

# The Politics of Youth Representation at Climate Change Conferences: Who Speaks, Who Is Spoken of, and Who Listens?

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## Abstract

In this article, we examine how young climate activists make use of the United Nations (UN) constituency system to give voice to children and youth in global climate governance. Our study is based on a mapping of accredited youth nongovernmental organizations (YOUNGO) as well as fieldwork at two UN Climate Change Conferences, where we conducted interviews, observed events, and analyzed plenary interventions. Informed by constructivist accounts of political representation, the article pays attention to the performative relationship between institutionalized means of youth representation and “the represented.” When analyzing our material, we asked who speaks for youth, how youth are spoken of, and how institutions shape representative speech. Our study identifies three subject positions that offer competing interpretations of who youth are as a political community and what they want. Rather than taking youth’s demands and interests as a starting point for representative politics, the article illustrates how the UN constituency system actively constructs youth and effectively molds young climate activists into professional insiders.

**Keywords:** youth, environmental activism, civil society, global environmental governance, UNFCCC, climate change

Since Greta Thunberg initiated her school strike outside the Swedish Parliament in August 2018, children and youth have gained widespread recognition in climate discourse (Martiskainen et al. 2020). Through symbolic acts of disobedience, millions of schoolchildren have taken to the streets and demanded urgent climate action (Wahlström et al. 2019). Speaking for those who will live with the adverse effects of a changing climate, this new generation of climate activists has protested the failure of governments to bring down global greenhouse gas emissions. Frustrated with the lack of meaningful policy action, many young

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protesters see the interstate negotiations on climate change as a waste of time and resources (de Moor 2021). They problematize established institutions, criticize existing power structures, and mobilize what O'Brien et al. (2018) call "dangerous dissent." As argued in a speech by Greta Thunberg outside the twenty-sixth Conference of the Parties (COP26) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Glasgow in November 2021, "it is not a secret that COP26 is a failure. It should be obvious that we cannot solve a crisis with the same methods that got us into it in the first place."<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, United Nations (UN) Climate Change Conferences remain a central "space of convergence" (Routledge 2003) for the global youth movement. At COP26 in Glasgow, more than 100 youth organizations were accredited as observers, and many young activists made their voices heard through the official youth constituency known as YOUNGO (youth nongovernmental organizations). Like many other social movements, young climate activists use international events to forge global connections, build collective identities, and develop new repertoires of collective action (Allan 2020; Hadden 2015). Through the formal rules for public consultation and representation created by states, youth organizations are also allowed to speak for children and youth who would otherwise not be heard in the UN system. However, youth representation is a precarious act marked by considerable inequalities in material resources, access, and discursive power. Although the UN constituency system has been celebrated as a way of increasing international institutions' public accountability (Scholte 2002), numerous scholars have pointed at the structural inclusions and exclusions that determine "who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens" (Alcoff 1991, 15; see also Holzscheiter 2016; Jaeger 2007).

In this article, we examine how young climate activists leverage the UN constituency system to speak and act in the name of children and youth at UN Climate Change Conferences. Informed by constructivist accounts of political representation (Brito Vieira 2020; Saward 2006), we are interested in the performative relationship between institutionalized means of youth representation and "the represented." Rather than approaching youth as an a priori political community with fixed and knowable interests, we examine how youth are constituted and made present as a constituency through the representational claims and practices of youth observers. Our study is based on fieldwork at the fiftieth intersessional UNFCCC meeting in Bonn in June 2019 and COP26 in Glasgow in November 2021, where we interviewed twenty-seven youth representatives from the Global North and South and two representatives from the UNFCCC Secretariat. During the conferences, we observed YOUNGO meetings and events and analyzed eight plenary interventions made by the constituency. Moreover, we searched the websites of all 124 accredited YOUNGO organizations registered in June 2022 to map their locations, organizational backgrounds, and activities.

1. "'COP26 Is a Failure': Greta Thunberg Condemns UN Climate Summit as a 'Greenwash Festival,'" available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4SkI8m31JEQ>, last accessed August 23, 2023.

In what follows, we first place our study in the long-standing scholarship on civil society involvement in international environmental affairs and outline what a constructivist account of political representation adds to the same. We conceptualize youth representation as a performative act that hinges on a dynamic interplay between the discursive construction of the represented, the epistemic and material resources of the representative, and the institutional setting under which representation occurs. Second, we present our empirical material and the ethical considerations that informed our data collection and analysis. Third, we outline three subject positions that emerge from our analysis and offer competing interpretations of how youth are constructed as a political community and what they want. Finally, we discuss what these subject positions tell us about the performative interplay between youth representation and the UN context within which it occurs. Rather than taking the interests and demands of youth as a given starting point for representative politics, our study suggests that we need to pay careful attention to how the UN constituency system is actively participating in the construction of youth as it effectively molds young climate activists into professional insiders.

### **Participatory Multilateralism and the Politics of Representation**

Ever since the UN's founding conference in 1945, members of civil society have been involved in the regulation of international affairs (Willets 1996). Article 71 of the UN Charter grants nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) consultative status in the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), which holds a roster of accredited organizations. While NGO accreditation initially was restricted to international and nonprofit organizations that support the work of the UN with relevant competence and expertise, it has, over the years, been extended to national and advocacy-based civil society actors (Alger 2002). At the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, nine "major groups"—of which children and youth are one—were recognized as particularly important in shaping and implementing international environmental policy. These groups are today granted formal stakeholder status under ECOSOC, with the right to select their constituencies and communities (Kuyper and Bäckstrand 2016).

