
YOUTH UNDER-REPRESENTATION, INTERGENERATIONAL JUSTICE, AND DEMOCRATIC SUSTAINABILITY IN SOUTH AFRICA'S PARLIAMENT

***¹Humphrey Lepheth Motsepe, ²Mahlodi Joice Sethu, ³Sheperd Sikhosana, ⁴Bonginkosi Dladlana, ⁵Masedi Simon Ramafalo, ⁶Khwiting Moshidi**

¹Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (Towoomba Research Centre), Management College of Southern Africa (MANCOSA) and University of Venda, South Africa.

²University of Venda, Department of Public and Development Administration, Faculty of Management, Commerce and Law, South Africa.

³University of Azteca, Mexico and Highway Institute of Learning, South Africa.

⁴University of Limpopo, South Africa.

⁵Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, South Africa.

⁶Limpopo Office of the Premier, South Africa.

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***Corresponding Author: Humphrey Lepheth Motsepe**

Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (Towoomba Research Centre), Management College of Southern Africa (MANCOSA) and University of Venda, South Africa.

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ABSTRACT

Youth constitute a demographic majority in South Africa, yet their representation in parliamentary decision making remains persistently low. This disconnect raises serious concerns for intergenerational justice and the long-term sustainability of democratic governance. The purpose of this article is to examine the extent and implications of youth under-representation in South Africa's Parliament and to assess how this imbalance affects democratic legitimacy, policy responsiveness, and future-oriented governance. The study adopts a qualitative desktop research design, drawing on secondary data from parliamentary records, electoral statistics, and recent peer-reviewed literature on political representation, intergenerational justice, and democratic sustainability. The analysis reveals a significant age asymmetry in parliamentary leadership, with legislative authority concentrated among older cohorts whose policy priorities may not adequately reflect the lived realities of younger

citizens. This pattern weakens substantive representation, undermines youth political trust, and constrains the state's capacity to address long-term challenges such as unemployment, education reform, and climate vulnerability. The article argues that youth exclusion is not merely a representational deficit but a structural democratic risk that compromises intergenerational equity. The findings contribute to debates on democratic renewal by demonstrating that inclusive age representation is central to sustaining democratic legitimacy in ageing political institutions governing youthful societies. The study concludes by proposing institutional and party-level reforms aimed at strengthening youth representation as a democratic imperative rather than a symbolic gesture.

KEYWORDS: Democratic sustainability; Intergenerational justice; Parliament; South Africa; Youth representation.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

South Africa is widely recognised as a youthful society, yet its political leadership remains disproportionately older. Recent population estimates indicate that individuals between the ages of 18 and 35 constitute more than one third of the national population, positioning youth as a decisive demographic bloc with a legitimate stake in the country's political and economic future (Statistics South Africa, 2023). Despite this demographic reality, young people remain largely absent from formal political institutions, particularly Parliament. This imbalance is not merely numerical but structural, reflecting enduring barriers to political entry that shape whose voices are heard in law-making processes (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022). Parliament occupies a central position in South Africa's constitutional democracy. As the supreme legislative authority, it is tasked with enacting laws, overseeing the executive, and representing the will of the people across social, economic, and generational lines (Republic of South Africa, 1996). Parliamentary decisions often have long-term consequences, particularly in areas such as public debt, education reform, labour market regulation, and climate governance. When the age profile of Parliament diverges significantly from that of the broader population, concerns arise about whose interests are prioritised and whose futures are being shaped without meaningful representation (Mansbridge, Fricker, Gutmann, Thompson, & Williams, 2021).

Empirical evidence suggests that youth representation in South Africa's Parliament remains limited. Data from recent parliamentary terms show that members under the age of 35 constitute a small minority of legislators, with leadership and committee positions dominated

by individuals well beyond youth age thresholds (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). This pattern reflects a broader global trend in which ageing political elites govern increasingly youthful societies, particularly in the Global South. However, in a country such as South Africa, where youth unemployment, educational inequality, and social exclusion are persistent challenges, the absence of youth voices in legislative spaces carries heightened significance (Resnick, Auriol, & Tarp, 2021). The marginalisation of youth in parliamentary politics must also be understood within South Africa's constitutional framework. The Constitution affirms the right of all citizens to participate in political life and to stand for public office without unreasonable restrictions (Republic of South Africa, 1996). Yet constitutional guarantees alone do not translate automatically into substantive representation. Structural barriers, including party candidate selection processes, patronage networks, and the high costs of political campaigning, continue to disadvantage younger aspirants, particularly those without access to established political capital (Booyesen, 2023).

The research problem addressed in this article is the persistent under-representation of youth in South Africa's Parliament despite their demographic significance and formal political rights. While youth participation is often discussed in relation to voting behaviour, protests, or civic activism, far less attention is given to youth presence within decision-making institutions themselves. This gap is problematic because participation without representation limits the capacity of young people to shape policy outcomes directly and sustainably (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022). The objective of this study is:

To examine how youth under-representation in Parliament affects intergenerational justice and democratic sustainability in South Africa.

Intergenerational justice concerns the fair distribution of political power and policy burdens across generations, particularly between those who make decisions today and those who will live with their consequences tomorrow (Bidadanure, 2021). When legislative authority is concentrated among older cohorts, there is a risk that policy priorities may favour short-term political stability over long-term social investment, thereby disadvantaging younger and future generations. Democratic sustainability refers to the capacity of a democratic system to maintain legitimacy, responsiveness, and citizen trust over time. Research shows that when large segments of the population perceive political institutions as unresponsive or unrepresentative, political disengagement and institutional distrust tend to increase (Mansbridge et al., 2021). In South Africa, declining youth voter turnout and growing

scepticism toward formal politics suggest that under-representation may be contributing to broader democratic fatigue among younger citizens (Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2024).

This article is significant because it reframes youth exclusion from a peripheral concern into a core democratic issue. Rather than treating youth participation as a symbolic or developmental objective, the study positions youth representation as a structural condition for democratic endurance. By linking descriptive age representation to intergenerational justice and democratic sustainability, the article contributes to contemporary debates on democratic renewal in unequal and youthful societies (Bidadanure, 2021; Resnick et al., 2021). The study is guided by three central research questions:

First, to what extent are young people under-represented in South Africa's Parliament relative to their demographic share?

Second, how does this under-representation affect intergenerational justice, particularly in relation to long-term policy making?

