Asia Democracy Research Network

Generational Divides and **Political Trust** in Southeast Asia : Comparative Insights

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In 2025, the Asia Democracy Research Network (ADRN) selected the "Generational Divides and Political Trust in Southeast Asia: Comparative Insights" as the subject of a joint research project conducted by ADRN members in four Southeast Asian countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Thailand.

Reaffirming the importance of understanding democratic resilience through a generational lens, the ADRN presents this report to document the scope, depth, and implications of political trust gaps emerging across Southeast Asia. Drawing on the Asian Barometer Survey (2014–2022), complementary national studies, and country-specific analyses, the report examines how younger and older generations diverge in their trust in political institutions, their forms of participation, and their democratic expectations.

The report investigates contemporary questions such as:

- How do generational cohorts in Southeast Asia differ in their levels of political trust and democratic engagement?
- What social, economic, and historical factors shape these divides in countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines?
- What challenges do generational rifts pose for political stability and democratic governance—and what policy pathways can help bridge these divides?

By integrating regional trends with country-level insights, the report identifies shared dynamics—such as declining youth trust in legislatures and political parties and the rise of digital activism—alongside national variations shaped by political transitions, authoritarian legacies, and demographic pressures. It further underscores how these divides affect institutional legitimacy, electoral behavior, and opportunities for meaningful political participation across age groups.

"Generational Divides and Political Trust in Southeast Asia:
Comparative Insights"
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Executive Summary

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This paper utilizes case studies from Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines to examine generational divides in political trust and participation across Southeast Asia. The analysis, which is supported by data from the Asian Barometer Survey (2014–2022) and additional national sources, demonstrates that youth cohorts consistently exhibit lower levels of trust in legislatures and political parties compared to older generations. Malaysia demonstrates youth trust volatility tied to democratic transitions and electoral reforms, Indonesia reveals stable executive trust but deep party skepticism, Thailand illustrates the most severe collapse of youth trust in institutions, and the Philippines shows dual generational divides rooted in history and digital culture. The synthesis underscores both shared patterns—such as distrust of parties and digital activism—and divergent trajectories shaped by national contexts. The policy recommendations emphasize three key areas: civic education, institutional reform, and youth inclusion. These recommendations aim to address existing divides and strengthen democratic legitimacy in the region.

Indonesia

A comparative analysis of public confidence in Indonesia's institutions reveals a relatively stable level of trust in the executive and judicial branches, while the legislative and political parties have experienced a decline in public confidence. A survey indicates that Millennials and Gen Z exhibit a higher level of trust in the executive branch at rates exceeding 50 percent. However, the survey also reveal that this level of trust is not extended to the parliament or political parties, as fewer than half of the respondents expressed confidence in these institutions. The prevalence of corruption scandals, the opacity of legislative processes, and the exorbitant costs associated with candidate nominations have further eroded public trust. deepen disillusionment. Surveys indicate that fewer than 20 percent of youth engage in party campaigns or memberships, signaling disengagement from formal politics.

Malaysia

The evident generational divides in Malaysia are indicative of the nation's democratic transitions, electoral reforms, and prevailing economic pressures. Following the 2018 general election, there was a notable surge in the level of trust among the youth population in the executive and parliament institutions. Thie development is indicative of a prevailing sentiment of optimism with respect to the potential for institutional transformation. Nevertheless, skepticism toward parties remains prevalent among various demographic groups. The Sheraton Move (2020) and subsequent coalition shifts have had a detrimental effect on youth confidence. Conversely, the Undi18 and automatic voter registration initiatives have resulted in an expansion of the youth electorate. The persistent issue of youth unemployment has led to an increased call for performance-based governance.

Philippines

The Philippines exemplifies a dual generational rift, deeply entrenched in a historical memory and digital cultural milieu. A comparison of the attitudes of different age groups reveals a marked difference. Older cohorts tend to prioritize the survival of democracy over authoritarianism, while younger generations place a greater emphasis

on issues such as justice, climate change, and human rights. According to data presented by the ABS, young people exhibit a greater degree of distrust in both legislatures and political parties, while older individuals demonstrate a higher level of institutional trust. Filipino youth activism thrives on digital platforms but remains episodic in nature offline. Millennials and Gen Z, comprising nearly two-thirds of voters, are decisive actors but remain underrepresented in formal institutions due to campaign costs and dynastic politics.

Thailand

Thailand exemplifies the most pronounced intergenerational rifts. A decline in the level of trust among youth in executive institutions was observed, with figures dropping from 70.3 percent in 2014 to 2.7 percent in 2022. The concurrent decline in public trust in parliament and political parties signifies a crisis of legitimacy. The emergence of youth-led protests in 2020–21, including Ratsadon and Free Youth, signifies a profound sense of disillusionment with authoritarian constraints. Individuals from older generations, having been socialized under Cold War stability, exhibited a higher level of trust. The demographic shift in Thailand, marked by an aging electorate and a diminishing youth population, have exacerbated existing divisions. The influence of the youth demographic has been observed to come from sources other than electoral outcomes, such as protests and digital activism.

Across all four countries, young people exhibit distrust towards political parties and legislatures, perceiving them as corrupt or unresponsive.

A comparative analysis of Southeast Asia reveals both commonalities and divergences in generational political trust. Across all four countries, young people exhibit distrust towards political parties and legislatures, perceiving them as corrupt or unresponsive. Digital media provides youth with alternative avenues of activism, contrasting with older generations' reliance on traditional media. The economic precarious conditions experienced by these countries, including high youth unemployment in Malaysia, corruption-linked disillusionment in Indonesia, substantial debt burdens in Thailand, and limited institutional access in the Philippines, serve to

further exacerbate existing generational divides.

However, notable disparities emerge when comparing these two groups. Thailand exemplifies a comprehensive breakdown of institutional legitimacy among the youth demographic. Malaysia signifies political transitions that are associated with volatility. Indonesia demonstrates resilience in executive trust despite the presence of dillusionment within its political party. The Philippines underscores the presence of competing political reference points between older and younger cohorts. These cases underscore the necessity of addressing generational divides to prevent cycles of democratic erosion.

In order to address these issues, policy responses must prioritize the following: first, the implementation of civic education and media literacy programs; second, the implementation of institutional reforms that aim to restore trust; third, the establishment of mechanisms for youth inclusion in the policymaking process; and fourth, the establishment of structured platforms for intergenerational dialogue. The consolidation of democratic institutions throughout Southeast Asia can be facilitated by the transformation of generational energy into a stabilizing force, thereby mitigating the impact of diverse factors.

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Case 1: Indonesia

Indonesian Democratic Reform: Youth Perspectives on the Functioning of Parliament and Political Parties

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Recent studies have indicated a notable increase in youth support for robust political institutions and leadership in Indonesia, suggesting a general commitment to democratic principles. A review of the data from the Asian Barometer Survey (2014–2022) reveals that millennials (aged 26-40) and Gen Z (aged 18-25), representing the younger generation, have exhibited a noteworthy degree of confidence in the prevailing political institutions, namely the executive and judicial branches. Their support for these institutions has surpassed 50 percent (Asian Barometer Survey, 2024). However, recent data indicates a discernible downward trend in public's trust in the legislature, particularly among younger generations. Gen Z and Millennial respondents exhibited an average of 47 percent and 52 percent trust, respectively.