The "participatory multilateralism" (Bäckstrand 2006) that gained ground after the Rio Conference has been subject to extensive scholarly analysis over the past decades. Numerous studies have documented how NGOs gain access to international organizations (Bäckstrand and Kuyper 2017; Hanegraaff 2015; Tallberg et al. 2013) and take on different roles in making and implementing environmental norms and principles (Allan 2020; Betsill and Corell 2008; Bulkeley et al. 2014; Nasiritousi 2016). In this literature, "opening up" the UN system to members of civil society has been proposed as a possible remedy to the democratic shortcomings of global governance structures (Dombrowski

2010). By forming a political space where a diversity of NGOs, activist networks, and social movements can critically engage with the rules that govern global life, the UN constituency system has been said to foster public accountability and global solidarity (Scholte 2002). Formal rules for public consultation and representation allow transnational publics to scrutinize what happens inside international treaty regimes and to sensitize international rule makers to the interests and concerns of “significantly affected others” situated on the outside (Mason 2005).

However, the ability of civil society actors to promote public accountability has also invited critique. One critical issue concerns the collaborative relations between states, intergovernmental organizations, and activist networks in global environmental governance. To make governments and international organizations answerable to communities affected by environmental harm, note Steffek and Ferretti (2009, 39), civil society organizations need to be able to act as independent watchdogs and not hesitate to contest political projects in public. Whereas many activist networks make use of international events to put pressure on governments from the outside of formal political systems (Chatterton et al. 2013; de Moor 2021), members of civil society are today increasingly constituted as professional and responsible partners on the “inside” (Jaeger 2007, 261). Through the rise of participatory governance arrangements, such as stakeholder dialogues, public–private partnerships, and carbon markets, formal constituency groups, such as environmental NGOs, business networks, and women’s organizations, are often invited to participate in crafting, monitoring, and even implementing international environmental rules and principles (Allan 2020). The price of such involvement is that advocacy groups assume responsibility for the processes and outcomes of global governance and thereby come to abide by the rules they seek to contest. While constituency membership amplifies voice, visibility, and the opportunity to exert influence (Kuyper and Bäckstrand 2016, 68), critics warn that too close collaboration with international institutions erodes the critical and adversarial role of civil society (Blühdorn and Deflorian 2019; Jaeger 2007).

Another concern relates to the accountability relations between civil society organizations and the affected publics they seek to represent. The normative case for involving members of civil society in intergovernmental decision-making processes rests upon their potential to speak for marginalized and vulnerable groups that otherwise would not be heard in the UN system (Dombrowski 2010). However, speaking for others is a problematic practice that raises questions about the location of the speakers, their ability to interpret and conceptualize the experiences of others, and the possibility of the represented to object to what is said and done in their name (Alcoff 1991; Spivak 1988). Numerous studies have documented the political struggles over rightful representation within institutions of global governance and how civil society organizations routinely claim to speak for others to mobilize support and legitimate their actions (Holzscheiter 2016; Kuyper and Bäckstrand 2016). In this

literature, political representation involves more than channeling preferences, interests, and values from a place where they are present (civil society) to a place where they otherwise would be absent (international institutions) (Brito Vieira 2020, 979). Constructivist scholars have insisted that we also need to consider the discursive processes by which self-appointed representatives construct images and ideas about who and what needs to be represented (Holzscheiter 2016; Knappe and Schmidt 2021).

Inspired by this critical-constructivist lens on political representation, this article examines how young climate activists leverage the UN constituency system to make claims about who youth are as a constituency and what they want. Rather than approaching the interests and demands of youth as a given starting point for representative politics, we are interested in how youth take shape as a political community through young climate activists' interactions with the UN system. While constructivists invite us to shift attention from the institutionalized side of political representation to its performative and claim-based character (Saward 2006), this study draws attention to the interplay between the two. As Knappe and Schmidt (2021, 26) suggest, the creative act of making representations crucially depends on the institutional contexts within which it occurs. The opportunities for members of civil society to represent the concerns of others within institutions of global governance are contingent on their scarce resources and the willingness of governments to let them in and listen. The representational power of civil society organizations is thus "both produced by the specific institutional histories, structures and discourses of a policy field *and* productive of their identities and those of others" (Holzscheiter 2016, 211).

To account for these performative dynamics, we approach political representation as an interplay between the discursive construction of the represented, the epistemic and material resources of the representative, and the institutional setting in which representation takes place. Paying attention to these three dimensions of representation allows us to critically examine how youth are spoken of at UN Climate Change Conferences, which youth observers have the capacity and resources to speak, and how the participatory institutions created by states condition who listens.

## Material, Methods, and Ethical Considerations

Three main sources of primary data inform our study: youth-related UNFCCC documents published between 2009 and 2019 and web information posted by 124 officially registered YOUNGO organizations; twenty-seven semistructured interviews with youth representatives at the fiftieth intersessional UNFCCC meeting in Bonn in June 2019 (SB50) and at COP26 in Glasgow in November 2021 and two semistructured interviews with members of the UNFCCC Secretariat; and participant observations at numerous YOUNGO coordinating meetings, side events, press conferences, and plenary interventions at the same

UNFCCC events. Table 1 offers a detailed overview of the material used for this study.<sup>2</sup>

As adult and northern-based researchers, we have taken several steps to ensure an ethical research process that is attentive to the age orders that we critically seek to discuss in this article. We selected our interview respondents to secure a broad representation from the Global North and South, from national youth delegates and youth NGOs, and from reform-oriented and more radical organizations. We ensured peer support by approaching youth during events where they were surrounded by other youth. Conscious of our biases, we asked our informants to help us find youth with diverse experiences. For example, we have been helped to find “first timers,” as these are often not the most vocal at events. All interview respondents were given written and oral information about the research project in nontechnical terms and were invited to sign consent forms (therefore being at least eighteen years old) before the interviews began. The interviews were conducted on-site or online based on our informants’ preferences and lasted forty-five to ninety minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. We documented the participant observations through field notes. While we noted who said what, where, and in what way, we made sure to deidentify our observation findings to secure anonymity. In the web-based analysis, we scanned through the accredited youth organizations’ home pages to obtain data on their geographical locations, organizational types, and levels of online activity.