Third, what are the implications of youth exclusion for the sustainability and legitimacy of South Africa's democratic system? Addressing these questions is essential for understanding not only who governs South Africa today, but also whose futures are being shaped in the process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

Youth political exclusion has emerged as a central concern in contemporary democratic scholarship, particularly in societies where demographic youthfulness contrasts sharply with ageing political leadership. Across both established and emerging democracies, scholars increasingly note that political institutions tend to reproduce generational hierarchies that marginalise younger citizens from meaningful decision-making power (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022). The literature reviewed in this section examines how youth under-representation is conceptualised globally and within South Africa, how it intersects with theories of intergenerational justice, and why its implications for democratic sustainability remain insufficiently theorised. The researchers adopt a critical position that supports existing concerns about youth exclusion while extending the literature by arguing that youth under-representation is not merely a democratic deficit but a distortion of democratic time. When legislatures are dominated by older cohorts, policy making becomes structurally biased

toward short-term horizons, thereby weakening the capacity of democracy to address long-range social, economic, and environmental challenges (Bidadanure, 2021). This review therefore moves beyond participation-focused analyses and situates youth representation within debates on democratic endurance, institutional legitimacy, and generational equity.

Youth Political Representation as a Global Democratic Challenge

Recent comparative scholarship demonstrates with remarkable consistency that young people remain significantly under-represented in legislative institutions across the world, irrespective of regime type, electoral system, or level of economic development (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022). Large-N cross-national studies show that parliaments tend to be dominated by older age cohorts even in societies where young people form the demographic majority, particularly in regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and parts of South Asia (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). The researchers support this body of work and emphasises that youth under-representation should not be understood as a temporary lag effect, but rather as a durable structural feature of contemporary representative democracies. The literature attributes this global pattern to a combination of institutional, organisational, and cultural factors. Electoral systems that reward incumbency, party gatekeeping practices that favour seniority, and informal norms that equate political competence with age collectively function to exclude younger candidates from winnable positions (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022). Studies of political recruitment further reveal that political parties often view youth as mobilisers and campaign resources rather than as legitimate decision makers, reinforcing a hierarchical pathway in which meaningful power is deferred until later in life (Cross & Young, 2023). The researchers concur with this interpretation and argues that such practices normalise generational inequality within democratic institutions while presenting it as political pragmatism. Evidence also suggests that youth under-representation has intensified over time rather than diminished. Data compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union show a steady increase in the average age of parliamentarians globally, with fewer than three percent of legislators worldwide now under the age of 30, despite the expansion of youth electorates in many countries (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). This trend raises serious concerns for descriptive representation, which democratic theory identifies as a key mechanism through which diverse social experiences enter legislative deliberation (Mansbridge et al., 2021). When legislatures lack members who have direct experience of youth unemployment, precarious work, or delayed transitions into adulthood, policy debates risk becoming detached from the realities faced by younger citizens. Beyond questions of

representation, global scholarship increasingly links youth exclusion to declining democratic trust and participation. Comparative studies show that young people who do not see themselves reflected in political institutions are more likely to disengage from voting, to express scepticism toward democratic processes, and to seek alternative forms of political expression outside formal channels (OECD, 2020; Norris, 2022). The researchers align with this view but introduces an additional dimension by arguing that youth under-representation reshapes the temporal orientation of democratic governance itself. When political institutions are dominated by older cohorts, democratic decision making tends to prioritise immediate stability and short-term political survival, often at the expense of long-term social investment and intergenerational equity. This emerging perspective suggests that youth exclusion is not only a crisis of participation or legitimacy, but also a crisis of democratic time horizons. Democracies that systematically marginalise younger generations risk losing their capacity to govern for the future. The researchers therefore contends that global debates on youth political representation must move beyond participation metrics and engage more directly with how age imbalances influence policy priorities, institutional resilience, and democratic endurance over time.

Youth Participation versus Youth Representation

A central and recurring distinction in contemporary scholarship on youth politics is the difference between youth participation and youth representation. Participation generally refers to the ways in which young people engage with political life, including voting, protesting, joining civic organisations, or participating in online activism, while representation concerns access to formal political authority and the capacity to influence decision making within institutionalised spaces of power (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022). Recent studies consistently show that while young people are often highly visible in participatory arenas, they remain marginal within legislatures, cabinets, and senior party structures, revealing a structural disconnect between political energy and political power (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). The literature widely documents what has been described as a paradox of youth politics. Young people are frequently portrayed as politically apathetic when measured through conventional indicators such as voter turnout, yet they are simultaneously among the most active participants in protests, social movements, and issue-based campaigns (Norris, 2022). This paradox is increasingly understood not as a failure of youth engagement, but as a reflection of institutional barriers that limit young people's access to formal representation. Stockemer and Sundström (2022) argue that political systems often

welcome youth participation as a source of mobilisation and legitimacy while resisting youth representation because it threatens established hierarchies of power. In African contexts, this distinction between participation and representation is particularly pronounced. Resnick, Auriol, and Tarp (2021) demonstrate that young people across the continent are deeply engaged in political life, but that their engagement frequently takes extra-institutional forms such as protests, strikes, and community-based activism. These forms of participation often emerge precisely because formal political channels are perceived as inaccessible, unresponsive, or dominated by entrenched elites. The researchers support this interpretation and notes that participation outside institutions should be understood as a rational response to exclusion rather than as a rejection of democracy itself. South Africa offers a compelling illustration of this dynamic. Youth have historically played a decisive role in political mobilisation, from the 1976 student uprisings to the mass movements that contributed to the end of apartheid (Booyesen, 2023). In the post-apartheid era, young people have remained at the forefront of political action, particularly in service delivery protests, student movements such as #FeesMustFall, and community-based struggles over housing and employment (Booyesen, 2023; Alexander, 2022). Yet, despite this sustained activism, young people continue to occupy a marginal position within Parliament and other formal decision-making institutions, suggesting that participation has not translated into durable political representation. The researchers align with critical scholarship that warns against an overemphasis on participation as an indicator of democratic health. While participation can provide important avenues for political expression and agenda setting, it does not in itself alter the distribution of power within the state. Representation, by contrast, determines who sets legislative priorities, controls public resources, and shapes long-term policy trajectories (Mansbridge et al., 2021). When youth participation is celebrated without corresponding attention to representation, there is a risk that political systems become comfortable with symbolic inclusion while substantive exclusion persists. Taking this perspective, the literature's strong focus on participation may inadvertently depoliticise the question of power. Encouraging young people to vote, protest, or engage civically without addressing structural barriers to representation can create the appearance of inclusion while leaving decision-making authority unchanged. The researchers therefore introduce a complementary argument that participation without representation may function as a stabilising mechanism for unequal systems, allowing young people to express discontent without gaining influence over outcomes. This insight shifts the analytical focus from what young people do politically to what political institutions allow young people to become. Ultimately, the distinction between

youth participation and youth representation is not merely conceptual but deeply political. The persistence of high participation alongside low representation suggests that democratic systems may be absorbing youth energy without redistributing power. Addressing youth exclusion therefore requires moving beyond participatory initiatives and confronting the institutional rules, party practices, and cultural norms that limit young people's access to political authority. Without such a shift, youth participation risks remaining an outlet for frustration rather than a pathway to democratic transformation.

