



## Article

# From Schoolyards to Government: A Comparative Analysis of the Positive Effect of Teenager Participation in Local Governance

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**Abstract:** Amid growing academic discourse on teenagers' political rights, this paper argues that the inclusion of teenagers in the decision-making process at the municipal level has positive effects. Based on qualitative and quantitative research on three municipalities in Greece and Sweden, this paper concludes that a level of awareness of the critical issue of climate change leads to a greater propensity for action from municipal councils aimed at restoring the environment. The findings demonstrate that including teenagers in the decision-making process at the local and regional level could lead to a greater focus on forward-thinking policies, particularly in areas concerning young people, such as environmental preservation efforts and democratic rights.

**Keywords:** comparative politics; decision-making; governance; local governance; youth participation; open democracy; democracy; teenagers



**Citation:** Saltiel, Ines Nelly, and Pantelis Sklias. 2023. From Schoolyards to Government: A Comparative Analysis of the Positive Effect of Teenager Participation in Local Governance. *Social Sciences* 12: 597. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12110597>

Academic Editor:  
Andreu Casero-Ripollés

Received: 23 August 2023  
Revised: 15 October 2023  
Accepted: 20 October 2023  
Published: 26 October 2023



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## 1. Introduction

Teenagers have been changing the world since the beginning of history. At 13 years old, Joan of Arc led the French army. Barbara Johns initiated a strike at her segregated school. In more recent years, Malala Yousafzai won the Nobel Peace Prize at the age of 17, and Greta Thunberg challenged leaders to take immediate action against the climate crisis at 16. The democratic world is currently witnessing the rise of far-right movements, political oppression of marginalized groups, and an increase in authoritarian regimes; people have lost faith in the democratic system, and democracy is threatened as a result (Van Beek 2019; Schmitter 2019). Autocratic regimes are on the rise, while at the same time, in the last 10 years, democratic values such as freedom of expression, rule of law, quality of elections, government censorship, and government repression of civil society and organizations (V-Dem Institute 2023) have deteriorated globally. Additionally, the economic crisis has exacerbated democratic principles worldwide (Sklias and Maris 2013).

In relation to the issue of teenagers' political participation, the average voting age today is 18, while some countries have lowered their voting age to 16 or 17 (Maňko 2023). Thus, the voting age in most countries is the same as it was in the Athens of Pericles approximately 2500 years ago (Mark 2012).<sup>1</sup> While teenagers do not have the right to vote in most countries, they participate when given the chance. Moreover, the literature suggests that to elaborate on teenagers' inclusion in democracy, there is a need for clarification of the true definition of democracy and democratic practice. Democracy "... is not a common philosophy but a system of ideas in permanent tension with each other. Democracy is not a single theory but a regular pattern of disagreement." (DeWiel 2000, p. 149). Disagreement and tension arise from the debate on the nature of rights and the level of state involvement (Hall 1986). However, teenagers are excluded from decision-making. Teenagers' trust in

institutions is declining, putting democratic systems at risk (Kwak et al. 2020). However, this mistrust is often mislabeled as laziness and apathy (Cammaerts et al. 2014).

Is teenagers' participation a threat to our current democracy or a breath of fresh air and a potential solution to an aging and weary system? Can the presentation of fresh ideas, radical thinking, and the challenging of the status quo bring about a more action-oriented approach to the discussion of pressing issues? Furthermore, could teenagers' participation and the development of early civic engagement habits serve as a solution to the exclusion of youth from public discourse and the low voter turnout?

Despite the current research on Gen Z and millennials, there is an absence of empirical research regarding this cohort of teenagers in public policy; thus, there is a need for a closer investigation into the issue of teenagers who are currently deprived of their civil rights. With the increase in life expectancy, the younger generation is outnumbered (Ritchie 2019) by the older population. The notion that the future belongs to the youth is not true, as the decision-making power in both electoral and representative bodies lies with the older generations. Young people have fresh and radical ideas, which are shaped by an urgent desire to address issues such as climate change, equality, and inclusion, which are crucial concerns for our society (Tyson et al. 2021). As democracy is based on the representation of the people, it benefits from the inclusion of more diverse opinions. So why are teenagers excluded from voting and representation in decision-making bodies? The arguments used to justify the exclusion of teenagers from democratic participation and voting are very similar to those historically used to exclude women, Black people, the working class, and other minorities from such rights. While this study explores the patterns reflected in three municipalities, further research is needed to expand the samples and develop a broader academic basis for the assessment of models of teenagers' participation in our political system. This study is the first to monitor the effect that teenagers have on local governance when allowed to participate and express their opinions for the first time. Using the issue of climate change as a topic for discussion, this study recognizes that teenagers are renowned for their eco-friendly actions (Tyson et al. 2021).