All interview and observation material was subject to open document analysis and thematized in view of representative claims. We applied an iterative, data-driven, yet theory-informed coding process that attended to how youth are spoken of, the epistemic and material resources of the speaker, and the institutional setting under which youth representation takes place. Following DeCuir-Gunby et al. (2011), we aligned our codes from the open coding process with the analytical categories outlined in Table 2, which exemplifies three codes, each belonging to one of the three main analytical categories. The coding process resulted in three overarching subject positions: youth as vulnerable and marginalized, youth as professional and responsible, and youth as unruly and critical.

## Who Speaks for Children and Youth at UN Climate Change Conferences?

Youth have been present at UN Climate Change Conferences for decades. Still, their recognition as a formal UNFCCC constituency is more recent and the

2. We guaranteed anonymity to all interview partners and therefore provide only a limited amount of data. We limit the description to the interviewee’s role and differentiate between the Global North and South. Any more specific information (e.g., in terms of nationality) would risk identifying the interviewee. All interviewees were older than eighteen years.

**Table 1**  
Overview of Empirical Material

<i>Source</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Material</i>	<i>Reference</i>
<i>Step 1: YOUNGO Organizations and UNFCCC Documents</i>			
DOCUMENTS 1: YOUNGO-related UNFCCC documents	<i>The constitution of youth as a political community</i>	UNFCCC (2009): Letter to Mr. Wilson Ang (YdB/MEN/dy). [Decision to grant YOUNGO constituency status]	UNFCCC 2009
		UN (2009): Growing Together in a Changing Climate <sup>a</sup>	UN 2009
		UN (2010): Youth participation in the UNFCCC negotiation process <sup>b</sup>	UN 2010
		UN (2013): Youth in Action on Climate Change <sup>c</sup>	UN 2013
		UNFCCC (2020): Youth for Climate Action <sup>d</sup>	UNFCCC 2020
DOCUMENTS 2: Websites of registered YOUNGO organizations	<i>The location and activities of accredited YOUNGO</i>	Based on the UNFCCC list of admitted NGOs <sup>e</sup>	
<i>Step 2: Field Research at SB50 (2019) and COP26 (2021)</i>			
INTERVIEWS 1: YOUNGO-affiliated youth representatives during SB50 (2019)	<i>YOUNGO interventions, tactics, and objectives</i>	YOUNGO focal point (Global South)	Interview_A1
		YOUNGO focal point (Global North)	Interview_A2
		UN COY organizer (Global South)	Interview_A3
		National youth delegate (Global North)	Interview_A4
		Youth climate network (Global South)	Interview_A5
		Youth climate network (Global North)	Interview_A6

**Table 1**  
(Continued)

<i>Source</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Material</i>	<i>Reference</i>
INTERVIEWS 2: YOUNGO-affiliated youth representatives during COP26 (2021)	<i>YOUNGO interventions, tactics, and objectives</i>	Youth climate network (Global South)	Interview_A7
		Youth climate network (Global North)	Interview_A8
		Environmental NGO (Global North)	Interview_A9
		Environmental NGO (Global North)	Interview_A10
		Educational institution (Global South)	Interview_A11
		Educational institution (Global South)	Interview_A12
		Educational institution (Global North)	Interview_A13
		Educational institution (Global North)	Interview_A14
		Fridays for Future (Global North)	Interview_A15
		Environmental NGO (Global South)	Interview_A16
		National youth delegate (Global North)	Interview_A17
		Educational institution (Global North)	Interview_A18
		National youth delegate (Global South)	Interview_A19
		YOUNGO focal point (Global North)	Interview_A20
		Youth climate network (Global South)	Interview_A21
		Youth climate network (Global South)	Interview_A22
		Youth climate network (Global North)	Interview_A23
		Environmental NGO (Global South)	Interview_A24
		Environmental NGO (Global South)	Interview_A25



		Fridays for Future (Global South)	Interview_A26
		Fridays for Future (Global South)	Interview_A27
INTERVIEWS 3: UNFCCC representatives	<i>Interstate expectations of youth</i>	UNFCCC Secretariat (non-state actor focus)	Interview_B1
		UNFCCC Secretariat (youth and education focus)	Interview_B2
OBSERVATIONS 1: Official YOUNGO interventions	<i>YOUNGO's official positions</i>	Joint opening plenary of SBI and SBSTA (2019)	Intervention_1
		Global Youth Video Competition (2019)	Intervention_2
		Informal consultations by the incoming presidency (2019)	Intervention_3
		AIM intervention (2019)	Intervention_4
		SBI Closing Plenary (2021)	Intervention_5
		SBSTA Closing Plenary (2021)	Intervention_6
		Global Stocktake Closing Plenary (2021)	Intervention_7
		COP26 Closing Plenary (2021)	Intervention_8
OBSERVATIONS 2: Events with YOUNGO involved	<i>YOUNGO interventions during UN Climate Change Conferences</i>	Press conference: Global Youth Video Competition (2019)	Event_1
		Side event: #YouthRising (2019)	Event_2
		Youth action: Protest outside the UNFCCC conference (2019)	Event_3
		Press conference: Launch of the 15th Conference of Youth (2019)	Event_4
		Workshop: 7th Dialogue on Action for	Event_5