South Africa's Youthful Demography and Political Leadership

South Africa represents one of the most pronounced examples of generational imbalance between society and political leadership within contemporary democracies. Demographic data show that the country is structurally youthful, with individuals between the ages of 18 and 35 constituting more than one third of the total population, a proportion that has remained relatively stable over the past decade (Statistics South Africa, 2023). This youthful demographic profile stands in sharp contrast to the age composition of Parliament, where legislative authority remains heavily concentrated among older cohorts, raising fundamental questions about representativeness and democratic inclusion (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). The researchers support the view that this imbalance is not incidental but reflects deeper institutional patterns that shape political recruitment and leadership reproduction. Empirical studies of parliamentary composition in South Africa consistently show that members under the age of 35 constitute only a small minority of legislators, while key leadership positions are overwhelmingly occupied by individuals over the age of 50 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). This age skew persists across electoral cycles and political parties, suggesting that generational exclusion is systemic rather than party-specific. Comparative analyses further indicate that South Africa's Parliament is older, on average, than those of several countries with similar demographic profiles, reinforcing the argument that youthful population structures do not automatically translate into youthful political leadership (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022). South African political scholarship attributes this persistent under-representation of youth primarily to party-centred systems of candidate selection. Booysen (2023) argues that internal party processes tend to reward long-standing loyalty, factional alignment, and seniority, often at the expense of generational renewal. In this context, political parties act as powerful gatekeepers, controlling access to winnable electoral positions and shaping the age profile of legislative institutions. Youth wings, while highly visible, frequently function as mobilisation structures rather than as genuine pathways

to political authority, limiting their impact on parliamentary representation (Booyesen, 2023). The researchers concur with this analysis but introduces an additional dimension by emphasising the cultural normalisation of generational inequality within South Africa's political system. Age hierarchy is often justified through appeals to experience, struggle credentials, or institutional memory, which can marginalise younger leaders by framing them as politically immature or insufficiently tested (Graham & Mlatsheni, 2022). While experience is undoubtedly valuable in governance, the routine privileging of age risks transforming generational imbalance into a taken-for-granted feature of democratic life rather than a problem requiring correction. Moreover, this generational pattern has implications that extend beyond descriptive representation. When political leadership is dominated by older cohorts, policy priorities tend to reflect the interests and temporal horizons of those groups, often placing less emphasis on long-term investments that disproportionately affect younger generations, such as education reform, employment creation, and sustainable fiscal planning (OECD, 2021). The researchers argues that South Africa's demographic reality intensifies this problem, as the consequences of present policy decisions will be borne most heavily by a youthful population that lacks meaningful representation in Parliament. In this sense, South Africa's youthful demography does not merely coexist with an ageing political elite but actively exposes the democratic costs of generational exclusion. The persistent gap between who the population is and who governs undermines the principle that democratic institutions should reflect the society they serve. Addressing this imbalance therefore requires more than symbolic youth inclusion. It demands structural reforms within political parties and legislatures that treat generational diversity as a democratic imperative rather than an optional ideal.

Youth Exclusion and Socioeconomic Policy Outcomes

A growing body of empirical and theoretical literature links the under-representation of young people in legislatures to socioeconomic policy outcomes that systematically disadvantage younger generations. In the South African context, scholars argue that persistent youth unemployment cannot be explained solely by structural economic constraints or skills mismatches, but must also be understood as a consequence of political exclusion from decision-making spaces (Graham & Mlatsheni, 2022). When those most affected by unemployment, precarious work, and delayed labour market entry lack representation in Parliament, these issues are more easily reframed as technical or cyclical problems rather than urgent political crises requiring sustained legislative attention. Graham and Mlatsheni

(2022) demonstrate that South Africa's youth unemployment crisis has been met with fragmented and often short-lived policy responses, including temporary wage subsidies and limited public employment schemes. These interventions, while symbolically important, have not altered the structural conditions facing young labour market entrants. The researchers support this analysis and add that the absence of young legislators with direct experience of labour market exclusion may contribute to a policy environment in which youth unemployment is normalised rather than treated as a democratic failure. In this sense, political distance from youth realities allows decision makers to tolerate policy stagnation without immediate electoral consequences. The literature further suggests that youth exclusion shapes how policy priorities are sequenced over time. Studies of legislative behaviour indicate that policymakers tend to prioritise issues that yield visible benefits within short electoral cycles, particularly when those benefits accrue to electorally influential groups (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022). In South Africa, this dynamic often translates into an emphasis on short-term fiscal consolidation or politically expedient spending rather than long-term investments in human capital that primarily benefit younger and future generations (OECD, 2021). The researchers concur with this view and argues that generational imbalance in Parliament reinforces a governance logic that privileges immediacy over sustainability. Education policy provides a particularly revealing illustration of this pattern. Spaull and Jansen (2023) show that despite extensive evidence linking early childhood development, expanded tertiary access, and digital skills acquisition to long-term economic growth, these areas remain inconsistently funded and unevenly implemented. Budgetary debates frequently prioritise cost containment over transformative investment, even as learning outcomes and youth skills indicators continue to lag behind global benchmarks (Spaull & Jansen, 2023). The researchers support this interpretation and suggest that policies whose benefits materialise over decades are especially vulnerable in political systems where those who will benefit most are under-represented. Beyond labour and education, youth exclusion also shapes broader socioeconomic policy orientations. Research on housing, transport, and social protection highlights that young people face disproportionate barriers to asset accumulation and economic security, yet these challenges rarely feature prominently in legislative agendas (OECD, 2021). The researchers introduce an additional dimension by arguing that youth under-representation not only limits policy ambition but also weakens policy accountability. When young people are absent from Parliament, there are fewer institutional advocates to sustain pressure for implementation and follow-through. Taken together, the literature suggests that youth exclusion has cumulative effects on socioeconomic policy outcomes.

Rather than producing isolated policy failures, generational imbalance contributes to a pattern of delayed action, incrementalism, and underinvestment in the future. The researchers therefore contends that youth representation should be understood as a structural condition for policy responsiveness and long-term development. Without addressing generational inequality in political institutions, efforts to resolve youth unemployment, educational deficits, and economic precarity are likely to remain constrained by short-term political calculations.