Furthermore, the subsequent data indicated a persistent decline in public trust towards political parties, a trend that remained consistently below the 50 percent mark. As demonstrated by the aforementioned results, Indonesia has surpassed Thailand in the Southeast Asian region. This is evidenced by the profound disillusionment expressed by Thai youth with their political parties and parliament, as demonstrated by public support figures that fall below 30 percent. However, the

alarmingly somber perspective that the youth generation, specifically Generation Z, holds toward Indonesia's legislative institutions should serve as a wake-up call regarding the need to strengthen Indonesian democracy.

However, the reality is that, subsequent to their oaths of office, legislators frequently act in a manner that aligns more closely with the interests of their own political parties than within the best interests of the public they are duty-bound to represent.

As previously mentioned, the waning commitment to youth-related concerns by the Indonesian parliament indicates a deviation from the legislative branch's constitutionally mandated responsibilities and obligations. This phenomenon is analogous to the Indonesian parliament's ascension to authority following the Reform period, a process that has been largely divorced from and unresponsive to public sentiment (Diprose et al., 2019). In the contemporary political structure of Indonesia, the House of Representatives is endowed with significant authority. In contrast to the previous era of the New Order, during which the legislature functioned as a passive instrument of government, contemporary directly elected legislators are actively shaping their actions and policies to align with the interests of their constituents (Haris, 2014).

However, the reality is that, subsequent to their oaths of office, legislators frequently act in a manner that aligns more closely with the interests of their own political parties than within the best interests of the public they are duty-bound to represent. Consequently, this disillusionment particularly impacted the younger generation, who increasingly perceived the House as an oligarchic institution rather than a representative body of the people.

The views expressed above are additionally informed by the extensive media coverage, and subsequent social media virality, of legislative political scandals that have been a recurring theme. For instance, corruption, such as minimal public hearings, clandestine meetings utilized for the passage of legislation, and occasionally even the interference in judicial processes to influence verdicts in one's favor, are substantial concerns. This phenomenon may be attributed to the recent actions of the parties who have been designated as the primary actors responsible for the nomination of candidates for legislative and executive positions. The process

of nomination itself is unfortunately inextricably linked to the corrupting influence of money politics, where the costs can reach millions, or even trillions, of rupiahs, depending on the intensity and scale of the electoral competition (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). It is irrefutably evident that in Indonesia, the corrupt practices form a vicious cycle that is continuously circulated among political parties, candidates, and legislative bodies, and is repeated this pattern endlessly (Lele, 2020). Consequently, the increasingly elitist nature of election-based democracy over the past decade, a result of various factors, has led to disillusionment among young people regarding legislative processes, as they perceive their aspirations as needing to go viral before receiving due consideration in the political system.

Indeed, the concerns articulated concerning the contemporary Indonesian political structure have elicited considerable indignation and exasperation among specific demographic groups, particularly with regard to the state of Indonesian politics and democracy. According to the most recent credible survey results, 31.3% of young people view corruption as a negative aspect of politics, which has contributed to a decrease in their active participation in political processes, most notably in practical, real-world political involvement (Katadata Insight Center, 2023). For instance, a remarkably low percentage of young respondents—less than 20%—expressed any interest in activities such as supporting political party campaigns, formally joining a political party, or pursuing a career in legislative office.

Indeed, the concerns articulated concerning the contemporary Indonesian political structure have elicited considerable indignation and exasperation among specific demographic groups, particularly with regard to the state of Indonesian politics and democracy.

This observation is founded upon the escalating elitism inherent in the processes of candidate nominations and the resulting necessity for political connections, a need which is ultimately rooted in emotional bonds and personal relationships. In addition to the aforementioned points, it is noteworthy that less than 10 percent of young people expressed interest in any of the following: joining a political party's campaign team, becoming a party member, or seeking a legislative position. This perception stems from the substantial costs and considerable risks associated with

the political process, wherein electoral outcomes mirror the uncertainties and financial stakes of gambling. This situation has led to a discernible trend of young people withdrawing from active engagement in practical politics.

In light of the aforementioned points, individuals such as 28-year-old Dimas and 32-year-old Monica, among other young people, have expressed that the perceived shortcomings and skepticism surrounding parliamentary productivity are incongruent with the ambitions and goals of today's youth. For instance, one could address the high unemployment rate could be addressed by expanding the job market and increasing the availability of affordable housing for young people, who are increasingly becoming a "sandwich generation" and shouldering the responsibility of financially supporting their parents. Dimas consistently experienced a sense of disappointment when perusing his device and encountering news reports detailing the arrests of corrupt officials, particularly those within the parliament.[1] He expressed discontent with the high salaries and benefits afforded to members of the House, arguing that their primary focus should be solely on public service rather than on other forms of employment. Monica articulated comparable sentiments, expressing indignation at the pervasive political corruption, a stark contrast to the reality that a substantial proportion of Indonesians, approximately three-quarters of the population, continue to grapple with low incomes.[2]

In summary, there is an imperative for fundamental improvements to political parties and parliamentary function to initiate the process of democratic reform in Indonesia. The aspirations of young people who maintain a skeptical perspective merit careful consideration, as they are poised to inherit leadership roles from their elders.

[1] interview with Dimas, March 2024

[2] Interview with Monica, August 2024

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Case 2: Malaysia

Malaysia's Generational Divides and Political Trust (2014–2024): An Age-Cohort Analysis Anchored in the Asian Barometer Survey

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1. Abstract

This article analyzes generational disparities in political trust in Malaysia, with a particular focus on confidence in the executive, parliament, political parties, courts, the Election Commission (EC), and local government. The Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) waves from 2014 (W4) and 2018 (W5) serve as the primary empirical foundation. A disaggregation of respondents into four distinct age cohorts (18–25, 26–40, 41–60, and 60+) was conducted to chart changes through the 2010s. These changes are then situated against a backdrop of post-2018 political realignments, the 2020 "Sheraton Move," Undi18, and the implementation of automatic voter registration (AVR).

The study also encompasses General Election (GE) 15 held in 2022. The present study utilizes a multifaceted approach to data analysis, incorporating a range of indicators to enhance the comprehension of the dynamics under scrutiny. The 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer (Malaysia), the Merdeka Center youth studies, the

Election Commission (EC) turnout and electorate data, and the DOSM[1] labor market and demography statistics. This comprehensive approach aims to provide a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of the phenomena under investigation, thereby contributing to a more robust and nuanced understanding of the dynamics under scrutiny. The following observations were made: (i) a marked increase in trust shortly after GE14 (2018) in multiple institutions (executive, parliament, EC), (ii) a pervasive cross-cohort skepticism toward parties, and (iii) a widening disparity in values concerning leadership styles and democratic preferences. These dynamics intersect with economic precarity (youth unemployment) and rapid electorate expansion (Undi18/AVR), yielding both opportunities and volatility for democratic governance.