**Table 1**  
(Continued)

<i>Source</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Material</i>	<i>Reference</i>
		Climate Empowerment (2019)	
		Side event: Reshaping Climate Narratives (2021)	Event_6
		Youth action: Women and Gender Working Group (2021)	Event_7
		Fridays for Future action: Polluters Out (2021)	Event_8
		Side event: The Climate Crisis: A Child Rights Crisis (2021)	Event_9
		Loss and Damage Youth Coalition action: Imagining Our Future in an Era of Loss and Damage (2021)	Event_10
		Civil society action: Peoples' Plenary walkout (2021)	Event_11
		Eight YOUNGO coordination meetings ("Spokes Councils")	Event_12

AIM = Arrangements for Intergovernmental Meetings. COY = Conference of Youth. SBI = Subsidiary Body for Implementation. SBSTA = Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice.

<sup>a</sup><https://unfccc.int/documents/45223>, last accessed September 4, 2023.

<sup>b</sup>[https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/youth\\_participation\\_in\\_the\\_unfccc\\_negotiations.pdf](https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/youth_participation_in_the_unfccc_negotiations.pdf), last accessed September 4, 2023.

<sup>c</sup>[https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/publications/publication\\_youth\\_2013.pdf](https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/publications/publication_youth_2013.pdf), last accessed September 4, 2023.

<sup>d</sup><https://unfccc.int/topics/education-and-outreach/workstreams/youth-engagement>, last accessed September 4, 2023.

<sup>e</sup><https://unfccc.int/process/parties-non-party-stakeholders/non-party-stakeholders/admitted-ngos/list-of-admitted-ngos>, last accessed August 23, 2023.

**Table 2**  
Sample Coding Scheme with Categories, Codes, Themes, and Examples

<i>Category</i>	<i>Code and Description (Example)</i>	<i>Material (with Source)</i>	<i>Derived Theme (Subject Position)</i>
Construction of the represented	“Vulnerable youth” described in interviews or documents	“Despite being least responsible for this planetary crisis, children are among the most vulnerable to its impacts.” (Event_9)	Youth as vulnerable and marginalized
Epistemic and material resources of the representative	“Procedural knowledge” described in interviews or documents	“I think there is a real challenge that people come to this space and feel they do not know enough and they cannot talk on the same terms as governments. It is extraordinarily complicated and hard to follow the rules but I realized that also parties themselves get confused, get lost. ... So disruption has actually more power because it can reach everyone rather than the few following the crazy rules that exist here.” (Interview_A6)	Youth as unruly and critical
Institutional setting of representation	“Bureaucratic constraints” described in interviews or documents	“My participation here right now I’m paying out of my own pocket. That is especially true for youth from developing countries and they have additional challenges like challenges to get a visa. We’ve had so many people having rejected their visa to come to European countries last year in Poland.” (Interview_A2)	Relevant for all three subject positions

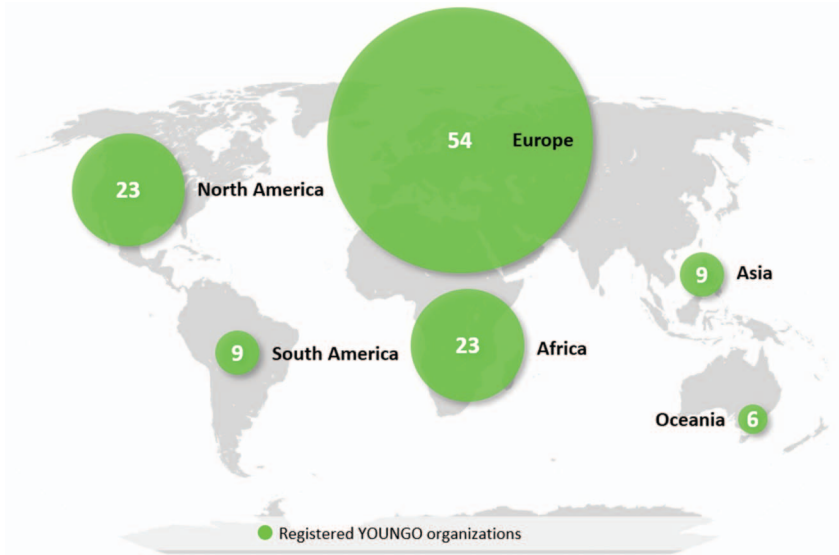
result of active lobbying by youth organizations. In 1999, the Children and Youth Forum on the Environment was organized in parallel to COP5 to raise awareness of the role of youth in climate-related discussions (UN 2010). This event formed the ground for active youth engagement with UN climate diplomacy. Since COP11 in Montreal (2005), dedicated youth delegations have participated in the negotiations and organized a Conference of Youth to prepare young climate activists for the upcoming negotiations, build capacity, and facilitate knowledge exchange. In 2009, YOUNGO gained provisional constituency status under the UNFCCC, which was officially confirmed in 2011.<sup>3</sup>

YOUNGO is the formal voice of youth and children in the UNFCCC process. Members attend the negotiations as observers and use their constituency status to deliver interventions in the conferences' plenary sessions (Risi and Albert 2019). While O'Brien et al. (2018) typologize youth-led climate activism more generally as "dutiful, disruptive, and dangerous dissent," Thew (2018, 371) describes YOUNGO as a transnational advocacy network that unites moderate and more radical voices. YOUNGO members bring expertise and advice to the interstate negotiations, but also join forces with advocacy groups, such as the climate justice movement (Thew et al. 2020). Awareness raising and educational campaigns are also part of YOUNGO's tactics. Although accounting for less than 5 percent of all admitted observer organizations, the UNFCCC Secretariat describes YOUNGO as "one of the loudest voices and very powerful in making their views heard" (Interview\_B1).