This comparative study examines the impact of teenagers' input and proposals on the views of elected municipal council members, with a focus on climate action and teenagers' participation. This study involves a council meeting between teenagers and elected officials to discuss the issue of the climate crisis. More specifically, through quantitative primary questionnaires, the paper provides an assessment of the impact of teenagers' participation in local decision-making bodies on elected council members. This study was conducted in three different municipalities: Kalamata and Trikala in Greece, and Östersund in Sweden. The municipalities were selected for this study due to their accessibility and their varying approaches to youth engagement. The data collection for this study includes pre- and post-meeting questionnaires of council members and post-meeting surveys of participating teenagers, as well as qualitative analysis of meeting recordings. The inclusion of teenagers in the councils appears to have raised the awareness of the council members, who became more invested in climate action aimed at restoring the environment. This paper concludes by arguing that the active inclusion of teenagers in the municipal council meetings of Östersund, Sweden; Trikala, Greece; and Kalamata, Greece, has led to a significant change in elected council members' perspectives on climate change and the value of teenagers' participation.

## 2. Literature Review

Teenager participation in local governance is a critical aspect of ensuring that the voices and perspectives of young people are integrated into decision-making processes at the community level. The engagement of teenagers in local governance not only contributes to the development of more inclusive and representative policies but also fosters a sense of civic responsibility and empowerment among young citizens. Additionally, literature also makes reference to "the unique expertise that youth have on the adversities and assets that are present in their familiar systems, such as schools and the community" (Ellington et al. 2023).

This literature review explores the various dimensions of teenager participation in local governance, including its importance, challenges, and potential solutions, drawing from a range of academic and policy sources. Thus, the literature review in this paper focuses on aspects of political participation and the types of political participation, youth participation, and democracy, as well as changes and challenges in youth participation.

### 2.1. Participation

Teenager participation in local governance is integral to the principles of democracy and civic engagement. It ensures that young people have a say in the decisions that directly affect their lives, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility within the community. Such participation is essential for the long-term sustainability of democratic systems, as it encourages the active involvement of the next generation in the political process. Local governments are more likely to make informed decisions when the perspectives of all demographic groups are considered. Young people often bring fresh ideas and innovative solutions to the table, which can lead to more comprehensive and inclusive policies. Engaging in local governance activities can provide young people with opportunities to develop critical skills such as leadership, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. These skills are transferable to various aspects of their lives, including their education and future careers.

Participation—partaking in community actions—is defined as legal actions taken by citizens to influence a governmental body or its decisions (Verba and Nie 1972). For the purposes of this study, participation includes political participation, conventional participation, non-conventional participation, and non-participation. One type is especially relevant to this paper: political participation, which refers to the citizens' contributions to the formulation, outcome, and implementation of policies with regard to taking action in protest of a decision's outcome. In a more inclusive definition, Milbrath and Goel (1977, p. 2) refer to political participation as “actions of private citizens by which they seek to influence or to support government and politics” (Milbrath and Goel 1977, p. 2).

#### 2.1.1. Conventional vs. Non-Conventional Participation

Milbrath and Goel's (1977) definition of political participation encompasses both conventional and non-conventional forms of participation. Conventional political participation refers to continuous behavior that aims to influence decision-making through institutional channels. Non-conventional political participation includes every form of political action that challenges the government channels (Janda et al. 1992). While teenager participation has, for the most part, been associated with non-conventional participation due to the restrictions and lack of access to information, it is important to utilize conventional practices such as youth councils and civic education programs (Landemore 2020).

Cammaerts et al. (2014) study shows that young people's voter turnout challenges the notion that the younger population is apathetic towards politics. His research, focusing on European youth, revealed that young people's political appetite has been mischaracterized. Rather than being lazy, young people are highly critical of political candidates and do not feel that their concerns are taken seriously. This results in them expressing their anger by abstaining from the conventional system and engaging in non-conventional forms of participation, such as petitions and discussions on social media. Youth participation in crisis times, especially in the case of Polish youth perceptions during the Ukrainian refugee crisis, has also been addressed, which can also serve as a guide for shaping future youth policies (Sengupta et al. 2023).

#### 2.1.2. Non-Participation

The concept of non-participation is just as important as participation since both have an equal influence on decision-making. Non-participation is the lack of participation and, thus, the lack of influence over institutions (DeLuca 1995). Recently, there has been an increase in abstention from voting. Solijonov's 2016 report shows that the global voter

turnout was stable from the 1940s to the 1980s, decreasing to 66% in 2011–2015 (Solijonov 2016). Although voter turnout has decreased, Roker and Eden (2002) suggest that this does not mean people have no interest in politics. Electorate behavior and voting systems in conventional electorate systems and the impact on the potential of adopting long-term policies addressed to youth as a means to reduce non-participation have also been addressed (Miyake et al. 2023), as well as the strongest predictors of non-electoral political participation (Ehsan 2018).

### 2.1.3. Opening Up Participation

Our conventional participation models are currently restricted to teenagers and other ordinary citizens. On the topic of open participation, which can also apply to including teenagers in governance, Landemore (2020) introduces new ideas for the participation of citizens. She argues that, as elections were historically used to limit power to the aristocracy, we need a medium to empower all citizens to make actual decisions leading to true democratic participation. She suggests a system of participation through three models. The first model is *lottocratic representation*, which involves randomly selecting citizens, as was implemented in the Citizen Convention on Climate Change and the Ostbelgium Citizen Council. The second, *self-selected representation*, comprises town meetings, such as those held by the Yellow Vests movement in France in 2018. The final model, *liquid representation*, includes selection from an open pool of other citizens rather than a closed party list. Farrell expanded upon this notion via the “Ireland Experiment,” which showed that the teenagers selected to participate did not take their selection lightly. In fact, the teenagers thoroughly researched the topic before participating (Farrell 2020).