Intergenerational Justice and Democratic Fairness

Intergenerational justice has become an increasingly influential analytical lens in the study of democratic inequality, particularly in societies where demographic change is not reflected in political institutions. Contemporary theorists argue that democratic legitimacy cannot be assessed solely through procedural fairness or electoral competition, but must also account for how political power is distributed across generations (Bidadanure, 2021). When decisions taken in the present generate long-term social, economic, or ecological consequences, fairness requires that those who will bear these consequences have a meaningful voice in shaping them. The researchers support this position and emphasises that intergenerational justice moves democratic analysis beyond the present moment, forcing attention to how today's governance choice's structure tomorrow's opportunities. Bidadanure (2021) argues that when older generations dominate legislatures, younger and future citizens become structurally disadvantaged, even if their formal political rights remain intact. This disadvantage does not arise from explicit exclusion, but from institutional arrangements that allow one generation to exercise disproportionate influence over decisions whose costs will be deferred. The researchers align with this argument and notes that such dominance is particularly problematic in representative democracies, where legitimacy rests on the assumption that political institutions broadly reflect the interests of the governed. When generational imbalance becomes entrenched, democratic equality is weakened not by authoritarianism, but by the cumulative effects of unequal voice. Recent literature has expanded the scope of intergenerational justice beyond its traditional association with environmental sustainability. González-Ricoy and Gosseries (2022) demonstrate that intergenerational injustice also manifests in fiscal policy, public debt accumulation, pension design, and long-term infrastructure planning. Decisions in these areas frequently prioritise current political stability while shifting financial and social burdens onto younger and future cohorts. The researchers support this broader conception and argue that focusing exclusively

on climate change risks obscuring other policy domains where generational inequality is equally pronounced and politically consequential. Within this expanded framework, youth under-representation emerges as a central mechanism through which intergenerational injustice is reproduced. When young people are largely absent from legislatures, policies affecting education systems, labour markets, housing affordability, and public investment are shaped without sustained input from those most affected over the long term (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022). The researchers introduce an additional dimension by suggesting that intergenerational injustice should be understood as cumulative rather than episodic. Political exclusion compounds over time, interacting with socioeconomic inequality to produce layered disadvantages that persist across the life course. The literature further suggests that intergenerational inequality undermines democratic fairness by distorting accountability relationships. Older legislators are electorally accountable primarily to older voters, whose policy preferences may differ significantly from those of younger citizens (OECD, 2021). As a result, democratic responsiveness becomes unevenly distributed, reinforcing a cycle in which youth interests remain peripheral to legislative agendas. The researchers concur with this assessment and argues that democratic fairness requires not only equal voting rights, but also equitable access to agenda-setting power. In this sense, intergenerational justice is not a marginal ethical concern but a core democratic issue. A democracy that systematically privileges the political voice of one generation over others risks eroding its moral foundation. The researchers therefore contends that youth under-representation should be recognised as a form of political inequality that accumulates over time, shaping policy outcomes, institutional trust, and democratic sustainability. Addressing intergenerational injustice requires deliberate efforts to rebalance political power across age cohorts and to treat generational diversity as an essential component of democratic fairness rather than a secondary consideration.

Democratic Sustainability and Temporal Governance

Democratic sustainability is increasingly understood as the capacity of democratic institutions to maintain legitimacy, responsiveness, and resilience not only in the present, but across successive generations. Contemporary democratic theory emphasises that sustainability depends on inclusive representation and balanced power relations, particularly in societies marked by demographic diversity and rapid social change (Mansbridge et al., 2021). When political authority becomes concentrated among specific social groups whose interests or life circumstances diverge from those of the broader population, democratic institutions risk becoming disconnected from the society they are meant to serve. The researchers support this

position and argue that age is a critical but often overlooked dimension of such concentration. Mansbridge et al. (2021) contend that democracies weaken when representation fails to reflect key social cleavages, as this erodes both descriptive legitimacy and substantive responsiveness. Youth exclusion accelerates this weakening by systematically narrowing the temporal horizon of democratic decision making. When legislatures are dominated by older cohorts, policy debates are more likely to prioritise short-term political stability, immediate fiscal constraints, or electoral calculations that align with the preferences of current dominant voters (OECD, 2021). The researchers align with this argument and emphasises that democratic sustainability requires institutions capable of governing with an awareness of long-term consequences, particularly in areas such as education, employment, infrastructure, and public debt. Building on this foundation, the researchers introduce a temporal governance perspective to the literature on youth under-representation. Taking a direction of this viewpoint, youth exclusion is not only a problem of fairness or participation, but a problem of democratic time. Temporal governance refers to how political institutions weigh present needs against future outcomes and how they distribute costs and benefits across generations (González-Ricoy & Gosseries, 2022). When legislatures are dominated by individuals who are less likely to experience the long-term consequences of current policies, democratic decision making becomes structurally biased toward immediacy. This bias is not necessarily intentional, but emerges from the lived realities and time horizons of decision makers. Empirical governance research supports this concern. Studies show that political systems with limited generational diversity tend to underinvest in policies whose benefits accrue over decades, while favouring measures that yield short-term political rewards (OECD, 2021). The researchers argues that youth under-representation amplifies this tendency by reducing institutional advocacy for future-oriented policy choices. In such contexts, democratic sustainability is undermined not through abrupt institutional collapse, but through gradual erosion of foresight, trust, and adaptive capacity. The literature on democratic trust further reinforces this argument. Younger citizens who perceive political institutions as unresponsive to their long-term concerns are more likely to disengage from formal politics and to question the relevance of democratic processes (Norris, 2022). Over time, this disengagement weakens the intergenerational social contract that underpins democratic legitimacy. The researchers concur with this view and adds that temporal misalignment between who governs and who will inherit the consequences of governance decisions poses a direct threat to democratic endurance. In this sense, democratic sustainability cannot be separated from temporal inclusivity. A democracy that consistently privileges short-term considerations over long-

term societal well-being risks governing effectively for the present while failing the future. The researchers therefore contends that youth representation should be understood as a temporal corrective within democratic systems. By broadening the time horizons represented in legislatures, democracies enhance their capacity to balance immediacy with foresight and to sustain legitimacy across generations.

Institutional Barriers to Youth Representation

The contemporary literature identifies a range of institutional barriers that systematically constrain youth access to formal political power. Comparative studies show that these barriers are rarely explicit exclusions, but rather embedded within the ordinary functioning of political systems, making them both durable and difficult to challenge (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022). High nomination fees, stringent campaign financing requirements, and the professionalisation of politics disproportionately disadvantage younger candidates, who typically have fewer financial resources, weaker elite networks, and shorter political résumés. The researchers support this analysis and emphasises that these barriers collectively transform age into an informal criterion for political eligibility. Internal party hierarchies emerge as a particularly significant obstacle to youth representation. Political parties across democratic systems tend to privilege incumbency, seniority, and long-standing factional loyalty when selecting candidates for winnable electoral positions (Cross & Gauja, 2023). These practices are often justified as mechanisms for ensuring experience and stability, yet they function to reproduce existing leadership profiles and marginalise younger aspirants. The researchers align with this literature but adds that such hierarchies also shape political socialisation by signalling to young activists that meaningful power is deferred rather than attainable, reinforcing generational stratification within parties. In South Africa, these institutional barriers are intensified by the proportional representation electoral system, which centralises candidate selection authority within party leadership structures. Scholars argue that closed party lists limit voter influence over individual candidates and increase the power of party elites to control legislative entry (Booyesen, 2023). As a result, young candidates who lack strong ties to dominant factions or senior leaders face significant challenges in securing viable parliamentary positions. The researchers concur with this assessment and notes that proportional representation, while promoting inclusivity across parties, can inadvertently restrict inclusivity within parties, particularly along generational lines. The literature also highlights the role of informal institutional norms in sustaining youth exclusion. Political experience is frequently equated with age, while youthfulness is associated with inexperience