2. Introduction

Since 2014, Malaysia has experienced a political trajectory marked by significant dynamism, including a historic opposition victory in the 2018 general election (GE14), a reconfiguration of the political elite in 2020, and the emergence of a hung parliament that was resolved by the formation of a multi-bloc "unity government" in 2022 (GE15). Generation-based analysis is particularly enlightening in this context because different cohorts have experienced distinct formative experiences. Older Malaysians were socialized during the long dominance of Barisan Nasional. Generation X and older Millennials experienced Reformasi and Bersih. Younger Malaysians experienced social media activism, 1MDB[2] revelations, the impact of COVID-19, and the expansion of the franchise under Undi18[3] / AVR. The age of the citizenry has a profound influence on their assessment of institutions, authority, and participation. In the context of Malaysia, this influence is particularly salient, as it shapes how individuals navigate ethnoreligious party competition and the trade-offs between stability and reform.

[1] DOSM = Department of Statistics, Malaysia

[2] 1MDB is an institution associated with financial scandals

[3] Decision to give rights to Malaysians age 18 years and above to vote

3. Why Age-based Analysis?

Three mechanisms link cohort membership to political trust:

1. **Imprinting & Path Dependency.** The crystallization of political attitudes in Malaysia has been observed to occur as Malaysian citizens reach adulthood. This phenomenon is also evident in the GE14 alternation and the 2020 political coalition change, which have left cohort-specific imprints that can persist.

2. **Replacement Dynamics.** As younger, digitally native cohorts become eligible to vote (an outcome accelerated by Undi18/AVR), aggregate political cultures undergo change. This evolution occurs despite the fact that older cohorts continue to exhibit a greater degree of trust in established institutions.

3. **Life-Cycle Effects.** The economic security and institutional touchpoints (e.g., courts, local authorities) of individuals vary according to their age. Life-stage shocks (e.g., pandemic schooling disruptions, job entry during downturns) have the capacity to alter trust trajectories. This renders the study of trust a worthy endeavor for the social sciences.

4. Data and Method

- **Primary source**: Asian Barometer Survey (face-to-face probability samples of eligible voters). Malaysia sample sizes: 2014 (n≈1,207), 2018 (n≈1,237); no 2022 Malaysia wave.

- **Cohorts**: 18–25, 26–40, 41–60, 60+.

- **Outcome domains**: trust in executive, parliament, parties, courts, national government, local government, EC; satisfaction with democracy/government; democratic preferences (e.g., strong leader vs parliament).

- Supplementary sources: EC and media reports for GE15 turnout and youth share; Undi18/AVR statistics; Edelman Trust Barometer (Malaysia); DOSM demography and youth unemployment; Merdeka Center[4] youth surveys.

5. Malaysia's Generational Trust Patterns (ABS Evidence)

1) Executive, Parliament, Parties

All cohorts show comparatively lower trust. Youth moved from 42.1% (2014) to 57.1% (2018)—an improvement, yet still below parliament/executive levels, reflecting enduring party-system skepticism

• **Executive**: Youth trust (18–25) rose from 65.9% (2014) to 74.9% (2018); older cohorts declined slightly by 2018 (e.g., 41–60 fell from 78.3% to 69.0%), consistent with a youth bump after the GE14 alternation.

• **Parliament**: Youth trust increased from 65.4% (2014) to 73.1% (2018); 60+ fell from 72.5% to 65.4%—a cross-over suggesting younger cohorts rewarded institutional change more than elders.

- **Parties**: All cohorts show comparatively lower trust. Youth moved from 42.1% (2014) to 57.1% (2018)—an improvement, yet still below parliament/executive levels, reflecting enduring party-system skepticism

2) Courts, National & Local Government, EC

- **Courts**: Youth trust was high and fairly stable (76.2%→80.0% from 2014→2018), suggesting judicial institutions remained comparatively credible across cohorts.

[4] Merdeka Center is a think tank or research center that carries out regular polling.

- **National Government (in the capital)**: Youth trust grew (76.6%→79.5%), consistent with immediate post-GE14 optimism.

- **Local Government**: Youth trust rose (75.7%→86.2%), indicating positive evaluations of service-delivery tiers among younger Malaysians post-2018.
- **Election Commission**: In 2018, trust was high across cohorts (e.g., youth 77.6%; seniors 79.3%), relevant given later debates on AVR and GE15.

3) Democratic Preferences & Satisfaction

Malaysia exhibits a youth-led trust uptick following GE14, especially toward representative institutions and the EC, alongside clear but relatively lower confidence in parties.

- **Democratic support (0–16 scale)**: Overall increased (12.13→12.73 from 2014→2018). Youth gained from 11.21 to 12.06, while 41–60 reached 13.41 in 2018.

- **Authoritarian temptations**: Agreement with "get rid of parliament and have a strong leader" among youth fell from 53.5% (2014) to 44.3% (2018); preferences for military rule or one-party rule also declined modestly among youth.

- **Satisfaction**: Youth satisfied with "how democracy works" rose (58.5%→62.8%); satisfaction with the current government modestly improved (57.6%→59.6%).

- **Aspirations & exit option**: Youth willingness "to live abroad" increased (46.0%→53.1% from 2014→2018), signaling persistent opportunity-/governance-related ambivalence even amidst rising trust.

Interim inference (2014→2018): Malaysia exhibits a youth-led trust uptick following GE14, especially toward representative institutions and the EC, alongside clear but relatively lower confidence in parties.

6. Beyond ABS: 2019–2024 Context and Additional Indicators

Political shocks and institutional confidence

- **Coalition instability (2020–2022).** The 2020 "Sheraton Move" reversed the 2018 alternation outside elections; governments changed twice before the 2022 hung parliament and formation of a multi-coalition unity administration under Anwar Ibrahim. Such elite-driven reconfigurations have been shown to weaken institutional trust, particularly among cohorts socialized into the expectation of alternation through elections. (For a more comprehensive review of these analyses, see Weiss 2022; Case 2015.)

Merdeka Center (2021) reported high youth alienation—~70% "uninterested in politics," ~66% felt politicians "don't care"—patterns echoed in secondary syntheses in 2022–2023.

• **GE15 electorate expansion & turnout.** AVR + Undi18 added ≈**5.8 million** voters; **18–39-year-olds ≈50.3%** of the roll. GE15 final turnout: **73.89%**.

• **Youth political dispositions.** Merdeka Center (2021) reported high youth alienation—~**70%** "uninterested in politics," ~**66%** felt politicians "don't care"—patterns echoed in secondary syntheses in 2022–2023.

Society & economy: youth conditions

- **Demography.** Malaysia's median age is ~**31.3** (2025), underscoring a structurally young electorate with rising youth weight post-AVR.

- **Youth labor markets.** DOSM reports a **15–24 youth unemployment rate ≈10.3%** (Mar 2025), materially higher than the national rate, shaping cohort risk perceptions and trust in economic governance.

Cross-check on "macro trust" beyond ABS

- **Edelman (Malaysia, 2024).** In the general "trust to do what is right" metric, Malaysia's **government** sits near the neutral-to-lower trust band (≈**51%**); **business** fares higher (≈**63%**). Within the innovation-governance framework, a greater proportion of Malaysians expressed greater trust in **business** entities than in **government** entities with respect to the responsible integration of novel technologies (74% vs 72%). While these levels cannot be not directly compared to ABS constructs, they do broadly indicate cautious public confidence and an institutional hierarchy of trust (business ≥ NGOs > government ≥ media).

Across cohorts, parties remain the weak link in trust architecture (even after improvements among youth in 2018), reflecting perceptions of patronage, factionalism, and ethnoreligious polarization.