As of June 2022, 124 organizations from forty countries were formally registered under the YOUNGO constituency, of which eighty-three (67%) were based in Europe, North America, and Oceania and forty-one (33%) in Africa, Asia, and South America. As indicated in Figure 1, this leads to a numeric dominance of YOUNGO organizations from the Global North.<sup>4</sup>

Registered YOUNGO organizations fall into four clusters: educational institutions, including student and youth organizations like the World Organization of the Scout Movement and various universities; youth networks like Young European Leadership and volunteer associations like Service Civil International; charity organizations like Save the Children International and foundations like the World Youth Foundation; and advocacy groups like the UK Youth

3. The UNFCCC Secretariat describes YOUNGO as "a vibrant, global network of children and youth activists (up to 35 years) as well as youth NGOs, who contribute to shaping the inter-governmental climate change policies and strive to empower youth to formally bring their voices to the UNFCCC processes." Available at <https://unfccc.int/topics/education-youth/youth/youngo>, last accessed August 23, 2023.
4. It should be noted that numerous organizations, particularly from the Global South, have shown no online activities (on websites or social media channels) for more than two years. In addition, various youth organizations are registered with other constituency groups, such as environmental NGOs.



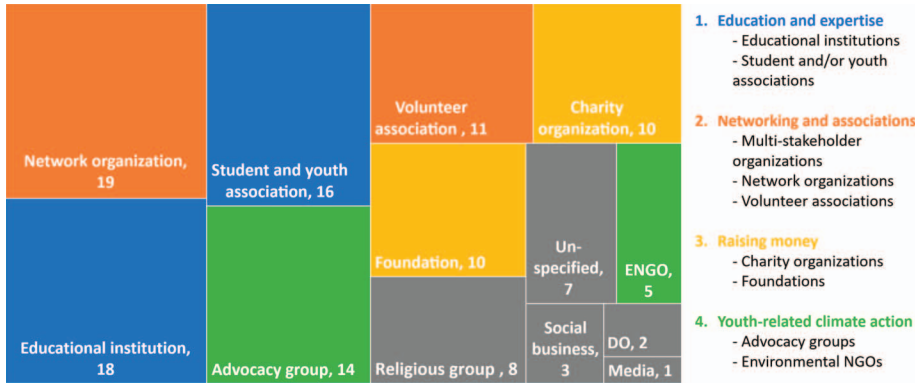
**Figure 1**  
Regional Distribution of Registered YOUNGOs (124 Organizations)

Climate Coalition and environmental NGOs like Nature and Youth Denmark. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of these clusters and indicates the diverse roles and orientations of YOUNGO organizations.

In sum, YOUNGO is a relatively small constituency that lacks financial and administrative resources compared to other groups, such as businesses and local governments. This might explain the Global North dominance in active organizations. Besides, YOUNGO representatives rotate rather quickly due to their specific phases of life. YOUNGO is also one of the most diverse constituency groups of the UNFCCC, with age as the only deciding common denominator.

### How Are Children and Youth Spoken of?

In the following section, we discuss how accredited youth organizations leverage the UN constituency system to represent children and youth at UN Climate Change Conferences. We organize our findings around three subject positions that emerge from our material: youth as a vulnerable and marginalized group whose rights must be secured through youth representation, youth as professional insiders and responsible agents of global climate governance, and youth as unruly outsiders and critical contenders of global climate governance. These subject positions are constituted by the discursive construction of the



**Figure 2**  
Four Clusters of YOUNGO Organizations (124 Organizations)

ENGO = Environmental nongovernmental organization. DO = Development organization.

represented, the epistemic and material resources of the representative, and the institutional setting in which representation takes place.

### *Youth as a Vulnerable and Marginalized Group*

Climate change is considered a “dangerous and disruptive force for many children around the world”<sup>5</sup>, and so are children and youth regularly framed as victims of a warming globe during UNFCCC events (Gibbons 2014). The report *The Climate Crisis Is a Child Rights Crisis*, presented by UNICEF (2021) in collaboration with Fridays for Future during COP26 in Glasgow, states that nearly half of the world’s children live in countries highly exposed to the risks of climate change. Already today, weather extremes have devastating impacts on the well-being, health, education, and protection of children in these countries, and in the near future, climate change may threaten their very survival (UNICEF 2021). In a flyer for the side event where this report was presented, children and youth were depicted as particularly vulnerable: “despite being least responsible for this planetary crisis, children are among the most vulnerable to its impacts” (Event\_9). Although this representational position is imbued with an adult gaze, such a *discursive construction of the represented* is regularly invoked by young climate activists themselves. As Fridays for Future activists highlight in the UNICEF report’s foreword, “climate

5. “Climate Change Mainly Impacting Vulnerable Children” available at <https://unfccc.int/news/climate-change-mainly-impacting-vulnerable-children>, last accessed September 4, 2023.

change is the greatest threat facing the world's children and young people" (UNICEF 2021, 2).

During UN Climate Change Conferences, youth delegates join hands with organizations like UNICEF and Save the Children to speak for those most at risk. However, several of our interview respondents see the position of the vulnerable as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, this representative position justifies the importance of listening to children and youth in global climate governance. On the other hand, it disqualifies youth as equal partners and is therefore unhelpful when seeking political influence. To gain a voice in the diplomatic process, noted one youth delegate, youth need to partake on equal terms with other civil society organizations (Interview\_A1). The portrayal of youth as vulnerable and in need of protection can open the door for "youth washing," noted others (see also Brown 2019). One young climate activist told a story of how youth delegates were included in an advisory board to "show off how inclusive they are" but were laughed at as soon as they brought up any topics (Interview\_A20). Another youth delegate suggested that governments mobilize youth for their interests: "I can imagine that Poland wants to say, 'Oh look, we have youth delegates, we include the future generation into our climate work,' but it is quite clear that they were not included" (Interview\_A12).