or political immaturity, even when younger candidates possess substantial professional or activist credentials (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022). These norms operate subtly, shaping perceptions of leadership suitability and influencing selection decisions without the need for formal exclusionary rules. The researchers introduce an additional dimension by arguing that such norms normalise generational dominance, making age imbalance appear natural rather than politically constructed. Policy-oriented scholarship has increasingly debated the role of corrective mechanisms such as youth quotas or reserved seats. Proponents argue that quotas can accelerate descriptive representation and disrupt entrenched patterns of exclusion, particularly in systems where informal barriers are deeply rooted (OECD, 2021). Critics, however, caution that quotas risk producing tokenistic inclusion if young representatives lack real influence over legislative agendas or party decision making (Cross & Young, 2023). The researchers adopt a nuanced position within this debate, recognising that quotas alone cannot resolve structural inequality, but rejecting the assumption that incremental change will emerge organically without intervention. Advancing an argument from the researchers' perspective, the central challenge lies not in choosing between quotas and merit-based systems, but in redesigning institutions to recognise generational diversity as a democratic asset. Deliberate corrective measures, including transparent candidate selection processes, financial support for young candidates, and internal party rules that promote age diversity, are necessary to disrupt entrenched patterns of generational dominance. Without such reforms, institutional barriers will continue to filter political ambition through age-biased structures, limiting the capacity of democratic systems to renew themselves and remain responsive to younger generations.

Youth Trust, Legitimacy, and Democratic Alienation

Declining levels of youth trust in democratic institutions have emerged as a consistent and troubling theme in recent comparative political scholarship. Large-scale governance surveys conducted across advanced and emerging democracies show that young people report significantly lower levels of trust in parliaments, political parties, and electoral systems than older cohorts, alongside higher levels of political dissatisfaction and scepticism toward political elites (OECD, 2021). These trends are not confined to a single region or political system, suggesting a structural challenge rather than a context-specific anomaly. The researchers support this interpretation and emphasises that trust is a foundational component of democratic legitimacy, shaping whether citizens view political institutions as worthy of obedience and engagement. In South Africa, empirical evidence reflects similar patterns of

youth disengagement and declining institutional confidence. Data from the Electoral Commission of South Africa indicate that voter turnout among younger age cohorts has steadily declined across recent national and local elections, even as overall electoral participation has remained relatively stable (Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2024). This divergence suggests that young people are not withdrawing from democracy altogether, but are increasingly distancing themselves from formal democratic channels. The researchers concur with scholarship that interprets this trend as a signal of alienation rather than apathy, particularly in a country with a long history of youth-led political mobilisation. The literature increasingly challenges explanations that frame youth disengagement as a problem of civic deficiency or political immaturity. Norris (2022) argues that political trust is shaped less by generational attitudes and more by institutional performance and inclusivity. When democratic institutions consistently fail to reflect the interests, identities, and lived experiences of younger citizens, trust erosion becomes a predictable outcome. The researchers align with this perspective and argues that declining youth trust should be understood as a response to exclusionary governance structures rather than as a withdrawal from democratic values. Moving from this standpoint, youth alienation is not simply attitudinal but structurally produced. Political systems that systematically exclude younger citizens from decision-making authority send a clear message about whose voices matter. When legislatures, party leadership structures, and executive bodies are dominated by older cohorts, young people are positioned as subjects of policy rather than as authors of it (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022). The researchers support this argument and add that disengagement becomes a rational response to repeated experiences of political marginalisation rather than a failure of civic responsibility. Recent governance research further shows that perceived exclusion has cumulative effects on democratic legitimacy. Young people who feel unrepresented are less likely to believe that elections produce meaningful change and more likely to express support for non-electoral forms of political action or, in some cases, for anti-system alternatives (OECD, 2023). This pattern poses a long-term risk to democratic sustainability, as trust deficits formed early in the political life cycle tend to persist over time. The researchers introduce an additional dimension by arguing that youth alienation weakens the intergenerational social contract that underpins democratic continuity, eroding the willingness of younger citizens to invest in democratic institutions they do not feel belong to them. This perspective fundamentally challenges narratives that blame young people for democratic decline. Rather than viewing youth disengagement as a moral or civic failure, the researchers contends that it should be understood as an institutional

outcome. Democracies that exclude young people from power cannot reasonably expect enduring loyalty, trust, or participation. Rebuilding democratic legitimacy therefore requires more than voter education or participation campaigns. It requires structural reforms that signal to young citizens that they are recognised as political equals whose voices matter in shaping collective futures.

Gaps in the Existing Literature

Despite extensive research on youth participation and representation, a critical gap remains in linking youth under-representation directly to democratic sustainability. Most studies treat youth exclusion as a problem of inclusion or fairness rather than as a structural threat to democratic continuity. Few analyses explicitly connect age imbalance in legislatures to the erosion of democratic time horizons and policy foresight. The researchers position this study as a response to this gap by integrating empirical findings on youth representation with normative theories of intergenerational justice and democratic endurance. By doing so, the study reframes youth under-representation as a systemic governance challenge rather than a marginal demographic concern.

Conclusion of the Literature review

This literature review demonstrates that youth under-representation is a persistent and well-documented feature of contemporary democracies, with particularly acute implications in youthful societies such as South Africa. Existing scholarship convincingly shows that young people are politically active yet institutionally marginalised, and that this exclusion shapes policy outcomes in areas central to youth well-being. However, the literature has yet to fully confront the implications of youth under-representation for democratic sustainability. By introducing the concept of democratic time distortion, the researchers extend existing debates and argues that generational imbalance in Parliament undermines both intergenerational justice and the long-term legitimacy of democratic governance. This study therefore builds on, supports, and deepens existing scholarship by repositioning youth representation as a foundational requirement for democratic endurance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in two complementary bodies of theory: intergenerational justice and representative democracy. Together, these frameworks provide a coherent lens for examining youth under-representation in South Africa's Parliament and its implications for democratic sustainability. The theoretical positioning reflects the view that age-based exclusion from

political institutions is not only a matter of participation or diversity but a deeper question of democratic fairness and long-term governance capacity (Bidadanure, 2021; Mansbridge et al., 2021).

Intergenerational justice theory centres on the ethical and political relationship between present and future citizens. Bidadanure (2021) argues that democratic decision making must account for the interests of those who will bear the long-term consequences of policies enacted today. This perspective challenges democratic systems that allow one generation to dominate political power while externalising costs to younger or future generations. In contexts where legislatures are disproportionately composed of older representatives, intergenerational justice becomes compromised because political authority is exercised by cohorts less likely to experience the full impact of long-term policy outcomes. Recent scholarship extends intergenerational justice beyond environmental concerns to include economic, social, and institutional dimensions. González-Ricoy and Gosseries (2022) emphasise that public debt accumulation, labour market regulation, and education policy all have intergenerational consequences that require equitable political consideration. In South Africa, where youth unemployment and inequality persist at structural levels, the absence of youth voices in legislative processes raises concerns about whether current governance arrangements adequately reflect intergenerational fairness (Graham & Mlatsheni, 2022). Within this framework, youth under-representation is understood not as an incidental demographic feature but as a form of political inequality. When older generations systematically dominate parliamentary spaces, younger citizens experience a dilution of political influence despite formal rights to participation. This imbalance undermines the normative foundation of democracy, which rests on the principle that those affected by decisions should have a meaningful role in shaping them (Bidadanure, 2021).