Inference: Between 2019 and 2024, shocks to elite stability likely tempered the post-2018 youth trust bump observed in ABS. Simultaneously, AVR/Undi18 magnified youth system-membership, creating a paradox of more youth voters but uneven youth confidence—a combination that can amplify fluidity in party competition and governing coalitions.

7. Discussion: Explaining the Generational Cleavages

1. **Reform Dividend vs. Stability Premium.** Youth cohorts rewarded institutional alternation in 2018 (higher trust in executive, parliament, EC). Older cohorts—accustomed to stability—showed flatter or declining confidence in those same institutions by 2018.

2. **Parties Lag Institutions.** Across cohorts, parties remain the weak link in trust architecture (even after improvements among youth in 2018), reflecting perceptions of patronage, factionalism, and ethnoreligious polarization.

3. **Values Gap on Authority.** Youth moved away from strong-leader/technocratic shortcuts between 2014 and 2018, though sizeable minorities still endorsed such statements—consistent with Merdeka's later findings of ambivalence (interest low, democracy preferred).

Digital media intensifies generational gaps: younger Malaysians rely on networked information and issue campaigns;

4. **Economic & Exit Logic.** Rising youth willingness to emigrate (2018) and persistently higher youth unemployment (2025) suggest a structural demand for performance-based responsiveness—conditions under which trust becomes contingent on credible delivery (jobs, cost-of-living, mobility).

5. **Information Environments.** Digital media intensifies generational gaps: younger Malaysians rely on networked information and issue campaigns; Edelman's Malaysia data show sizeable worries about misinformation and a competence-trust gap for government in innovation—factors likely to depress generalized trust among youth.

8. Policy Implications: Rebuilding Youth-Inclusive Trust

1. **Institutional Credibility & Process Integrity.** Maintain EC transparency post-AVR (roll accuracy, campaign finance disclosure, fair access to media). ABS already shows a high 2018 baseline of EC trust—a valuable asset to preserve.

2. **Parties as Gateways.** Invest in open candidate selection, youth wings with real influence, and programmatic agendas beyond ethnic patronage or perhaps integrate ethnicity with progressive approaches. Identity-politics in Malaysia should not be ignored or dismissed. Parties must close the trust gap vis-à-vis parliament/executive.

3. **Performance Politics for Youth.** Prioritize youth employment quality (apprenticeships, SME incentives, digital skills), housing affordability, and transport—demonstrable outputs that map onto youth trust formation.

4. **Civic Learning & Deliberation.** Expand non-partisan civic education (schools, universities, unions, mosques/churches/temples, CSOs), and deliberative forums (citizens' assemblies, youth councils) to institutionalize voice beyond episodic protests.

5. **Information Integrity & Innovation Governance.** Address mis/disinformation and improve the state's perceived competence in regulating technology; coordinate with business/NGOs to build "trust by design" for high-salience innovations.

9. Conclusion

The generational trust landscape in Malaysia since 2014 is characterized by the following factors: (a) a youth-led surge in institutional confidence around the 2018 alternation; (b) continued party skepticism across age demographics; and (c) post-2019 volatility that likely blunted gains, even as Undi18/AVR expanded youth electoral weight. Given that half of the electorate is now aged 18–39 and youth unemployment is structurally higher, trust will hinge on transparent process integrity and tangible performance. Should political parties and state institutions succeed in narrowing the credibility gap, Malaysia's substantial youth demographic may evolve into a stabilizing force, thereby mitigating the potential for democratic instability.

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1. The Generational Divide in Political Perception and Engagement

The Philippines is currently experiencing a growing generation gap in politics, a phenomenon that has been shaped by demographic change, diverging media consumption patterns, and a shift in values across the different generations. Given that Millennials and Gen Z now compromise nearly two-thirds of the electorate[1], their influence on governance and policy outcomes has become decisive.

For older generations of Filipinos who lived through Martial Law (1972–1986), the EDSA People Power Revolution, and post-1986 democratic transitions, politics is a moral battle between democracy and dictatorship,

[1] *GMA Network*. 2025.01.23. "Philippines' Voting-Age Population Rises to 76M; 69.7M Registered Voters as of January 2025." https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/896490/philippines-voting-age-population-rises-to-76m-69-7m-registered-voters-as-of-jan-2025

freedom and repression. They evoke memories of the sacrifices made to restore democratic institutions, and hold a more idealistic conception of political participation. Nevertheless, the populace has also endured recurrent waves of political dynasties, languid reforms, and corruption scandals. These events have endangered widespread disillusionment and disengagement[2], leading to a pervasive sense of resignation among the populace regarding the belief that politics is inherently corrupt and cannot be reformed.

Conversely, contemporary Filipino youth have been reared in a milieu characterized by the pervasive influence of social media, accelerated globalization, and a markedly polarized political environment. The subjects of this study learned about past struggles from various sources, including history lessons, family narratives, and online debates. The political stance of the aforementioned group is inextricably linked to a series of issues, including social justice, climate change, and human rights.[3] This viewpoint is articulated through the medium of digital platforms, which serves as a crucible for competing and clashing narratives. The political landscape, as perceived by this group, transcends the mere act of electing officials and encompasses a more profound form of advocacy that is inextricably linked to the quotidian experiences of individuals[4].

Conversely, contemporary Filipino youth have been reared in a milieu characterized by the pervasive influence of social media, accelerated globalization, and a markedly polarized political environment.

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[2] *Philstar.com*. 2025.05.12. "Millennials, Gen Z Make Up 60 Percent of Voting Population." https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2025/05/12/2442408/millennials-gen-z-make-60-percent-voting-population

[3] Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. 2024.06.17. "Digital News Report 2024 — Philippines Country Profile." https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024/philippines

[4] DataReportal. 2024.01. "Digital 2024: The Philippines." https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-philippines

This emerging generational divide stems from contrasting political reference points, with elders posing questions such as "How can we safeguard democracy against a reversion to authoritarianism?" Meanwhile, youth grapple with concerns like, "How can we ensure that democracy serves our interests in the face of inequity and disinformation?" In the context of electoral processes, older voters tend to prioritize stability and familiarity, while younger voters often prioritize charisma, relatability, or a strong digital presence. A common complaint among senior individuals is that younger generations lack a sufficient historical foundation.

Conversely, younger individuals often express frustration with the perceived rigidity and antiquity of the frameworks employed by their elders. This friction cannot be reduced to a simplistic dichotomy between apathy and activism. Rather, it is a complex interplay of information ecologies[5], political socialization, and lived experience. These elements are shaped by economic anxiety, dynastic institutions, and the increasingly interconnected media landscape.

Conversely, younger individuals often express frustration with the perceived rigidity and antiquity of the frameworks employed by their elders.

The Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) was conducted from 2010-2022. This survey collected cross-sectional, nationally representative data this past decade on political values, institutional trust, and democratic attitudes in the Philippines and other Asian countries during the past decade. Despite the absence of a generational breakdown in the survey, related research and findings reveal a qualitative contrast in political trust trends. Specifically, Filipino youth exhibit a generally low level of trust in legal institutions, with an even lower level of trust in political parties and the legislature. This phenomenon stands in contrast to the tendency exhibited by older Filipinos, who have been observed to exhibit an increased prosperity for trust, along with

[5] VERA Files. 2024.06.17. "Facebook, Other Traditional Socmed Platforms Wane as News Sources in PH; Adults Turn to TikTok — DNR 2024." https://verafiles.org/articles/facebook-other-traditional-socmed-platforms-wane-as-news-sources-in-phdigital-news-report-2024

a stronger adherence to authoritarian values and traditional hierarchies.[6]

A notable finding of the study was that Gen Z Filipinos (ages 18–25) exhibited the lowest levels of institutional trust. This demographic demonstrated critical and skeptical attitudes, which are indicative of a generation characterized by distrust and skepticism towards institutional entities and systems. A survey of Millennials (ages 26–40) revealed a moderate level of trust. This demographic appeared to adopt a pragmatic and reform-oriented stance. A higher level of trust in institutions was exhibited by Gen X (ages 41–60), a demographic frequently associated with more conservative attitudes toward tradition, order, stability, and resistance to change. A correlation was identified between age group and levels of trust, with Baby Boomers (ages 60+) demonstrating the highest level of trust. This finding is indicative of senior conformism and authoritarian leanings.

This finding suggests that the development of political trust is an ongoing process that occurs across the lifespan.

According to multiple waves of the ABS, younger Filipinos exhibited greater skepticism towards government institutions during their early years. However, this trust increased over time, regardless of initial reservations. This finding suggests that the development of political trust is an ongoing process that occurs across the lifespan. Generational differences in trust are influenced by both formative experiences and the effects of life-stage. The study also reveals a statistical correlation between authoritarian-leaning values, such as a preference for strong leaders and anti-pluralism, and higher trust in political institutions. This tendency is particularly pronounced among older individuals, as evidenced by generational contrasts in trust patterns. This dynamic was consistent across different regime types, whether under populist or democratic governance.[7]

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[6] Asian Barometer Survey (ABS). 2010–2022. "Waves 3–5 Data on Political Values, Institutional Trust, and Democratic Attitudes." https://www.asianbarometer.org/

[7] UNDP Asia-Pacific & Asian Barometer. 2014. Youth and Democratic Citizenship in East and South-East Asia (Summary Report). https://www.undp.org/sites/zskgke326/files/migration/asia_pacific_rbap/RBAP-DG-2014-

2. Probing Cross-Generational Contrasts

A subsequent examination of the ABS data and the associated studies has revealed a divergence among generations in three domains of civic and democratic engagement, commencing with the well-established subject of socio-political participation among older generations and culminating in this nascent field of study that aims to comprehend contemporary youth:

1. Political Activism

- **Seniors (ages 60+)**: The political memory of these Martial Law survivors were shaped by radical protests against the authoritarian rule of Marcos and the democratic transition. They were active in the 80's but less today due to age, so activism is often limited to community or religious involvement.

- **Gen X (ages 41-60)**: This generation romanticizes People Power event and efforts, but is also greatly disillusioned by cycles of corruption and political dynasties. Many are pragmatic voters, valuing local patronage networks over ideological causes.

- **Millennials (ages 26-40)**: Involvement through combined digital activism with on-the-ground mobilization, volunteering for campaigns, NGOs and advocacy groups. Work for institutional reform advocacy, such as anti-dynasty laws and transparency in governance.

- **Gen Z (ages 18–25)**: Have high enthusiasm for issue-based activism, on climate strikes, education reforms, LGBTQ+ rights. Turnout can be strong when mobilized, such as during the 2022 elections, but activism is episodic and tied to viral campaigns. They have stronger involvement in community drives and online campaigns rather than formal party structures.

Youth-n-Democratic-Citizenship-East-n-SE-Asia-Summary.pdf

2. Digital Engagement

- **Seniors (ages 60+)**: Primarily TV and radio audiences, with growing but shallow use of Facebook for news. Less digitally literate, making them vulnerable to simplistic or nostalgic narratives circulating online. Less likely to generate content, more likely to consume and forward political material via messaging apps.

- **Gen X (ages 41-60)**: Heavy reliance on Facebook and Viber for news and communication, but still consume TV and radio as trusted sources. More likely to be exposed to networked disinformation.

- **Millennials (ages 26-40)**: Strong presence on Facebook, Twitter (X), and YouTube as main news sources. More digitally literate than older groups but still vulnerable to echo chambers. Often act as both producers and sharers of content, shaping discourse across younger and older cohorts.

- **Gen Z (ages 18–25)**: Digital natives, heavy reliance on TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram for news. Increasingly consume political content from influencers and creators, rather than online news websites. Vulnerable to disinformation due to algorithm-driven feeds, but also the most active in fact-checking movements and viral counter-narratives.[8]

3. Preferences for Democratic Reforms and Social Change

- **Seniors (ages 60+)**: Tend to value stability, continuity, and moral order over progressive reforms. Support democratic ideals in principle, but less supportive of liberal social policies, more drawn to platforms promising law-and-order, pensions, and healthcare.

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[8] Social Weather Stations (SWS) & The Asia Foundation (YouthLed). 2022.07.13. "Confirmatory Release of the 2021 National Youth Survey." https://www.sws.org.ph/downloads/publication_files/Confirmatory%20release%20of%20the%202021%20National%20Youth%20Survey.pdf

- **Gen X (ages 41-60)**: Prioritize economic stability, livelihood, and security over systemic reforms. More conservative in social issues such as divorce, same-sex marriage), but supportive of institutional strengthening like anti-corruption drives and good governance reforms. Bit skeptical of radical change; prefer incremental improvements.

- **Millennials (ages 26-40)**: High support for labor rights, freedom of expression, civil liberties and digital economy reforms. Pragmatic progressives, focus on anti-corruption, inclusive economic growth, and better social services.

- **Gen Z (ages 18–25)**: Progressive with strong support for human rights, social equity, and anti-corruption measures. Favor participatory governance reforms and environmental policy. More open to non-traditional politicians and independent candidates, provided they engage online.

Generational differences are evident in belief systems; older citizens tend to be more conservative and reliant on traditional institutions, while younger citizens, with greater online exposure to pluralistic and global values, tend to hold more progressive views.

Generational differences are evident in belief systems; older citizens tend to be more conservative and reliant on traditional institutions, while younger citizens, with greater online exposure to pluralistic and global values, tend to hold more progressive views. The access to political influences is highly stratified, with older Filipinos relying on traditional media such as TV and radio, while younger generations increasingly turn to social media for political content. Across generations, nationalism remains strong, though its expression differs. While youth activism flourishes online, it does not always translate into offline political action. Although the act of casting a vote remains the primary means of equalization, disparities in demographic reveal a voting base that is youthful and marginally female-leaning. Urbanization,

educational attainment, and religion affiliation collectively influence the manner in which individual engage with the political landscape.[9]

3. Why this is Important?

From an electoral perspective, young people should not be regarded as a niche demographic; rather, they represent the demographic center of gravity.

The Filipino youth, defined in law as ages 15–30, are both numerically significant and civically consequential. Their engagement encompasses various domains, including voting, student and local governance, digital advocacy, community service and social entrepreneurship. However, their representation in formal institutions remains uneven, constrained by socioeconomic barriers, political patronage, limited civic education, and the corrosive effects of disinformation. Contemporary youth involvement is characterized by a combination of offline and online actions, though it frequently occurs in an episodic manner and lacks a strong institutional framework.