To move beyond the position of vulnerability and marginalization, youth delegates do their best to get actively involved in the UNFCCC process, which hinges on the *epistemic and material resources of the representative*. Since many youth representatives are newcomers to the negotiations, they spend their time trying to navigate the different meetings, events, and agenda items. All interviewees bear witness to the hard work involved in learning the procedures and making the most of their accreditation, despite a sense of exhaustion and climate desperation. A youth representative from South America outlined that "the whole negotiations are so complex ... that I was completely overwhelmed by my first COP" (Interview\_A3).

Engaging in interstate negotiations is demanding, and this *institutional setting in which representation takes place* puts structural disadvantages on youth due to their age and lack of resources (Thew 2018). One South Asian youth representative spoke of the challenges of securing accreditation to her first COP. To become an eligible youth delegate, she had to establish her own NGO, show a long track record of climate action, and have a relevant education. She also battled complicated visa and vaccination procedures, applied for funding, and was forced to sign a consent form from her accredited organization stating that she would not engage in contentious actions. Despite these barriers, she managed to organize an action (Event\_7) and work as a communicator to her constituency on social media (Interview\_A24).

These structural constraints suggest that inviting young people to attend UN Climate Change Conferences is not enough. Youth delegates need epistemic and material resources to gain access and make their participation

meaningful. As a constituency group, YOUNGO actively works to challenge the portrayal of youth as passive objects. By offering preparatory workshops for youth and helping accredited members navigate the UNFCCC process, YOUNGO has paved the way for a more active insider position at UN Climate Change Conferences.

### *Youth as Professional Insiders and Responsible Agents of Global Climate Governance*

In parallel to the position of the vulnerable, the UN system often portrays youth as progressive and “highly aware supporters of environmental thinking.”<sup>6</sup> This *discursive construction of the represented* grants agency to youth. The UNFCCC Secretariat encourages YOUNGO to “make official statements, provide technical expertise and policy inputs to negotiations and engage with decision-makers at UN climate change conferences.”<sup>7</sup> Described as “very active, very supportive, very constructive” (Interview\_B1), many youth delegates follow this instruction and act as knowledgeable professionals at UN Climate Change Conferences. They know the rules of the game, use a diplomatic tone, and “speak the language of the negotiators” (Interview\_A2). YOUNGO members develop close relationships with governments and political officials, provide expertise, formulate policy recommendations, make public interventions, organize bilateral meetings, and give press conferences.

Concerning the *epistemic and material resources of the representative*, YOUNGO plays an important capacity-building role for these young climate professionals. The constituency organizes preparatory meetings ahead of the conferences to introduce young climate activists to the rules of procedure and the official agenda items. During the conferences, WhatsApp groups, Google Docs, and mailing lists bring together participants from different youth organizations. In addition, YOUNGO holds daily morning meetings and a policy-focused evening meeting to present ongoing debates and activities in the working groups “where youth from tons of organizations work together” (Interview\_A2). Despite these efforts, not all youth who enter the YOUNGO space understand the process or feel included. One newcomer from a Northern European country describes the difference between her activism outside the COPs and YOUNGO, where she feels “that I have to perform very highly before I can be part of the process” (Interview\_A18).

As young professionals, youth delegates seek to represent “the voices of young people from across the world”<sup>8</sup> by getting involved in yearlong

6. United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Agenda 21, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1992.
7. UNFCCC, “YOUNGO,” <https://unfccc.int/ru/node/254473>, last accessed August 23, 2023.
8. YOUNGO Intervention on Open-Ended Informal Consultations by the Incoming Presidency, Bonn, Germany, 2019.



negotiations (e.g., Event\_5) to improve negotiated agenda items within the *institutional setting in which representation takes place*. For example, YOUNGO members announced their demands—such as youth inclusion—to world leaders in a “Global Youth Statement” published just ahead of COP26 in Glasgow.<sup>9</sup> This active engagement with the policy agenda is a central source of leverage and agency for youth who “get involved in the nitty-gritty negotiations to make a substantial contribution” (Interview\_A8). Some countries work more actively to ensure youth representation at UN Climate Change Conferences. For example, Bangladesh, the Netherlands, and Norway include youth delegates in their official government delegations. These young delegates are “trained to be negotiators” (Interview\_A11), and their close ties to governments mean that they “can go into all the negotiations that some of us with observer batches can’t get into” (Interview\_A9).

These representative performances construct an image of youth as trustworthy partners, competent solution finders, and responsible agents of global climate governance. This subject position rests heavily on support from the UNFCCC Secretariat. In recent years, the secretariat has helped YOUNGO to arrange dedicated events to facilitate exchange between youth and government delegations. The secretariat also organizes High-Level Youth Briefings with youth delegates and high-level officials. The UN Joint Framework Initiative on Children, Youth, and Climate Change hosts a UN Youth Booth that allows youth organizations to showcase their work. While these kinds of activities give young climate activists a voice in UN climate diplomacy, many informants bear witness to the institutional knowledge required to be heard: “if we are not making any substantial contribution to the technical process, they won’t take us seriously” (Interview\_A11), argues one informant.