Representative democracy theory further deepens this analysis by distinguishing between descriptive and substantive representation. Descriptive representation refers to the extent to which political institutions mirror the social composition of the population, including characteristics such as age, gender, and ethnicity (Mansbridge et al., 2021). From this perspective, the under-representation of youth in Parliament constitutes a descriptive deficit that weakens the symbolic legitimacy of democratic institutions. Substantive representation, by contrast, concerns whether representatives actively advance the interests and needs of the groups they are meant to represent. Mansbridge et al. (2021) argue that descriptive

representation can enhance substantive outcomes, particularly where shared experiences shape policy priorities and agenda-setting. Applied to age representation, this suggests that legislators who have direct experience of youth-related challenges are more likely to prioritise issues such as employment precarity, access to education, and long-term social investment. The integration of intergenerational justice and representative democracy allows this study to move beyond a narrow focus on numerical representation. It enables an examination of how age imbalances in Parliament shape policy orientation, institutional trust, and democratic legitimacy. The framework is particularly suited to the South African context, where democratic institutions are constitutionally robust but socially strained by inequality, unemployment, and declining political trust among younger citizens (Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2024).

By combining these theories, the study conceptualises youth under-representation as a structural governance issue with temporal implications. Democratic institutions that fail to incorporate younger generations risk adopting short-term policy horizons that prioritise immediate political stability over long-term societal resilience. This theoretical framing directly informs the study's analytical focus on democratic sustainability and intergenerational equity.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative desktop research design, which is appropriate for examining structural patterns of representation and governance without direct engagement with human participants. Qualitative desktop research is widely used in political science and public administration to analyse institutional dynamics, policy trends, and democratic outcomes using secondary data sources (Bowen, 2020).

Data were drawn from publicly available and authoritative sources, including parliamentary membership records, reports from the Electoral Commission of South Africa, publications by Statistics South Africa, and peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2021 and 2025. These sources were selected to ensure empirical reliability, transparency, and relevance to the study's research questions (Statistics South Africa, 2023; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). Document analysis served as the primary analytical technique. Bowen (2020) defines document analysis as a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating documents to extract meaning, identify patterns, and develop empirical insights. In this study, documents

were analysed to assess age distribution within Parliament, identify trends in youth political representation, and examine policy priorities related to youth and long-term governance.

The analysis followed a thematic approach:

First, documents were coded for indicators of age representation, including age categories of Members of Parliament and leadership positions. *Second*, policy documents and parliamentary reports were reviewed to identify recurring themes related to youth development, employment, education, and long-term planning. *Third*, these findings were interpreted through the theoretical lenses of intergenerational justice and representative democracy to assess broader democratic implications (Mansbridge et al., 2021).

The use of secondary data ensured that the study remained non-intrusive and ethically sound. As the research did not involve interviews, surveys, experiments, or the collection of personal data, it did not require ethical clearance in accordance with standard research ethics guidelines (Creswell & Poth, 2024). All data sources were publicly accessible and used solely for scholarly analysis.

While qualitative desktop research does not allow for causal inference, it is well suited to normative and institutional analysis. The methodology enables a holistic understanding of youth under-representation as a structural feature of democratic governance rather than an individual-level behavioural issue. This approach aligns with the study's theoretical emphasis on systemic power distribution and democratic sustainability.

RESULTS

The findings of this study reveal a persistent and structurally embedded age imbalance within South Africa's Parliament. Analysis of parliamentary composition across recent electoral cycles confirms that Members of Parliament under the age of 35 constitute a small minority relative to their demographic share of the national population (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). This imbalance is not confined to a single term or party but appears consistently across legislative periods, suggesting that youth under-representation is a systemic feature rather than a temporary anomaly.

Parliamentary membership data indicate that the median age of South African legislators remains significantly higher than the national median age. According to Statistics South Africa (2023), the median age of the population is approximately 28 years, while parliamentary representatives cluster predominantly in older age brackets. The majority of Members of Parliament fall within the 45 to 65 age range, with comparatively few legislators

entering Parliament during early adulthood. This disparity reflects a widening gap between the age profile of the governed and that of the governing institutions. The findings further show that youth under-representation is most pronounced in positions of authority within Parliament. Leadership roles such as committee chairs, party whips, and senior parliamentary office bearers are overwhelmingly occupied by individuals over the age of 50 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). Younger Members of Parliament, where present, are more likely to occupy backbench roles or serve on committees with limited influence over strategic legislative agendas. This distribution of power reinforces generational hierarchies within parliamentary structures.

The persistence of this age imbalance across political parties suggests that youth exclusion is not primarily driven by ideological orientation but by institutional practices common to South Africa's party system. Party lists, candidate selection processes, and internal promotion mechanisms tend to favour long-standing members with established political networks (Booyesen, 2023). As a result, younger candidates face structural barriers to entry and advancement, even within parties that publicly endorse youth empowerment. Analysis of electoral cycles further reveals limited generational renewal within Parliament. Despite changes in party dominance and electoral outcomes over time, the overall age composition of Parliament has remained relatively stable (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). This finding indicates that electoral competition alone has not been sufficient to disrupt entrenched age patterns in political representation. Youth under-representation therefore appears resilient to routine democratic turnover.

Beyond numerical representation, the findings highlight significant implications for policy orientation and legislative priorities. Document analysis of parliamentary debates, committee reports, and budget speeches reveals a consistent emphasis on short-term political and fiscal concerns rather than long-term youth development strategies (National Treasury, 2024). While youth-related issues are acknowledged rhetorically, they rarely translate into sustained legislative focus or long-term funding commitments. Budgetary analysis shows that allocations directed explicitly toward youth development programmes constitute a relatively small proportion of overall public expenditure. Although initiatives addressing youth employment, skills development, and entrepreneurship exist, they are often fragmented across departments and subject to funding volatility (National Treasury, 2024). This pattern suggests limited institutional prioritisation of youth as a distinct policy constituency.

Parliamentary debate records further demonstrate that youth-centered issues tend to surface episodically, often in response to public unrest or political pressure rather than as part of a coherent long-term agenda. Discussions on youth unemployment, for example, frequently intensify following periods of protest or social instability but diminish once immediate pressures subside (Resnick, Auriol, & Tarp, 2021). This reactive pattern reflects short-term political responsiveness rather than sustained strategic planning. The findings also reveal that long-term policy challenges disproportionately affecting youth, such as education system reform, labour market precarity, and intergenerational inequality, receive comparatively limited legislative scrutiny. While education and employment feature regularly in parliamentary discourse, debates often focus on immediate performance indicators rather than structural reform (Spaull & Jansen, 2023). This orientation aligns with governance patterns that prioritise short electoral cycles over long-term societal transformation.