From an electoral perspective, young people should not be regarded as a niche demographic; rather, they represent the demographic center of gravity. The Commission on Elections (COMELEC) reported that in 2022, 56% of registered voters were between the ages of 18 and 40, a substantial proportion that has been increasing, thereby conferring a disproportionate agenda-setting power at the ballot box to Generation Z. The majority of respondents (58%) reported being guided on issues and candidates by family members, followed by political experts, close peers, and social media posts.12 While 86% of youth expressed the belief that they could effect change through campaigning and

[9] ABS-CBN News. 2022.07.03. "9 of 10 Filipinos Proud of Being Filipino — SWS." https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/07/03/22/9-of-10-filipinos-proud-of-being-filipino-sws

voting,[10] very few had formally affiliated themselves with any organization, with only 8% belonging to a political party.

The political course of the Philippines has historically been shaped by the recurring and pivotal role played by Filipino youth. This phenomenon can be traced back to the 1880s, when Filipino youth played a pivotal role in the Propaganda Movement. More recently, Filipino youth were instrumental in the 1986 People Power Revolution, and they continue to play a significant role in today's issue-driven campaigns. The country has also established robust legal framework for youth participation, firmly embedded in the 1987 Constitution and further reinforced by the Youth in Nation-Building Act (RA 8044), which led to the formation of the National Youth Commission. Additionally, the SK Reform Act (RA 10742) allocated dedicated financial resources and introduced anti-dynasty provisions for the Sangguniang Kabataan youth councils.[11]

The political course of the Philippines has historically been shaped by the recurring and pivotal role played by Filipino youth.

A considerable number of national and local democracy organizations have acknowledged the urgent necessity to nurture the emerging generation of youth leaders to perpetuate the revitalization of democratic governance. Nevertheless, recent endeavors to cultivate a subsequent generation of democratic leaders have been hampered by

- Entrenched political dynasties that dominate electoral spaces, limiting opportunities for independent or reform-minded young leaders to gain traction;

[10] The Carter Center. 2023. Final Report: The Republic of the Philippines General Elections, May 9, 2022. https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/news/peace_publications/election_reports/philippines-2022-final-report.pdf

[11] UNDP & Asian Barometer. 2014. Youth and Democratic Citizenship in East and South-East Asia. https://www.undp.org/sites/zskgke326/files/migration/asia_pacific_rbap/RBAP-DG-2014-Youth-n-Democratic-Citizenship-East-n-SE-Asia-Summary.pdf

- Electoral barriers like the high cost of campaigning, limited party resources and support;

- Socioeconomic pressures on young Filipinos to earn vs long-term democratic work;

- Generational divides in priorities and approaches within democracy forces;

The broader political culture of patronage, vote-buying, and limited accountability collecting impede the entry, sustainability, and influence of young leaders in politics. It is imperative to bridge the generational gap and strengthen institutional pathways for young leaders to ensure the sustainability of democratic reforms in the ensuing decade.

4. Lessons Learned to Bridge the Gap

The resolution of the discrepancy between generations in the political landscape of the Philippines necessitates measures that extend beyond the mere act of electoral participation. This approach necessitates a comprehensive understanding of the implications, followed by the reformulation of policies and practices that acknowledge the unique characteristics of each cohort in terms of knowledge, values, and engagement. Additionally, it is essential to establish shared democratic spaces conducive to dialogue, accountability, and collaboration.

1) Demographics: The Philippine electorate is now predominantly youthful and female, with Millennials and Gen Z constituting nearly two-thirds of the voting populace. This demographic shift signifies that generational disparities in values, education, urban experience, and religiosity will progressively influence political outcomes. It is imperative for political parties to acknowledge that the governance agenda will be shaped by the priorities of

a youthful, diverse, and evolving electorate. This underscores the necessity for inclusive, intergenerational engagement.

... it is essential to employ intergenerational communication strategies that acknowledge and respect these differences while promoting shared, credible sources of democratic knowledge and engagement.

2) Knowledge: According to survey results, Filipino youth exhibit a high level of engagement in political discourse on social media platforms. However, concurrent studies indicate that a significant proportion of this demographic exhibits a dearth of understanding regarding democratic institutions and processes. This phenomenon aligns with a broader generational trend observed across Asia, wherein younger demographic groups tend to favor democratic principles but often harbor skepticism regarding its practical implementation. In order to address this discrepancy, it is incumbent upon leaders and educators to translate online engagement into more profound civic learning. This would create opportunities for young people to connect digital participation with concrete understanding and real-world influence in democratic governance.

3) Media Influence: Media consumption has exhibited a pronounced generational pattern, with older voters demonstrating a strong reliance on television, while younger demographics are increasingly socialized politically through social media, particularly through the medium of short-form video platforms. This phenomenon gives rise to the proliferation of disparate information ecosystems, characterized by varying degrees of trust, exposure, and susceptibility to misinformation across diverse age demographics. To address this gap, it is essential to employ intergenerational communication strategies that acknowledge and respect these differences while promoting shared, credible sources of democratic knowledge and engagement.

4) Beliefs: The belief systems of Filipinos are characterized by a multifaceted and intricate array of generational differences. While youth may exhibit a digital facade that is more open-minded and accepting of diverse perspectives, they may concurrently harbor ambivalent attitudes regarding contentious issues such as gender equality and institutional trust. It is imperative to acknowledge the heterogeneity that characterizes different generations. To that end, fostering a constructive dialogue that respects shared national pride while cultivating openness, tolerance, and inclusive values across generations is paramount.

To that end, fostering a constructive dialogue that respects shared national pride while cultivating openness, tolerance, and inclusive values across generations is paramount.

5) Political Behavior: Voting remains the most unifying form of participation in the Philippines, with both older and younger generations participating in high numbers. However, beyond the electoral process, older generations tend to engage more through traditional mechanisms, while younger Filipinos channel their activism into online platforms, with less consistent offline mobilization. In order to facilitate this transformation, it is imperative that democracy champions expand access to pathways for youth participation and enhance the availability of local councils and civil society actions. This will ensure that digital energy is translated into sustained democratic engagement across generations.

6) Institutional Legitimacy: The findings of the study suggest that the lower levels of trust among Filipino youth for legislature and political parties may indicate a potential crisis of democratic legitimacy, which could result in increased disengagement or alienation among the youth demographic. The implementation of civic messaging must prioritize the reinforcement of institutional accountability and transparency, while concomitantly effecting a reset of public expectations concerning democratic institutions. The policy recommendations

encompass several key areas. Firstly, there is a call to fortify civic education for young people. Secondly, there is a necessity to adapt communication strategies to align with both traditional and digital media formats. Thirdly, there is a proposal to streamline pathways from online to offline civic engagement. Finally, there is a call to enhance the accessibility of direct democracy mechanisms.

Contrary to the notion of political disengagement, young people are reinterpreting the realm of politics as a domain for innovative protest movements concerning climate change, advocating for LGBTQ+ rights, community mobilization in the aftermath of typhoons, and digital campaigns against corruption.

The presence of a generational gap does not necessarily imply disengagement. This initiative represents a call for a transformation of political participation in the Philippines. Contrary to the notion of political disengagement, young people are reinterpreting the realm of politics as a domain for innovative protest movements concerning climate change, advocating for LGBTQ+ rights, community mobilization in the aftermath of typhoons, and digital campaigns against corruption. Cross-generational dialogue is imperative for cultivating inclusive democratic participation. The challenge lies in establishing a conduit that connects the historical acumen of older generations with the digital dynamism of the youth. If the aforementioned issues are not addressed, Philippine politics risks deepening polarization. The Philippines stands to benefit from a more holistic political consciousness, one that is grounded in history yet adaptive to contemporary realities, if intergenerational understanding and dialogue can be fostered.