### *Youth as Unruly Outsiders and Critical Contenders of Global Climate Governance*

While some youth representatives at SB50 mentioned the inclusion of intergenerational equity in the Paris Agreement, the shaping of Article 12, and the development of the Doha Work Programme in 2012 as their biggest successes, others have maintained a more antagonistic approach to global climate diplomacy (Interview\_A12). They offer a *discursive construction of the represented*, where youth aim to challenge, contest and politicize the institutional procedures of the UNFCCC. YOUNGO members use their accreditation to challenge official policy discourse and constitute youth as critical contenders of global climate governance. These youth delegates portray the interstate negotiations

9. Available at: <https://www.yorku.ca/dighr/global-youth-statement>, last accessed September 4, 2023.

as a “powerful form of distraction” (Interview\_A4) that directs attention away from the primary concerns of the global youth movement, such as climate justice.

Acting as watchdogs of a highly technical and expert-driven negotiation process requires particular *epistemic and material resources of the representative*. Confrontational youth use the participatory opportunities offered by the UN constituency system to put pressure “on parties that have not felt the pressure yet” (Interview\_A4). Speaking for those who will bear the costs of a changing climate, these youth representatives oppose closed meetings, refuse backroom deals, and try to “make it more difficult for the negotiators to come back and say, ‘Well, we failed again’” (Interview\_A14). For example, during the launch of the Youth Video Competition in 2019, a YOUNGO representative blamed BNP Paribas for greenwashing by cofunding the competition despite investing in fossil fuels (Event\_1). Another youth activist explained her aim to “bring discomfort to the people. And I also want to bring the voices outside these bureaucratic spaces to the table” (Interview\_A4).

In the years leading up to the 2015 Paris Climate Change Conference, youth organizations like Advocates for Youth, SustainUS, and the UK Youth Climate Coalition formed alliances with the climate justice movement to protest the official UNFCCC protocol (Foran et al. 2013) and challenge the *institutional setting in which representation takes place*. “People who were blocking coal and fossil fuel facilities were also coming into YOUNGO” (Interview\_A12). However, these disruptive conference tactics came at a price. In 2019, some youth activists and other observer organizations were banned from COP25 in Madrid after expressing their frustration with a UN process that, according to them, had failed to deliver a meaningful outcome (McGrath 2019). In 2021, Fridays for Future activists organized many actions inside the conference venue, often dissolved by UNFCCC personnel due to the Code of Conduct (e.g., Event\_8). Drawing attention to the dysfunctionalities, ambiguities, and power games at the UNFCCC, confrontational youth activists openly protest the negotiations “to avoid falling into the trap of going into the specifics and agenda items” (Interview\_A4).

An illustrative disruptive tactic that engaged most youth delegates at COP26 was the “walkout” organized on the conference’s last day. Different civil society groups gathered in the plenary hall, symbolically taking the seats usually occupied by party delegates, and, while the room filled up, read the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report aloud. Each constituency gave a speech where most were highly critical of the UNFCCC system, leveraged a post-colonial critique of global climate diplomacy, and appealed through climate justice discourse. Ultimately, all civil society observers marched out of the conference venue, singing and chanting, with the Indigenous constituency leading the march (Event\_11). The secretariat approved the protest, which indicates that the UNFCCC can host disruptive action, but these actions are curated to fit the goals of the secretariat. From our material, we cannot draw any conclusions

about the effects of these confrontational forms of youth advocacy. Still, young climate activists often see their radical actions as ways of creating visibility, stirring the public to care, and holding politicians accountable.

### Who Listens? Youth Representation as a Performative Act

Participatory multilateralism has been at the center of global environmental governance studies for decades, and numerous scholars have examined how the UN constituency system creates conditions for nonstate participation, consultation, and representation (Allan 2020; Betsill and Corell 2008; Bulkeley et al. 2014; Nasiritousi 2016; Tallberg et al. 2013). While presented as a possible remedy to the democratic shortcomings of state-centric, elite-driven, and technocratic forms of multilateralism (Steffek and Ferretti 2009), the UN system's opening up to civil society members has also invited skepticism. Numerous studies have examined conflicts over legitimate nonstate participation in international policy making and asked how UN constituency groups are held accountable by those they formally claim to represent (Dombrowski 2010; Kuyper and Bäckstrand 2016). Constructivists have also drawn attention to the creative agency of the representative and asked how UN constituency groups construct images and ideas about who and what needs to be represented (Knappe and Schmidt 2021).

Informed by this critical-constructivist take on participatory multilateralism, we have approached youth representation as a performative act that hinges on a dynamic interplay between the discursive construction of the represented, the epistemic and material resources of the representative, and the institutional setting in which representation takes place. Hence we have asked who speaks for children and youth at UN Climate Change Conferences, how children and youth are spoken of, and how institutional settings shape representative speech.

#### *Construction of the Represented*

Our study suggests a broad spectrum of subject positions available for youth at UN Climate Change Conferences. While YOUNGO members regularly invoke the position of the vulnerable, they also claim recognition as professional "insiders" of UN climate diplomacy. By providing expertise, formulating policy recommendations, and making public interventions, these young professionals construct an image of youth as trustworthy partners and competent agents of global climate governance. Other youth delegates use their accreditation to disrupt official policy discourse and portray youth as critical contenders of an ineffective and unjust multilateral process. Rather than considering these representative positions as given or fixed, our study indicates that YOUNGO members creatively play with them to gain political effect. Sometimes they side with environmental NGOs (ENGOs) and research and independent NGOs (RINGOs) that offer scientific and policy advice to the negotiations. Other

times, they adopt the more adversarial position of the climate justice movement (Allan 2020; Hadden 2015).