Youth unemployment provides a particularly clear illustration of weak substantive representation. Despite persistent unemployment rates among young people that far exceed those of older cohorts, parliamentary responses remain incremental and fragmented (Statistics South Africa, 2023). Legislative initiatives tend to emphasise short-term employment schemes rather than comprehensive labour market restructuring. This suggests a disconnect between the scale of the challenge and the depth of legislative engagement. Committee oversight reports further indicate that youth development is often treated as a cross-cutting issue without clear ownership. Responsibility is dispersed across multiple departments, resulting in diluted accountability and limited parliamentary oversight (Auditor-General South Africa, 2023). This diffusion of responsibility weakens the ability of Parliament to monitor and enforce long-term youth-focused policy outcomes.

The findings also point to a gap between youth political participation outside Parliament and youth representation within it. Electoral Commission data show that young people engage actively in political discourse through protests, community activism, and civil society organisations, even as voter turnout among youth declines (Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2024). This pattern suggests that disengagement from formal politics may be less about apathy and more about perceived institutional exclusion. Parliamentary proceedings reflect limited incorporation of youth perspectives into formal deliberation processes. Youth submissions to parliamentary committees are relatively rare, and mechanisms for sustained youth consultation remain underdeveloped (Parliament of South Africa, 2023). Where youth

voices are included, they are often framed as stakeholders rather than as political actors with decision-making authority.

The findings further reveal that generational imbalance within Parliament shapes the temporal orientation of policy making. Legislative focus tends to privilege immediate governance concerns such as fiscal stability, political compromise, and short-term service delivery targets (National Treasury, 2024). Long-term considerations, including the future sustainability of social protection systems and intergenerational equity, receive comparatively less attention. Analysis of parliamentary responses to climate change illustrates this temporal bias. While South Africa has adopted policy frameworks acknowledging climate risks, legislative action has progressed slowly, and long-term mitigation strategies remain underdeveloped (Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment, 2022). Given that climate impacts will disproportionately affect younger and future generations, the limited urgency observed in parliamentary action reflects generational asymmetry in decision making.

The findings also indicate that youth under-representation affects democratic trust and institutional legitimacy. Survey data analysed in parliamentary reports show declining confidence in political institutions among young citizens, particularly with regard to Parliament's responsiveness to youth concerns (Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2024). This erosion of trust coincides with sustained age imbalance in legislative representation. Parliamentary attendance and participation records further reveal that younger Members of Parliament often face constraints in shaping legislative outcomes. While younger MPs may participate actively in debates, their influence over agenda-setting and decision-making remains limited due to seniority-based norms and party discipline structures (Booyesen, 2023). This reinforces the finding that numerical inclusion alone does not guarantee substantive influence.

The results also show that youth representation varies marginally across parties but does not fundamentally alter the overall generational profile of Parliament. Parties with explicit youth rhetoric do not necessarily translate this commitment into parliamentary leadership roles for young representatives (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). This suggests a disjuncture between party discourse and institutional practice. Importantly, the findings demonstrate that youth under-representation is not offset by policy mechanisms explicitly designed to protect future interests. Unlike some jurisdictions that employ youth quotas or future generations

commissioners, South Africa lacks institutional safeguards to ensure that long-term youth interests are systematically considered in legislative processes (González-Ricoy & Gosseries, 2022). The absence of such mechanisms amplifies the consequences of age imbalance.

Document analysis also reveals that parliamentary monitoring of youth-focused policy outcomes is limited. Performance indicators often prioritise expenditure compliance over substantive impact on youth livelihoods (Auditor-General South Africa, 2023). This focus on administrative accountability rather than generational outcomes further constrains Parliament's ability to address youth disadvantage structurally. Collectively, these findings indicate that youth under-representation in South Africa's Parliament extends beyond descriptive imbalance to shape policy priorities, institutional trust, and democratic time horizons. The concentration of legislative authority among older cohorts coincides with limited prioritisation of long-term youth development and weak institutional mechanisms for intergenerational accountability. These patterns persist across parties, electoral cycles, and policy domains, underscoring the structural nature of youth exclusion within parliamentary governance.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm and deepen existing concerns in the literature regarding intergenerational inequality in political power within democratic systems. The persistent under-representation of youth in South Africa's Parliament reflects a broader structural pattern in which political authority is concentrated among older cohorts, despite the country's youthful demographic profile (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022). This imbalance limits the inclusion of future-oriented perspectives in legislative processes and shapes policy priorities in ways that are misaligned with the long-term interests of younger and future generations.

One of the most significant implications of youth under-representation identified in the results is its effect on democratic sustainability. Democratic sustainability depends not only on procedural adherence to elections and constitutional rules but also on the perceived legitimacy and responsiveness of institutions across generations (Mansbridge et al., 2021). When young citizens consistently observe that Parliament does not reflect their presence, experiences, or priorities, the democratic system risks appearing exclusionary rather than representative. This perception is reinforced when legislative outcomes fail to address enduring youth challenges such as unemployment, education inequality, and long-term economic insecurity (Graham & Mlatsheni, 2022). The findings align with evidence from the

Electoral Commission of South Africa, which shows declining voter participation among younger cohorts and growing scepticism toward formal political institutions (Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2024). Rather than interpreting this disengagement as apathy or political immaturity, the results support the view that disengagement may be a rational response to structural exclusion. When democratic institutions repeatedly fail to provide meaningful avenues for youth representation, withdrawal from formal politics becomes a predictable outcome (OECD, 2020).

Exiting from a theoretical perspective, the study provides strong empirical support for intergenerational justice arguments advanced by Bidadanure (2021). The concentration of legislative power among older generations undermines democratic fairness by allowing those least affected by long-term policy consequences to dominate decision making. This pattern is particularly problematic in policy domains with extended temporal horizons, such as public debt management, education reform, climate adaptation, and labour market regulation (González-Ricoy & Gosseries, 2022). The results also extend intergenerational justice theory by demonstrating how generational dominance operates institutionally rather than merely normatively. Youth under-representation is embedded within party systems, parliamentary hierarchies, and leadership selection processes, which collectively privilege experience defined narrowly as longevity rather than as relevance to contemporary social realities (Booyesen, 2023). This institutionalisation of generational inequality normalises the exclusion of youth and renders it politically invisible, even as its consequences accumulate over time.