## 2.2. Youth Participation and Democracy

The concept of teenagers’ voting rights dates back to the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The CRC recognizes children’s rights to enter into agreements, also known as participation rights. Article 12 of the convention affirms children’s right to express their views freely in all matters that affect them.

From the revivalist perspective of democracy, there are two key strands of democracy, the first being the *traditional view* based on the relations between the government and citizens, and the second being the *civic-communitarian* model, which focuses on democracy based on communities of active citizens (Hindess 1991). While these are different notions, they both focus on common rights and responsibilities that are equally applicable to all citizens. Therefore, the issue of youth participation concerns whether those under the voting age are considered citizens. This view informs Held’s (1987) theory of ‘developmental democracy’ as the relationship between citizens and government through the ability for development (Held 1987). Models of democracy, from direct democracy to the protective model (Macpherson 1977, pp. 23–29), focus on the voice of the people. The protective model focuses on the greatest happiness of the majority of citizens and managing a growing population.

## 2.3. Changes and Challenges in Youth Participation

### 2.3.1. Youth Participation and Social Networks

As Gen Z and teenagers are considered to be digital natives, the vast majority of their political participation is conducted through social networks. A study by Cortés-Ramos et al. (2021), entitled Activism and Social Media: Youth Participation and Communication, aimed to examine youth’s online experience in social activism, as well as their preferences, themes, and perceived impact. This study found that young people interpret social media as a platform that allows communication and self-expression. The participants in this study realized the power of online platforms as a tool for social change. Their motivation for social participation arose from the environment in which they grew up, mentioning the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as an area of interest. This study concluded that institutions should consider youth’s possible transformative power and digital civic

engagement. [Boulianne and Theocharis' \(2018\)](#) study on digital engagement supports the findings of [Cortés-Ramos et al. \(2021\)](#), as they found overwhelming evidence of the connection between social media engagement and offline engagement (such as demonstrations and petitions). These authors conclude that teenagers' tendencies towards online participation are mirrored in their offline participation ([Boulianne and Theocharis 2018](#)). Youth engagement and participation through social media platforms has also been elaborated in the case of Jordanian society, "emphasizing the need to take differences in gender into account when developing effective tactics to engage young people in political processes" ([Alodat et al. 2023](#)).

### 2.3.2. Challenges in Youth Participation

[Boldt's \(2017\)](#) paper explores the concept of "youth-friendly" participation and how to achieve it while maintaining seriousness. [Morrow \(2001\)](#) describes the challenge of reaching youth with methods that are not childish but do not require in-depth knowledge of other methods of participation. Likewise, [Rebok et al. \(2004, p. 86\)](#) propose several methods that can be used to determine the opinions of the youth. However, due to the presence of condescending language, when carried out incorrectly, youth-friendly approaches may be counterproductive. For example, in Boldt's paper, the city of Helsinki youth department chose a youth-friendly approach, but this only resulted in further issues as the young people involved saw it as demeaning ([Boldt 2017](#)).

As the interaction between elected adults and teenagers is crucial to this study, it is important to note the impact adultism may have on its results ([William T. Grant Commission 1988](#)). Adultism is a central threat to collaboration between adults and young people ([Delgado and Staples 2008](#)). [Bell \(1995\)](#) defined adultism as the idea that adults are superior to children and teenagers. [Checkoway \(1996\)](#) furthers that definition by defining the term as "all of the behaviors and attitudes that flow from the assumption that adults are better than young people." Adultism is at the root of (and subsequently undermines) all collaboration between teenagers and adults. As [HoSang \(2005\)](#) states, young people are often disrespected because of their age. Adultism can be manifested in both obvious and subconscious ways through statements such as "You are smart for your age" and "You are not old enough to understand" ([Delgado and Staples 2008](#)).

A major argument against children's participation rights is that they lack the ability to make appropriate political judgments. However, adults also make political decisions without understanding the complexity of the issues at hand, for example, when they are influenced by propaganda and misinformation ([Achen and Bartels 2017](#)).

Summing up, the above literature review assumes that teenager participation in local governance is a fundamental aspect of a thriving democracy, fostering inclusivity, skill development, and a sense of civic responsibility among young citizens. While challenges like lack of awareness, institutional barriers, and adultism exist, there are various strategies to promote teenager engagement, such as the use of social networks and party openness.

It is in this framework that it will be argued that it is imperative that local governments and societies recognize the importance of involving young people in governance and take proactive steps to ensure their voices are heard and valued in the community. As the future leaders of our societies, the engagement of young people in local governance is not just an option but a necessity for building sustainable and inclusive communities.

## 3. Reasoning

**Geographic Diversity:** By conducting this study in three different municipalities in two different countries (Greece and Sweden), this research provides a comparative perspective that can help shed light on the impact of youth participation across various cultural and political contexts. This geographic diversity adds richness to the existing literature, as it demonstrates that the effects of youth participation may not be uniform and can be influenced by local factors.



