal experiences, which influenced parts of the analysis and findings.

7.3 Further Steps

This section outlines potential next steps for advancing the research and design process.

Testing

As it will be discussed in the limitations section, the validation phase was unfortunately not conducted, meaning that the effectiveness of the Civic Mirror design concept in addressing the broken relationship between politics and youth remains unknown. Additionally, it is unclear whether the concept is feasible, viable, or desirable. To address these issues, I propose the following steps.

Firstly, the desirability of the Civic Mirror app should be tested with European youth. This could be done with the same participants from the workshop and interviews, as they are already familiar with the project, or with a completely new sample. Ideally, the app should be tested with a diverse group of individuals from multiple European countries. To achieve this, a functional prototype of Civic Mirror would need to be developed, and a detailed validation plan should be created.

Following this, the concept should also be tested with politicians. Since they were not involved in the thesis—either as clients or through interviews—their perspective has not been incorporated into the final concept. While the exclusion of politicians was intentional to avoid external political influence, it is crucial to assess whether the concept is both feasible and viable by engaging political bodies. Given that the concept is intended for regional politics, the next step should involve testing the app with regional political bodies, such as municipalities and city councils.

Further Research

I also propose additional research as a next step. Given that Slovenia and the Netherlands were selected as representative countries for this thesis, it would be beneficial to investigate the current state of youth-political relationships in other European countries and compare these findings with those presented in this study. Furthermore, more research into younger age groups is warranted, as this thesis primarily addressed youth between the ages of 18 and 30, with the majority of respondents in interviews and workshop participants being over 25. Therefore, further investigation into the 18-25 age group is recommended.

Additionally, further research into the needs of politicians is essential, as they were excluded from this thesis. While data on their work, behaviour, and actions was included through literature review, these aspects were not tested with politicians in real-life contexts. I recommend conducting interviews, surveys, and observations of politicians' work during elections to understand their perspective on the relationship between youth and politics. This would also inform the development of the Society Mirror prototype.

Further Design

As mentioned in the testing phase, a fully functional digital prototype must be developed to facilitate further validation. I recommend initially focusing on the development of the app before creating the Society Mirror system. This approach

will allow the researcher/designer to concentrate solely on the needs of youth, without the added complexity of addressing the needs of politicians at this stage.

7.4 Personal Reflection

This journey has undoubtedly been the most challenging experience of my life, not just academically or professionally, but in every sense. As much as I have enjoyed the process and learned from it, personal circumstances along the way significantly impacted my journey. This project began out of my frustration with the political situation in my home country, where I witnessed so many young people, especially my friends, feeling disillusioned and disappointed by the system. It was painful to watch, and I felt a deep need to do something to address this issue.

As I write this, political situations across Europe have worsened, and the rise of populism, violence, and the increasing control of systems by politicians is deeply unsettling. Yet, this only fuels my desire to fight back against the negativity and to create change. Political participation, as I have learned throughout this thesis, is not only a complex issue but a fundamental aspect of our daily lives, even when we don't recognize its full impact.

The insights I've gained about youth across Europe—about their political habits, mentalities, and identities—have been both revealing and transformative. It has challenged many of the preconceptions I had and opened my eyes to new perspectives.

While I am exhausted and eager to move on to the next phase of my life, I am also incredibly grateful for this thesis. It has taught me more about resilience, survival, and my own capacity to face challenges than anything I have experienced before.

7.4 Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to all those who have supported me throughout the process of writing this thesis and during my academic journey.

First, I would like to thank my mentors Sine Celik and Deger Ozkaramanli for their invaluable guidance and constructive feedback. Your expertise, patience, and continuous support have been crucial to the development of this thesis. I am also grateful to all the participants who took part in my research—your insights, time, and willingness to engage have greatly enriched this work and made it possible.

A special thank you to the staff at the university for their encouragement and assistance throughout my studies. Your help, whether in the form of administrative support or academic advice, has been greatly appreciated.

I would also like to extend my heartfelt thanks to those who have helped me reach this point in my education. To my parents, whose sacrifices and unwavering support have shaped my journey, I am truly grateful. You have always believed in me, and your love and guidance have been my foundation.

To my friends Milica, Maja, Kristina, Jure, Janja, Jan, Ivan, and many others, your friendship, encouragement, and support have meant the world to me during this process. Thank you for always being there, listening, and keeping me motivated.

Finally, I owe the greatest thanks to Linda, the biggest support in my life. Your love, understanding, and constant belief in me have been a driving force throughout this entire journey. I cannot thank you enough for being by my side.

Thank you all for helping me reach this point. Grandma this one is for you.

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