

A Comparative Study of Youth Political Agency and the Socio-Cultural Barriers to Legislative Power in Norway and South Korea

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Abstract

Governments worldwide have created youth councils to formalize young people's political voice, but these institutions vary sharply in whether they merely advise or actually decide. This paper asks how cultural perceptions of youth maturity and seniority-based social structures in East Asia shape the institutional design and legislative limits of youth participation bodies, compared with youth council models elsewhere. Using two independent variables — a body's statutory authority (binding versus advisory) and the strength of surrounding age-hierarchy norms — the paper compares Norway, Colombia, Uganda, and South Korea to explain variation in youth legislative agency, defined as the capacity of youth proposals to become law without adult gatekeeping. It finds that Norway's youth councils remain formally advisory but function effectively within a low-power-distance civic culture, while Colombia and Uganda have granted genuinely binding authority through deliberate statutory design, showing that such power is not uniquely "Western." South Korea, by contrast, has built an elaborate consultative architecture that never crosses into binding authority, a pattern this paper attributes to Confucian-derived age hierarchy and an academically saturated model of adolescence. The paper concludes that youth legislative agency depends on the interaction of institutional design and cultural context, and that closing South Korea's agency gap requires a deliberate institutional choice, not merely additional consultation.