**Focus on Climate Action:** The specific focus on climate action as a key issue is timely and important, given the growing global concern about climate change. This study addresses a critical and urgent policy area and explores how youth participation can influence decision-making in this domain. This focus on climate action aligns with the broader discourse on youth activism and environmental concerns.

**Mixed Methods Approach:** Combining both quantitative and qualitative research methods (questionnaires, surveys, and qualitative analysis of meeting recordings) allows for a more comprehensive assessment of the impact of teenagers' participation. This methodological diversity can provide a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which youth involvement affects elected council members' perspectives and decision-making.

**Impact Assessment:** This study's emphasis on assessing the impact of teenagers' participation on elected council members is valuable. By examining changes in council members' perspectives on climate change and the value of teenagers' participation before and after the inclusion of teenagers in council meetings, this research offers empirical evidence of the effects of youth involvement in local governance.

**Practical Implications:** This study concludes that the active inclusion of teenagers in council meetings led to a significant change in elected council members' perspectives on climate change and the value of teenagers' participation. This finding has practical implications for policymakers and advocates of youth engagement, as it highlights the potential benefits of involving young people in decision-making processes.

In summary, this comparative study adds to the current literature on youth participation in local governance by offering insights into the perception of the elected council members on the impact of teenagers' participation in local governance, focusing on a critical issue such as climate action, and employing a mixed-methods approach across diverse geographic contexts. Its findings will provide us with a deeper understanding of the role of youth in shaping local policy and governance.

#### 4. Argumentation

This paper discusses a research study that focuses on the impact of teenagers' participation in local governance. This study is conducted in three different municipalities in Greece and Sweden, providing a comparative perspective to understand the influence of youth participation in different cultural and political contexts. This comparative study adds depth to the existing literature on youth participation in local governance. It offers insights into elected council members' perceptions of teenagers' participation, with a particular focus on climate action. This study's use of questionnaires across diverse geographic contexts provides a deeper understanding of the role of youth in shaping local policy and governance. These findings underscore the significance of involving teenagers in local governance and highlight the positive impact they can have on addressing critical issues like climate change. This study calls for further research in this area to better understand how youth participation can influence decision-making and policy outcomes in different settings.

The argumentation of the paper is based on three major pillars:

1. **Attitudes towards the involvement of teenagers:** This study found a positive shift in council members' attitudes toward the inclusion of teenagers in municipal decision-making. More council members became open to the idea of teenage participation in councils after the meetings. The majority of council members agreed that teenagers' participation was beneficial and that they could contribute effectively to discussions.
2. **Climate and environmental issues:** This study indicated that teenage participation had a positive impact on council members' perspectives regarding climate and environmental issues. Council members became more concerned about climate change, and there was an increase in support for renewable energy and a decrease in prioritizing fossil fuel production. This shift in opinion was most pronounced in Trikala and Östersund.

3. Perception of Teenagers' Proposals: Council members received the proposals put forth by teenagers positively. They found these proposals to be feasible, well-researched, applicable, and capable of providing fresh ideas to address municipal challenges.

As a result, this study suggests the significance of involving teenagers in local governance and decision-making processes. It demonstrates that, when given the means, teenagers can influence council members' attitudes and contribute positively to discussions on critical issues like climate change.

This study also calls for further research in this area, ideally on a larger scale and in diverse geographical and socio-economic contexts. Such research will help better understand how teenage participation can influence decision-making and policy outcomes in different settings, contributing to the development of more inclusive and equitable governance practices.

In summary, this research highlights the potential of teenagers to actively engage in local governance and influence council members' perspectives, underscoring the benefits of promoting youth participation in municipal decision-making processes.

## 5. Materials and Methodology

Kalamata, Trikala, and Östersund were selected due to their similar small- to medium-sized populations. The small size of both the population and the council facilitated the integration of teenagers into the process, as it limited the stress caused by the experience and decreased the likelihood that the teenagers would be intimidated, allowing them to contribute to the discussion. The council members in each municipality also varied in terms of their ages, backgrounds, and beliefs.

### 5.1. Methodology

A meeting between teenagers and elected council members in each municipality was organized, where they discussed the issue of the climate crisis. Teenagers participating presented their views and proposals on the matter and engaged in debate and discourse on climate action.

1. Questionnaire Development: Questionnaires were developed based on existing research and theories relating to youth participation and climate change. The Pew Research Center created a questionnaire to analyze attitudes towards climate issues held by different cohorts/genders. Due to the success of the questionnaire, this research uses some of its questions to evaluate attitudes towards the climate crisis.
2. Pre-Council Meeting Questionnaire: Three days before this council meeting, the questionnaires were distributed to the council members. They completed it up to one day before the meeting. This initial questionnaire focused on recording their attitudes toward the climate crisis and teenagers' inclusion. The questions regarding their aptitudes in relation to climate change were adapted from the Pew Research Center's questionnaire. Additionally, the questions concerning their perspectives on teenage participation were designed based on established concepts from the field of youth voting and participation rights.
3. Post-Council Meeting Questionnaire: After the council meeting, another questionnaire was sent to the same council. This follow-up questionnaire included the same questions concerning environmental attitudes and perspectives on teenagers' political inclusion as the pre-meeting survey. The purpose of this repetition was to analyze any changes in opinions or attitudes that may have occurred. Additionally, more questions were added concerning their views of the proposals and ideas put forth by the participating teenagers.
4. Teenage Participants' Questionnaire: In addition to council members, a questionnaire was sent to the teenagers who participated in the council meeting. This post-meeting questionnaire aimed to explore their sentiments about their experience. This allowed for the generation of conclusions based on the level of the teenagers' active participation.