Representative democracy theory further illuminates the implications of the findings. Mansbridge et al. (2021) argue that descriptive representation can enhance substantive representation, particularly when shared social positions influence policy agendas and deliberative priorities. The results indicate that the lack of descriptive age representation in Parliament corresponds with weak substantive attention to youth-centered and long-term policy issues. This relationship suggests that the absence of youth voices is not merely symbolic but materially affects legislative outcomes. Importantly, the findings challenge the assumption that older representatives can adequately represent youth interests in the absence of youth participation. While representatives may act in good faith, the literature suggests that lived experience plays a crucial role in shaping problem definition, urgency, and policy imagination (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022). The limited prioritisation of structural youth

development policies observed in parliamentary debates and budgetary allocations supports this argument.

The study also highlights the temporal dimension of democratic decision making as a critical but underexplored consequence of youth under-representation. Legislative bodies dominated by older cohorts tend to prioritise short-term political stability and immediate fiscal concerns, often at the expense of long-term investment (National Treasury, 2024). This short-termism is not simply a function of electoral cycles but is reinforced by generational composition. When decision makers are less likely to experience the future outcomes of current policies, incentives for long-term planning are weakened (González-Ricoy & Gosseries, 2022). This temporal distortion has profound implications for democratic sustainability. Democracies that consistently privilege the present over the future risk eroding their capacity to adapt to structural challenges such as technological change, demographic transition, and climate risk (OECD, 2020). In South Africa, where young people will bear the long-term consequences of today's governance choices, the absence of youth perspectives in Parliament undermines the resilience of democratic institutions themselves. The findings also shed light on the limits of youth participation outside formal institutions. While young South Africans remain politically active through protests, social movements, and civil society engagement, these forms of participation have not translated into sustained parliamentary influence (Resnick, Auriol, & Tarp, 2021). The results suggest that participation without representation offers limited capacity to shape long-term policy trajectories, reinforcing the argument that institutional access remains central to democratic power.

Departing from a practical standpoint, the study underscores the urgency of institutional reform. The persistence of youth under-representation across parties and electoral cycles indicates that incremental change is unlikely without deliberate intervention (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). Mechanisms such as youth quotas, age diversity targets, and structured leadership pipelines within political parties have been proposed in the literature as potential corrective measures (OECD, 2020). However, the discussion also cautions against simplistic solutions. Youth quotas alone may result in tokenism if not accompanied by genuine authority, access to leadership positions, and meaningful participation in agenda-setting processes (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022). Effective reform therefore requires a combination of descriptive inclusion and institutional empowerment. Party-level

commitments to age diversity must extend beyond candidate lists to encompass committee leadership, executive roles, and policy influence.

The findings further suggest that strengthening youth representation could enhance democratic trust and institutional legitimacy. Research shows that when citizens perceive political institutions as inclusive and responsive, trust increases and democratic engagement deepens (Mansbridge et al., 2021). In a context of declining youth trust in Parliament, improving age representation may serve as a signal that democratic institutions are capable of renewal and adaptation. The discussion also introduces an important normative implication. Youth representation should not be framed solely as a developmental or symbolic objective but as a democratic necessity. Intergenerational justice requires that those who will inherit the outcomes of present governance decisions have a meaningful voice in shaping them (Bidadanure, 2021). Failure to address youth under-representation risks entrenching generational inequality and weakening the moral foundations of democracy.

Finally, the findings point toward the need for future research that examines youth representation not only at the national parliamentary level but also within provincial legislatures, municipal councils, and executive institutions. Comparative studies across democracies with similar demographic profiles could further illuminate how institutional design shapes generational inclusion and democratic sustainability (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). In summary, this study confirms that youth under-representation in South Africa's Parliament is both a symptom and a driver of democratic vulnerability. By limiting future-oriented perspectives, weakening substantive representation, and eroding youth trust, generational imbalance undermines democratic sustainability. Addressing this challenge requires not only technical reforms but a rethinking of how democracy distributes power across time and generations.

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that the under-representation of young people in South Africa's Parliament cannot be dismissed as a neutral outcome of electoral competition or individual career choices. Rather, it reflects a deeper structural imbalance within the country's democratic system, one that carries significant implications for intergenerational justice and long-term democratic sustainability. In a society where young people constitute the majority of the population and will live longest with the consequences of today's policy decisions,

their persistent exclusion from the central arena of political power represents a serious democratic vulnerability.

The concentration of political authority among older cohorts shapes not only who makes decisions, but also how those decisions are framed and whose interests are prioritised. When legislative power is dominated by those closer to the end of their political and economic life cycles, the democratic system tends to privilege short-term stability over long-term transformation. This limits the space for future-oriented thinking in Parliament and weakens sustained attention to structural challenges that disproportionately affect young people, such as employment insecurity, skills development, education reform, and the long-term sustainability of public finances. Over time, this imbalance risks locking the democratic system into a cycle of reactive governance that struggles to anticipate and prepare for future social and economic pressures. Importantly, this study also highlights that youth under-representation has consequences beyond policy outcomes. It shapes how young citizens perceive democracy itself. When Parliament appears distant, unresponsive, or unreflective of their lived realities, trust in democratic institutions is gradually eroded. Political disengagement among young people should therefore be understood less as apathy and more as a response to exclusion. A democracy that fails to create meaningful pathways for youth representation risks losing not only their participation, but also their belief in the value of democratic processes.

Taking a normative perspective, the findings reinforce the argument that intergenerational justice must be treated as a core democratic principle rather than an abstract ethical concern. Democracy derives its legitimacy from the idea that those affected by collective decisions should have a voice in making them. When future generations are systematically marginalised in present decision making, this principle is weakened. Youth representation is therefore not a symbolic gesture or a developmental favour, but a requirement for democratic fairness and moral coherence. The article further suggests that addressing youth under-representation requires more than rhetorical commitments to inclusion. Meaningful change depends on deliberate institutional and political reforms that challenge entrenched norms within parties and legislatures. These reforms may include age diversity targets, structured leadership development pathways for young politicians, and internal party rules that value generational balance alongside experience. Crucially, youth inclusion must involve real

authority and influence, not tokenistic presence on candidate lists or advisory structures with limited power.

At the same time, this study cautions against viewing youth representation as a stand-alone solution to broader governance challenges. Increasing the number of young parliamentarians will not automatically resolve deep-rooted issues of inequality, corruption, or state capacity. However, without addressing generational imbalance, efforts to strengthen democratic accountability and long-term governance are likely to remain incomplete. Youth representation should be understood as a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for democratic renewal. Finally, the article points to important directions for future research. Comparative analysis across democratic systems could provide valuable insights into how different institutional designs either enable or constrain youth inclusion. Further research is also needed to assess whether existing youth inclusion mechanisms translate into substantive policy influence and improved democratic trust over time. Such work would deepen understanding of how democracies can adapt to generational change and remain legitimate in the eyes of those who will inherit their outcomes.

In conclusion, youth under-representation in South Africa's Parliament is not simply a demographic curiosity but a warning sign. It signals a democracy at risk of becoming disconnected from its future. Recognising young people as full political actors and integrating their voices into the heart of decision making is not only a matter of representation, but of democratic survival itself.

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