### *Epistemic and Material Resources*

While YOUNGO members take advantage of the constituency group's diversity to experiment with multiple modes of engagement, they also bear witness to the structural constraints of the UN climate regime. Although the UN rules for nonstate actor participation and consultation allow many youth organizations to register as YOUNGO members, not all youth activists have the capacity required to engage critically with the negotiation agenda. It takes time, resources, and considerable training to become an active YOUNGO professional. Youth representation is thus not a level playing field. Instead, skills, knowledge, and a proven track record in climate action define which youth organizations gain access to UN Climate Change Conferences, who gets to speak inside the conference venue, and ultimately who listens. Like other constituency groups, YOUNGO representatives struggle to make their voices heard, articulate criticism, and provide novel forms of knowledge (Belfer et al. 2019; Morrow 2017). They are balancing between the ideal of speaking on behalf of the marginalized, voiceless, and underrepresented, on the one hand, and living up to internal standards of representativeness and accountability, on the other.

### *Institutional Setting*

While the UNFCCC provides various opportunities for representation, it also defines and restricts the room within which YOUNGO can maneuver (UNFCCC 2009). Our study illustrates how the rules and procedures of participatory multilateralism empower youth through formal recognition and participation but also hinder radical voices from being represented—and heard—in the process. The UNFCCC setting significantly restricts youth from openly challenging the status quo and translating the transformative potential from the streets to the UNFCCC venue (O'Brien et al. 2018). Leveraging institutions is a difficult task that is by no means unique to YOUNGO. The search for recognition inside international institutions is shared by many activist networks and NGOs (Allan 2020), and the risks for depoliticization increase as members of civil society become involved in the processes of global governance (Jaeger 2007). Dependent on the support of the UNFCCC Secretariat for access, space, and funding, YOUNGO members often adjust to the rules of the game and adopt responsible and diplomatic attitudes. While this professionalization of youth is central to their official recognition as a political community, it comes at a price. Rather than establishing youth as independent watchdogs who put pressure on governments from outside of formal political systems, our study

suggests that the UN constituency system molds them into responsible partners on the inside.

Table 3 combines the three identified subject positions with the three dimensions of youth representation.

Adding to previous categorizations of nonstate actor participation and NGO roles in international climate governance (Betsill and Corell 2008; Nasiritousi 2016; Scholte 2002), we stress that these subject positions are not static. Instead, youth perform various subject positions, which can shift in different times and contexts. Representation is a dynamic and relational process shaped not only by the represented but also by the institutional setting within which it occurs.

**Table 3**  
Performative Politics of Youth Representation

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Guiding Question</i>	<i>Youth As ...</i>		
		<i>Vulnerable/Marginalized</i>	<i>Professional Insiders</i>	<i>Unruly Activists</i>
Construction of the represented	How are they spoken of?	Children and youth as vulnerable, marginalized, and in need of protection	Youth as capable and knowledgeable partners of global climate governance	Youth as critical contenders of global climate governance
Epistemic and material resources of the representative	Who speaks?	Youth and nonyouth actors/advocacy organizations	Youth with negotiation experiences, skills, capacities	Critical youth activists who disrupt established rules and routines
Institutional setting	How does the institutional setting shape representative speech?	Vulnerability as justification for formal recognition and participation	Formal rules determine what is possible to say and do "on the inside"	International events as an opportunity to build movement identity and collective action "on the outside"

## Conclusions

YOUNGO represents a relatively small and new constituency group in the UN system that, over the past years, has taken on the task of speaking for children and youth at UN Climate Change Conferences. Through their work, diverse youth organizations today observe the interstate negotiations on climate change, coordinate their actions, and develop joint strategies to bring the concerns of young people to the negotiation table. While this study has illustrated how YOUNGO members creatively play with different representative positions in their interactions with the UN system, we have also found that the formal rules for nonstate participation and consultation restrict who speaks, who is spoken of, and who listens. Although YOUNGO works to maintain space for political deliberation, experimentation, and confrontation, the UN constituency system favors some representative claims over others and effectively molds young climate activists into professional insiders with responsible and diplomatic attitudes, similar to civil society actors in other international organizations (Tallberg et al. 2013).

What do these findings imply for other constituency groups and participatory multilateralism more generally? First, YOUNGO is a relatively small constituency with fewer financial and administrative resources than, for example, businesses and local governments. While this hampers institutional knowledge management, long-term commitments, and strategic interventions, it also fosters creativity, novel ideas and perspectives, quick adaptation, and flexibility. Second, political representation is a relational process shaped by the institutional setting within which it takes place. By asking who speaks and who is spoken of at UN Climate Change Conferences, we may get a better sense of how power asymmetries and structural inequalities shape representative politics. YOUNGO is a constituency group particularly vulnerable to the inclusions and exclusions at work at international events. However, YOUNGO is also one of the most diverse and constantly changing constituency groups of the UNFCCC, where representative claims are constantly renegotiated. YOUNGO members can experiment with different subject positions, as rules are not yet fully set and multiple modes of intervention are possible.

YOUNGO efforts to build alliances with the climate youth movement, including Fridays for Future, hold the potential to channel more critical voices to the negotiation table and thereby repoliticize the climate change agenda (Machin 2022; Marquardt and Lederer 2022; Swyngedouw 2022). Adopting more confrontational summit tactics could, however, deprive youth of their formal constituency status and thus undermine their ability to challenge global climate rule making from within. This trend cuts across all constituency groups, particularly in light of the facilitative post-Paris climate governance regime that embraces nonstate action (Jernnäs and Lövbrand 2022; Marquardt et al. 2022). Future research should expand on the role of youth in global climate politics and trigger conceptual debates about the responsabilizing effects of institutionalized forms of

representation in environmental governance. Scholars should examine more closely how other constituency groups, such as labor unions, climate justice advocates, or farmers, are constituted as political subjects and make representative claims in global climate governance.

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