### 5.2. Municipal Councils

Each municipal council has a different number of members. Kalamata has 35, Trikala has 44, and Östersund has 65. All three councils met within a two-month period, each at a different date. Kalamata's meeting took place on 2 May 2023. The teenagers presented their proposals concerning climate issues to the council members and then discussed them in greater depth. A total of 23 members of Kalamata's council and 3 teenagers participated in the survey. Trikala's meeting took place on the 22 March 2023. In Trikala, the Mayor decided to conduct the meeting with the special climate change committee. All 15 of the respective council members participated, as well as 4 teenagers from the youth council. Östersund's meeting took place on 5 April 2023. The mayor decided to conduct the discussion with the ruling committee of the municipal council. The committee has nine members, all of whom participated, along with four teenagers from the youth council.

### 5.3. Selection of Cities

The selection of teenagers was conducted by each respective municipality and differed from city to city. In Trikala, during this study, a youth council was formed with an age range of 18–25, but only those under the age of 18 were able to participate in the research, which allowed the participation of 4 teenagers. In Östersund, the pre-existing youth council at ages 14–17 was selected. Again, four teenagers took part in this study. In Kalamata, as there was no established youth council, the municipality involved local schoolchildren, specifically the 8th grade class (ages 12–13). The school has been involved in climate action through their pioneering work with the Environmental Education Center of Kalamata. Only three schoolchildren participated in the meeting and completed the survey.

### 5.4. Overview of the Cities

#### 5.4.1. Kalamata

Located in southern Greece, Kalamata is a vibrant city and the capital of the Messinia region. With a population of approximately 70,000, Kalamata is situated on the coast. The city is a two-hour drive from Athens and has its own international airport, enhancing its accessibility. Kalamata has a rich historical background dating back to ancient times, particularly during the Mycenaean era. The local economy thrives on tourism and agriculture, and Kalamata is also renowned for its vibrant student community due to the presence of the University of Peloponnese. Moreover, the European Commission has selected Kalamata to participate in the EU Mission for 100 climate-neutral and smart cities by 2030.

#### 5.4.2. Trikala

Trikala, located in northwestern Thessaly, Greece, serves as the capital of the Trikala region. The city has a population of 81,355 and combines historical significance with a forward-thinking vision. Having been selected to participate in the EU Mission for 100 carbon-neutral and smart cities by 2030, Trikala gained recognition on a European level. The city's economy is based on agriculture, livestock, and domestic tourism.

#### 5.4.3. Östersund

Located in the heart of Sweden's Jämtland region, Östersund is an urban area known for its cultural and economic significance. Serving as the capital of Jämtland County, this city has a rich history and plays a significant role in the region's trade and commerce. Östersund is home to the largest campus of Mid Sweden University and has a population of around 50,960. The focus of the economy is trade, commerce, and tourism.

#### 5.4.4. Why These Municipalities Were Selected

1. All three are small- to medium-sized cities located in different regions/countries: Kalamata in the Peloponnese, southern Greece; Trikala in northwestern Thessaly, Greece; and Östersund in the heart of Sweden's Jämtland region. Their relatively small size facilitated a non-threatening environment for the teenagers.



2. All three cities are the capitals of their regions, so council members and teenagers are more likely to be informed about and experienced with the issues the region faces.
3. The cities prioritize sustainability and innovation, with Kalamata and Trikala being selected by the European Commission to participate in the EU Mission for 100 climate-neutral and smart cities by 2030, and Östersund running the Winter City project to promote its winter offerings.
4. All three cities have educational institutions contributing to their cultural and intellectual landscapes, such as the University of Peloponnese in Kalamata; the Faculty of Physical Education Sciences, Sports, and Dietetics of the University of Thessaly in Trikala; and the largest campus of Mid Sweden University in Östersund. Teenagers and students play a significant role in the everyday lives of all three cities.

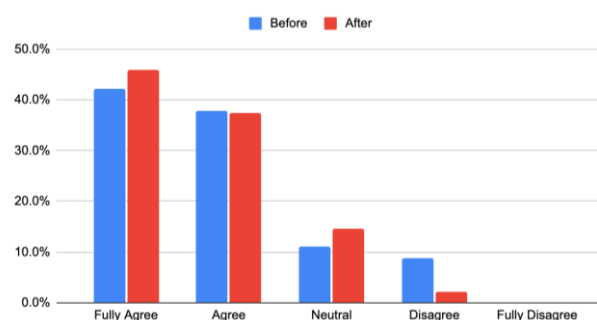
There are also significant differences such as geolocation, daylight hours, and average temperature, which create a similar but sufficiently differentiated sample for this study.