5. Ways Forward in Building a Successor Generation for Democratic Leadership

A review of mechanisms is necessary to ensure the genuine autonomy of youth councils and to empower youth representation in decision-making bodies beyond the barangay level.

The following strategies and practices are proposed to build the pipeline of democratic successors and empower the next generation of youth leaders to overcome entrenched political and socioeconomic barriers. These strategies and practices are anchored on the findings of the Asian Barometer survey and our analysis of intergenerational differences.

a) Reform Political Structures and Rules: The initial step in this process should be the promotion of anti-dynasty legislation and campaign finance reforms. It is imperative to identify methodologies that can facilitate the establishment of a more equitable environment for novice candidates. A review of mechanisms is necessary to ensure the genuine autonomy of youth councils and to empower youth representation in decision-making bodies beyond the barangay level.

b) Build Leadership Pipelines: Democracy groups have the capacity to augment mentorship programs, thereby establishing a connection between experienced democratic leaders and younger activists. These groups can also offer leadership fellowships and scholarships, which provide training in governance, policy analysis, and civic engagement. This training equips young leaders with the necessary skills, networks, and confidence to assume more prominent roles. It is imperative to facilitate the paring of nascent leaders with distinguished mentors who can provide them with the guidance necessary to navigate the intricacies of governance without impeding their novel perspectives. A subsequent objective is to showcase success stories of young

Filipinos who have influenced governance, with the aim of countering cynicism and inspiring replication. In order to reach young people in a contemporary manner, it is essential to modernize party outreach. This can be achieved by meeting young people in platform-native formats and utilizing issue-based ladders of engagement. These ladders of engagement can range from digital micro-volunteering to neighborhood problem-solving. It is imperative for youth party-list groups to organize and sustain participation beyond single election cycles.

It is imperative to provide support to student councils, campus press, and debate programs, recognizing their role as incubators of democratic practice and leadership.

c) Strengthen Civic and Political Education: The integration of democratic literacy into school curricula is imperative, with a focus on critical thinking, human rights, media literacy, and active citizenship. A compelling approach would be to establish a connection between principles and prevailing issues by contextualizing governance matters within the broader framework of employment, education, climate change, transportation, and mental health. It is imperative to elucidate the manner in which democratic participation can result in substantial enhancements in the daily lives of the populace. It is imperative to provide support to student councils, campus press, and debate programs, recognizing their role as incubators of democratic practice and leadership. These initiatives must be nurtured from an early stage to cultivate democratic literacy and engagement.

d) Address Socioeconomic Barriers: It is imperative to identify resources that offer financial assistance and incentives to facilitate the engagement of young individuals from diverse backgrounds. This approach is crucial to ensure that participation does not compromise their livelihoods. It is imperative to provide assistance in the endeavor to accumulate financial resources for civic

initiatives and mobilizations that are initiated by young people.

e) Leverage Generational Strengths: The utilization of digital platforms for participatory governance, including online town halls and feedback applications, should be augmented. It is imperative to foster a culture of youth-led digital activism, leveraging the innate skills and competencies that are characteristic of younger generations. The promotion of responsible digital spaces and the combating of disinformation are the primary objectives of support groups. The utilization of social media for issue-based campaigns, civic education, and grassroots mobilization is of paramount importance.

The implementation of shared governance model is crucial in achieving a balance between the youthful vigor of newcomers and the institutional knowledge and experience of seasoned professionals.

f)Foster Trust and Accountability: The establishment of transparent feedback loops and participatory digital platforms is essential for enabling youth to observe the influence of their contributions on policy outcomes. It is imperative to empower youth groups with independent oversight and accountability mechanisms to ensure the credibility of their initiatives and prevent them from being influenced by political patrons. It is imperative to extend beyond the scope of consultation by empowering youth to assume decision-making roles within councils, board, and the design of policy. The implementation of shared governance model is crucial in achieving a balance between the youthful vigor of newcomers and the institutional knowledge and experience of seasoned professionals.

g) Create Safe and Inclusive Spaces: The establishment of intergenerational dialogue, facilitated by the organization of dialogues between young leaders and older reformists, is a crucial component of this initiative. It is imperative to acknowledge the heterogeneity that exists across socioeconomic, regional, and

cultural boundaries. It is imperative to establish secure environments where young individuals can articulate their discontent, exchange viewpoints, and engage in discourse without the apprehension of retaliation. The utilization of digital engagement tools is paramount for effective communication, ensuring the dissemination of honest and authentic messaging.

6. Conclusion

In order to ensure that the next wave of leaders emerges prepared, resilient, and committed to democratic renewal, it is essential to build trust in institutions, expand opportunities for meaningful participation, and foster inclusive, intergenerational dialogue.

The future of Philippine democracy will be determined by the extent to which it successfully mitigates the generational divide in political values, trust, and modes of participation. While older generations have accumulated knowledge from past struggles, younger Filipinos have digital fluency, energy, and a strong commitment to issues of justice, equity, and sustainability. The challenge lies not in the privilege of one generation over another, but rather in the cultivation of create a political culture that facilitates mutual learning and empowerment between them. In order to ensure that the next wave of leaders emerges prepared, resilient, and committed to democratic renewal, it is essential to build trust in institutions, expand opportunities for meaningful participation, and foster inclusive, intergenerational dialogue. By allocating resources to the nation's youth, the Philippines can foster a more participatory, accountable, and future-ready democratic system.

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Case 4: Thailand

Generation Gap in Politics in Thailand: Political Cleavage

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1. Abstract

This paper examines the widening generational divide in Thailand's political landscape and its implications for democratic stability. The present study draws on data from the Asian Barometer Survey (2014–2022) and relevant theoretical frameworks to explore explores patterns of political trust, participation, and ideological divergence across age cohorts. The findings underscore a precipitous decline in institutional trust among youth aged 18–25, particularly in executive offices, parliament, and political parties, contrasting with comparatively higher levels of trust among older generations. This erosion of legitimacy has coincided with a rise in youth activism, most notably during the 2020–2021 pro-democracy protests, where social media facilitated decentralized mobilization and taboo-breaking demands for reform that broke with established norms. In contrast, older cohorts exhibit a preference for hierarchical institutions and

conventional participation such as voting. The analysis attributes these cleavages to formative historical experiences, divergent media consumption, and generationally uneven economic opportunities.

The study posits that Thailand's shifting demographics—marked by an aging electorate and a diminishing youth population—serve to perpetuate a state of intractable generational politics, thereby shaping the agendas of policymakers and constraining the potential for reform. To address this issue, the study proposes a multifaceted approach, including institutional recalibration, the facilitation of intergenerational dialogue, the integration of civic education into educational curricula, and the promotion of youth-inclusive policymaking. These measures are imperative for the transformation of Thailand's generational conflict into a foundation for democratic consolidation.

2. Introduction

A notable shift in attitude is evident among younger cohorts, particularly those between the ages of 18 and 25.

