

YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF PARTICIPATION

Abstract

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) accords all young people the right to be heard and make decisions on matters affecting them. Despite the fact the United States remains the only country in the world not to have ratified this document, a number of American cities have nevertheless begun to engage young people in community decision-making (e.g., in neighborhood associations or community boards). However, as of yet there are few actual opportunities for youth to participate fully in the governance of their cities. This study examined the perspectives of young people (18–24 years of age) living in New York City about the opportunities available to them to express their opinions, be heard, and have their views taken into consideration in city governance. Over the course of focus groups and individual interviews, participants discussed the opportunities that were available to them to participate in local governance and the degree to which such opportunities were meaningful, democratic, and supported young people’s political agency. Believing that their contributions were not taken seriously, young people viewed participating in social movements as a way of enhancing their political agency. Youth also viewed social media as both an effective vehicle for being heard and as a tool for connecting with others to become a part of social change. By drawing on young people’s own voices concerning the opportunities to participate in the decisions that impact their lives, we come to better understand the gap between the intention to engage young people and the practices of local governance.