## 6. Results

All the municipalities discussed the topic of climate change, as it is an issue that has been shown to have diverse perspectives among age groups. Gen Z and Millennials stand out in terms of climate change activism and social media engagement, as shown by the May 2021 Pew Research Center (Tyson et al. 2021).

### 6.1. Attitudes towards the Involvement of Teenagers

To determine whether elected council members in all three municipalities had, after the meeting, become keener on the idea of teenagers' political participation at the municipality level, data collected from items 1, 2, and 4 were for a matrix of the questionnaire items. Item 1 indicates the straightforward view: Teenagers should be included in the decision-making process of the municipality because their ideas are useful and beneficial to society. The cumulative results of all three samples show that council members' opinions shifted. Overall, 8.9% of council members were opposed before the meeting, compared to 2.1% who were opposed afterward as shown in Figure 1. However, it seems that the views of the council members who were already in support of teenagers' inclusion in the municipalities' decision-making bodies did not significantly change after hearing teenagers' voices at municipality meetings. Based on this information, we can conclude that for these councils, the inclusion of teenagers was successful at persuading those who were opposed to teenage participation but had minimal impact on those who agreed/fully agreed.



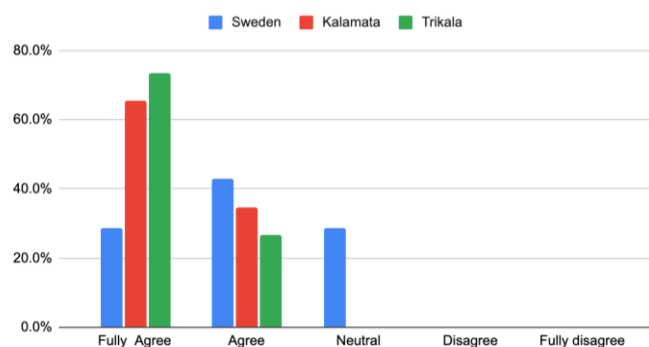
**Figure 1.** Teenagers should be included in council decision-making because their ideas are useful for generating policies beneficial to the community.

The second question was, “Was the participation of teenagers in the decision-making of your municipality useful to the community?” revealed a 14.4% increase in those who completely agreed before and after, and only 2.1% opposed after the meeting vs. 4.4%. Furthermore, from the fourth question, it is evident that 77.1% of the council members agree/completely agree that teenagers are able to contribute to the discussion as much as elected officials. It is important to note that even though Östersund has had a long-running

youth council and Trikala a newly founded one, Kalamata, with no youth council, had the smallest percentage of council members who completely disagreed on the first question of teens' inclusion. It is important to note that women were initially more likely than men to fully agree/agree with the inclusion of teenagers, but both men and women agreed or fully agreed after the meeting. This could be due to similar forms of exclusion they have experienced in the past.

## 6.2. The Overall Shift in Opinions of Council Members on Environmental Issues

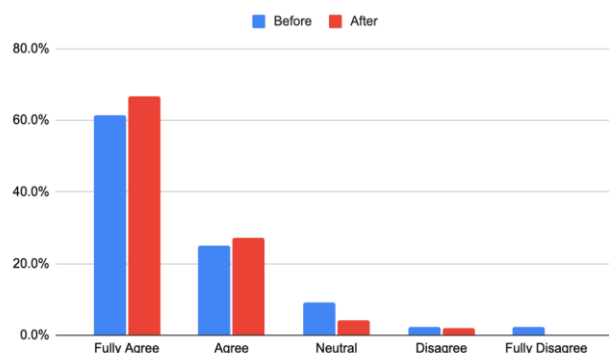
To answer how teenagers' inclusion impacted the views of council members on the issue of climate/environment, items 3–18, 3.2, and 5.2 were used. From items 3.2 and 5.2, we gain insight into whether council members realized the impact their discussion with teenagers had on their opinions. The question of whether seeing teenagers urge action to be taken about climate change makes you eager to address those issues showed that 95.8% of council members agreed/fully agreed, and 4.2% were neutral as shown in Figure 2. This result indicates that the positive impact the teenagers had on council members is directly correlated with the likelihood of the latter agreeing to their inclusion. Similarly, item 5.2, which related to whether the teenagers' opinions presented in the meeting influenced the council members' opinions, shows that 62.5% agreed or fully agreed, while 33.3% were neutral and 4.2% were negative. This shows that, unlike the majority agreement that teenagers influenced their likelihood of acting, they did not necessarily influence their political policies/decisions. Items 3–18 collected the overall opinions of council members before and after the meeting on climate issues.



**Figure 2.** When you see teenagers urging for action to be taken about climate change, it makes you eager to address those issues.