An examination of Thailand's political landscape in the twenty-first century reveals the presence of significant generational divisions that have contributed to the transformation of patterns of political participation, trust, and ideological alignment. The aforementioned cleavages have intensified over the past two decades, driven by divergent historical experiences, socioeconomic transformation, and the proliferation of digital media. A notable shift in attitude is evident among younger cohorts, particularly those between the ages of 18 and 25. These individuals exhibit a marked disconnection from conventional institutions, a phenomenon that stand in stark contrast to the tendency of older generations to maintain a degree of confidence in established authority (Teeratanabodee 2025).

This paper examines the generational gap in Thai politics by analyzing political trust, participation, and ideological divergence. Utilizing data from the

Asian Barometer Survey (2014–2022) in conjunction with theoretical frameworks, the study posits that generational divisions represent a fundamental realignment of Thai politics, with a substantial ramification for democratic stability and institutional legitimacy.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study of generational divides is predicated on Karl Mannheim's (1952) notion of cohorts shaped by shared historical experiences. According to the principles of political socialization theory, formative political events have the capacity to leave an indelible mark on the minds of young individuals, shaping their long-term ideological orientations (Jennings and Niemi 1981). Ronald Inglehart's (1997) post-materialist thesis posits that younger generations, who have been beneficiaries of enhanced educational opportunities and relative economic stability, place a higher value on democratic principles and participatory governance.

The situation in Thailand complicates these theories. The recurrence of democratic backsliding and the occurrence of repeated military interventions have had a disruptive effect on the development of politics, giving rise to distinctive generational rifts (McCargo and Farrelly 2011).

4. Demographic Shifts and Political Implications

Thailand is experiencing a period of rapid demographic transformation. As of 2024, individuals aged 60 and over constituted approximately 20 percent of the population, while those aged 10–24 represented only 17 percent. The fertility rates have decreased to 1.21 births per woman, thereby accelerating the country's transition into an aging society.

These demographic dynamics shape electoral politics:

- The electorate has been age-weighted. As the proportion of voters over the age of 65 in the electorate increases, issues such as pensions, healthcare, and energy prices become increasingly salient in legislative agendas. In contrast, issues that are prioritized by younger voters, including climate change, digital rights, and educational reform, face challenges in garnering the same level of struggle for traction.

Although social media enables youth to mobilize quickly, demographic realities and institutional veto players diminish their direct electoral impact.

- Slow cohort replacement: Smaller youth cohorts mean generational turnover is slower, prolonging political stalemates even when reformist parties gain electoral ground.

- Territorial concentration: Younger voters are concentrated in urban constituencies, where their impact is amplified, but they wield less influence in rural strongholds dominated by older voters.

- Digital mobilization vs. electoral arithmetic: Although social media enables youth to mobilize quickly, demographic realities and institutional veto players diminish their direct electoral impact.

5. Methodology and Data

This analysis draws on data from the Asian Barometer Survey (2014–2022), which has been disaggregated into age groups: 18–25, 26–40, 41–60, and 60+. The indicators encompass various aspects, including the level of trust in executive offices, parliament, and political parties. The Survey evidence is supplemented with secondary literature on Thai political protests, youth

movements, and democratic transitions.

6. Generational Cleavages in Political Trust

The advent of social media platforms played a pivotal role in this paradigm shift, facilitating the mobilization of individuals in a decentralized and leaderless manner (Mietzner 2020).

From 2014 to 2022, trust in executive institutions among Thai youth decreased precipitously from 70.3 percent to a mere 2.7 percent (Asian Barometer Survey 2022). This coincided with the aftermath of the 2014 coup and the 2020–2021 pro-democracy protests led by groups such as Ratsadon and Free Youth. As indicated by Teeratanabodee (2025), older cohorts (60+) exhibited comparatively higher levels of trust (52.1 percent in 2022), indicative of their socialization during eras characterized by robust state authority.

Concurrently, the level of trust in parliament among the youth segment experienced a precipitous decline, from 55.8 percent in 2014 to 5.3 percent in 2022. In contrast, older respondents exhibited a slightly higher level of trust, with 47.5 percent reporting the same year. The performance of political parties was particularly substandard, with youth confidence levels consistently below 5 percent. These patterns suggest a severe legitimacy crisis (Case 2015).

7. Generational Cleavages in Political Participation

As institutional trust eroded, youth increasingly turned to alternative forms of participation. The 2020–2021 protests signified a pivotal moment, as youth movements advanced demands for monarchy reform and democratization that defied conventional norms (Abbott, Teti, and Ayoub 2018). The advent of

social media platforms played a pivotal role in this paradigm shift, facilitating the mobilization of individuals in a decentralized and leaderless manner (Mietzner 2020).

In contrast, older cohorts demonstrated a preference for conventional channels, such as voting and party affiliation, reflecting an alignment with the hierarchical structures the characteristic of Thai politics. Consequently, the cleavage in this case is indicative of not only prevailing attitudes toward trust but also divergent modes of political engagement.

8. Roots of the Generational Divide

Rising debt, stagnant wages, and limited upward mobility have fostered youth disillusionment, while older cohorts benefited from earlier economic booms.

Several factors explain Thailand's deepening political cleavage:

1. Historical socialization: Older cohorts experienced the Cold War and authoritarian stability, while younger generations grew up amid coups, volatile democratization, and political conflict (McCargo and Farrelly 2011).

2. Digital vs. traditional media: Youth exposure to diverse online discourses contrasts with older generations' reliance on state-controlled media (Curato 2017).

3. Economic inequality: Rising debt, stagnant wages, and limited upward mobility have fostered youth disillusionment, while older cohorts benefited from earlier economic booms.

9. Political Consequences and Risks

Thailand's expanding gap between generations has been identified as a significant factor that undermines national cohesion and exacerbates governance challenges. The alienation of youth populations has the potential to incite cycles of protest and repression. A comparative analysis of cases in Indonesia and the Philippines, where youth trust remains higher, underscores the significance of inclusive institutions (Mietzner 2020).

10. Bridging the Gap: Policy Pathways

Institutional Recalibration

Constitutional reform should address structural disenfranchisement. Gradual abolition of the appointed Senate and clarification of lèse-majesté's constitutional scope could enhance democratic responsiveness (UK House of Commons Library 2024).

Intergenerational Dialogue

Structured platforms—such as participatory councils and university–community forums—can bridge divisions by focusing on common issues like corruption, inequality, and education (Muckchim 2022).

Civic Education and Media Literacy

Integrating civic education into schools and promoting digital literacy across age cohorts can foster resilience against disinformation and authoritarian narratives (Kanokrat Lertchoosakul 2021).

Youth Inclusion in Policymaking

Formal mechanisms, such as a Youth Advisory Council under the Prime Minister's Office, could institutionalize youth input. Policies targeting climate, education, and platform-economy labor rights may build generational solidarity

(International IDEA 2024).

11. Conclusion

The generational divide in Thailand is indicative of profound and entrenched transformations in political culture, social structure, and media ecosystems. The precipitous decline in youth confidence in government institutions underscores the pressing need for comprehensive reform. In the absence of deliberate efforts to ameliorate this cleavage, Thailand is susceptible to cycles of democratic erosion and political instability.

The eventual resolution of this discord between hierarchical traditions and participatory aspirations will determine whether Thailand advances toward democratic consolidation or remains trapped in authoritarian cycles.

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