Item 3 asked council members whether they were worried about climate change as shown in Figure 3. After the meeting, there was a 7.4% increase in those who fully agreed/agreed, taking the total to 93.8%. Council members were also influenced by their place of residence. In Kalamata, before the meeting, significantly more members were very worried about climate change (78.3%) compared to Östersund (33.3%) and Trikala (46.7%). Regarding the questions about fossil fuel production and renewable energy, the results differ. While in both Trikala and Östersund, council members became keener on the use of renewable energy (item 5), in Kalamata, though 78.3% originally thought that prioritizing fossil fuel production was important, only 46.2% held the same view after the meeting. However, when asked whether priority should be given to the production of fossil fuels (item 6), in all three municipalities, the results in favor decreased after the meeting. A similar pattern can be seen with regard to the issue of cars using fossil fuels. In Östersund, the Swedish municipality, 83.3% of council members initially agreed that the use of fossil-fueled cars should be phased out, compared to 100% after the meeting. However, for the same question (item 8) in Kalamata and in Trikala, the percentage of those who fully agreed with phasing out fossil-fueled vehicles decreased after the discussion. This change in opinions between councils could be due to the gas pollution present in

Östersund, making the reduction of fossil fuels a higher priority for both teenagers and council members living there.



**Figure 3.** I am worried about the climate crisis.

It is clear from teenagers' responses to the questionnaire that there is a significant difference between teens in Östersund and those in the other two municipalities with regard to the issue of fossil fuels. Teenagers in Östersund 100% agree with the phasing out of fossil-fueled vehicles, whereas in Trikala and Kalamata just 25% and 66.6%, respectively, agree or fully agree. Item 18 reflects the level of priority for reaching carbon neutrality. The council members who ranked it as a top priority rose from 37.2% to 56.3% overall. This is in line with the corresponding ranking of teenagers (54.4%). It is important to note that while 100% of the teenagers in Östersund ranked carbon neutrality as a top priority, the corresponding figures for Trikala and Kalamata were 50% and 0%, respectively. Despite this, the largest shift in opinion was in Trikala, which saw an almost 32% increase in council members ranking it as a top priority. This may indicate that while individual teenagers may not rank climate change as a top priority, they still see it as a pertinent issue, thereby swaying council members' opinions. Overall, these results suggest that the inclusion of teenagers positively influenced council members' views on climate and environmental issues, as evidenced by their changes in opinion prior to and after the meeting.

### 6.3. Teenagers' Proposals

From Items 29–34, we gather the views of council members regarding the teenagers' proposals/discussions. It is evident that most councilors have positive views regarding the feasibility and implementation of proposals put forth by teenagers. A majority of 87.6% of council members agreed that the proposals were feasible. Additionally, 83.3% expressed their agreement to implement these proposals, which is a clear indication of the value they attach to them. The questionnaire also reveals that council members found the proposals well-researched and applicable, with 85.5% agreeing with this statement. Moreover, 83.4% acknowledged that the proposals were well presented. Out of all the council members, 77.1% stated that the proposals of teenagers have provided them with fresh ideas on how to address the challenges faced by the municipality. Overall, the results demonstrate positive opinions towards the proposals of teenagers who participated, suggesting that teenagers' inclusion in the respective municipalities would be beneficial.

## 7. Discussion

As can be observed, a positive shift was seen in council members' attitudes towards the inclusion of teenagers in their municipal council. It would therefore be fair to say that adultism was rarely present in the discussions, since, according to the teenagers' questionnaire, only 9.1% believed council members were condescending towards them. This contrasts with [Delgado and Staples' \(2008\)](#) findings on adult-youth collaboration, which may suggest that today, such obstacles have been surpassed. It further indicates an openness to the inclusion of teenagers in decision-making bodies, as at least one challenge they faced has been largely removed. Most council members agreed that the teenagers who

participated in the council meetings could contribute just as effectively as elected officials, thereby signaling their overall agreement with their inclusion in the decision-making process. Most council members of all three municipalities acknowledged that teenagers' attitudes towards climate action positively influenced their views on climate change. After the meetings with the participation of teenagers, the importance of achieving carbon neutrality rose from 37.2% to 56.3%. This is in line with the Pew Research Center's findings, according to which teenagers prioritize issues such as climate change. It would appear, therefore, that this prioritization can sway the opinions of council members. Furthermore, both the feasibility and willingness to implement teenagers' proposals were apparent among the majority of council members. This suggests that teenagers, despite being regarded as being primarily interested in unconventional/non-traditional participation, can also thrive in conventional forms of participation.

The key limitation of this study was the small sample size due to the small number of council members, which means the statistical analysis is very limited and therefore lacks sufficient statistical significance. Another limitation was the reliance on the questionnaires being answered at a time when council members and teenagers would remember the discussion and their thoughts. However, as council members in each municipality had various time constraints, some answered the questionnaire up to a week after the discussion. Realizing this would be a problem, questions about the level of recollection of the meeting were included to limit inaccuracies. Of all the council members, 92.5% agreed or fully agreed that they recalled the meeting, while 7.5 were neutral. This increases the accuracy of the results obtained. Furthermore, the scope of the research is limited to just three municipalities, so the findings cannot be applied to other regions due to their unique socioeconomic profiles and the aforementioned small sample size. Lastly, only 3–4 teenagers participated in each meeting, so the question arises as to whether it was these teenagers who positively influenced the council or whether teenagers in general would have the same effect.

In conclusion, this study highlights the positive strides made in diminishing adultism and fostering youth participation in local governance. The willingness of council members to embrace teenagers as valuable contributors to decision-making processes is an encouraging sign of democratic engagement. While there are limitations to the current research, it underscores the need for further investigations on a larger scale, involving a more extensive and diverse sample, to draw more generalizable conclusions about the impact of teenagers on local governance. This, in turn, will contribute to a more inclusive and democratic society where the voices of all age groups are not just heard but also heeded in the halls of power. There is a critical need for research on the participation of teenagers, as they are one of the few groups that do not have democratic participation rights. Specifically, further research on the impact of teenagers in local governance on a larger scale would allow for a broader and more applicable conclusion.

## 8. Conclusions

This study examined the inclusion of teenagers in local governance in the cities of Kalamata, Trikala, and Östersund. The selection of these cities, characterized by their small to medium-sized populations, provided a conducive environment for teenagers to participate without intimidation. This study aimed to evaluate the impact of teenage participation in council meetings on council members' attitudes towards youth involvement and their perspectives on climate and environmental issues. The research utilized questionnaires completed by both council members and teenagers as its primary data source.

The findings of this study indicate several key outcomes. First, there was a notable shift in council members' attitudes toward the inclusion of teenagers in municipal decision-making. The data showed that more council members were open to the idea of teenagers participating in the councils after the meetings, demonstrating the success of inclusion in persuading those who were initially opposed. Moreover, the majority of council members

agreed that teenagers' participation was beneficial and that they could contribute effectively to discussions, regardless of their previous stance.

In terms of climate and environmental issues, this study revealed that teenagers' participation had a positive impact on council members' perspectives. Council members became more concerned about climate change, and there was an increase in support for renewable energy and a decrease in prioritizing fossil fuel production. This shift in opinion was particularly pronounced in Trikala and Östersund, where council members exhibited greater enthusiasm for addressing climate change after the meetings.

The proposals put forth by teenagers were well received by council members, who found them feasible, well researched, and applicable. This positive feedback suggests that teenagers can play a valuable role in contributing fresh ideas to address municipal challenges.

In a broader context, this research highlights the importance of involving teenagers in local governance and decision-making processes. It demonstrates that, when given the opportunity, teenagers can influence council members' attitudes and contribute positively to discussions on critical issues such as climate change. The findings suggest that policies promoting youth participation at the local level can be effective at bridging generational gaps and fostering a more inclusive and responsive governance system.

Further research in this area is warranted, particularly on a larger scale and in diverse geographical and socio-economic contexts. Understanding how teenagers' participation can influence decision-making and policy outcomes in different settings will contribute to the development of more inclusive and equitable governance practices.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on teenagers' potential to actively engage in local governance and influence council members' perspectives on important issues. It underscores the importance of promoting youth participation and highlights the positive outcomes that can result from including teenagers in municipal decision-making processes.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, I.N.S.; Methodology, I.N.S. and P.S.; Software, I.N.S.; Validation, I.N.S.; Formal analysis, I.N.S.; Investigation, I.N.S.; Resources, I.N.S.; Data curation, I.N.S.; Writing—original draft preparation, I.N.S.; Writing—review and editing, I.N.S. and P.S.; Visualization, I.N.S. and P.S.; Supervision, I.N.S. and P.S.; Project administration, I.N.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board Neapolis University Pafos (protocol code 2023/003, 28 January 2023).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in this study. For the teenagers who participated, both teenagers themselves and their parents consented to participate through the municipalities. The president of the council consented to the inclusion of this study in a normal council meeting; thus, the municipal members present participated.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy concerns.

**Acknowledgments:** This research was made possible by the kind assistance of a number of individuals who supported me throughout the process. I would like to thank Professor Florence Faucher, FNSP Professor and director of the Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics, who has been an invaluable mentor to me from the very beginning of my research; Sophia Daskou, University of Pathos, Cyprus for providing access and guidelines for the bibliography, for reviewing the research, and for providing valuable feedback. Professor Gregory Katsas, The American College of Greece, Greece, for reviewing the paper and providing valuable feedback. Professor David Farrell, University College, Dublin, for providing valuable information through an interview. Thank you to the Mayor and the Deputy Mayor of Kalamata, Thanassis Vassilopoulos and Nikos Basakidis, respectively, for believing in this research; the Mayor and the Deputy Mayor of Trikala, Dimitris Papastergiou and Michalis Lappas, respectively, for believing in this research, agreeing to the participation of their municipality; the Mayor of Östersund, Effie Kourlos, for believing in the research, and accepting

the participation of her municipality. Special thank you to all municipal council members of Trikala, Kalamata and Östersund for participating in the council meetings and the survey; Ioanna Ravani, Environmental Education Center of Kalamata; Tzina Mouselimi, 5th High School of Kalamata; Konstantina Zachari, Municipality of Trikala; Christina Karamberi, Municipality of Trikala. I would like to conclude this section with very special thanks to all the teenagers who participated from the 5th High School of Kalamata, and the youth council members of Trikala and Östersund.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> While the voting age has remained the same, groups of people, including women, those aged over 35, and other marginalized groups, have since been given the vote.

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