

THE FORGOTTEN POWER: POLITICAL RIGHTS IN UZBEKISTAN AND THE DECLINE OF VOTER PARTICIPATION

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Abstract. *As someone who is deeply concerned about civic engagement, I find it troubling how political rights in Uzbekistan—once hard-won freedoms—are increasingly overlooked. This article reflects on the decline of voter participation, a right that past generations fought for but is now often ignored. Beyond just voting, I also examine other fundamental political rights, like freedom of speech, assembly, and access to justice, questioning why they remain underutilized.*

Through this discussion, I hope to shed light on the societal and systemic factors at play and emphasize the urgent need to rekindle a sense of civic responsibility among Uzbek citizens.

Key words: *Political and civil rights, civic engagement, to vote, freedom of speech, sense of civic responsibility.*

ЗАБЫТАЯ СИЛА: ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЕ ПРАВА В УЗБЕКИСТАНЕ И СНИЖЕНИЕ АКТИВНОСТИ ИЗБИРАТЕЛЕЙ

Аннотация. *Как человек, которому небезразличны вопросы гражданской активности, я с тревогой наблюдаю за тем, как политические права в Узбекистане – когда-то завоёванные с большим трудом – всё чаще остаются без внимания. В этой статье я рассматриваю снижение явки избирателей, право, голосовать, за которое боролись предыдущие поколения, но которое сегодня нередко игнорируется. Кроме выборов, я анализирую и другие важные политические права, такие как свобода слова, собраний и доступ к правосудию, задаваясь вопросом, почему они используются так редко. В этой работе я стремлюсь выявить системные и социальные причины сложившейся ситуации и подчеркнуть необходимость возрождения гражданской ответственности среди узбекистанцев.*

Ключевые слова: *политические и гражданские права, гражданская активность, голосование, свобода слова, чувство гражданской ответственности.*

In Uzbekistan, the rights of citizens are commonly categorized into two main groups: 1-civil and political rights, and 2-economic, social, and cultural rights. While economic, social, and cultural rights help ensure people's material well-being, they are often fully realized only when civil and political rights are actively exercised. In Uzbekistan, the underutilization of political rights - such as voting and participation in governance - directly affects how effectively social and economic rights are implemented. The decline in voter participation is not just a political issue; it reflects a deeper disconnect where citizens feel their voices have little impact on shaping policies that affect their daily lives. This erosion of political engagement weakens public influence over decisions related to education, healthcare, employment, and social justice - thus showing how political rights are the foundation upon which other rights can be protected and advanced. While economic development and social stability have often been at the forefront of national policy, the protection and promotion of political rights have received comparatively less attention. Among these rights, the right to vote stands as a cornerstone of democratic participation and civic empowerment¹. Despite the report of CEC in Uzbekistan², it is reported in the international journal - World economics - "Uzbekistan has a Political Rights Index of 9.5 ranking it 142nd of 150 in the global listings"³. Which means, in recent years, Uzbekistan has experienced a noticeable decline in voter turnout, especially among young and urban populations. This trend raises important questions about the health of political engagement in the country. In a society where economic reforms are progressing, the neglect of political freedoms risks creating an imbalance that undermines sustainable development and inclusive governance.

This paper explores the reasons behind the decline in voter participation and argues for the revitalization of political rights as a necessary step toward a more active and representative civic life.

Although Uzbekistan's Constitution guarantees political rights such as freedom of expression, association, and the right to vote, the practical realization of these rights remains limited in various ways. The political landscape has historically been dominated by a small number of officially recognized parties, most of which align closely with government policies, leaving little room for genuine opposition or alternative voices. This lack of political diversity contributes to public skepticism about the value of elections, with many citizens perceiving them as predetermined or lacking real competition.

¹ <https://constitution.uz/en>

² <https://saylov.uz/ru>

³ <https://www.worldeconomics.com/ESG/Governance/Political-Rights/Uzbekistan.aspx>

Furthermore, restrictions on independent media and limited access to unbiased political information hinder the public's ability to make informed decisions. According to international human rights organizations and academic studies⁴, these constraints reduce the meaningfulness of electoral participation and contribute to a sense of political disempowerment among citizens, especially the youth. As a result, despite high official voter turnout figures, there is growing concern that participation is often more procedural than voluntary or politically motivated - casting doubt on the authenticity of civic engagement in Uzbekistan's democratic process.

One of the most critical factors behind the decline in meaningful political participation in Uzbekistan is the disengagement of youth from civic life. Despite making up a significant portion of the population, young people often feel that their voices are neither heard nor valued in political decision-making. This disconnect is partially due to the lack of comprehensive civic education in schools, which leaves many students unaware of their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Without a strong foundation in democratic values and political literacy, youth are less likely to view participation - such as voting, joining civil society initiatives, or engaging in public discourse - as meaningful or impactful. International human rights organizations, including the OSCE and Freedom House, have noted that restrictions on freedom of expression, limitations on independent media, and crackdowns on online activism further discourage youth from becoming politically active. As a result, a generation that could be a driving force for reform is instead growing up politically apathetic and alienated - posing long-term challenges for democratic development in Uzbekistan.

Media freedom plays a crucial role in fostering political awareness and encouraging citizen participation, yet in Uzbekistan, it remains significantly constrained⁵. While recent reforms have aimed to modernize the media sector, many independent outlets continue to face censorship, pressure, or outright closure. Journalists and bloggers who critique government policies or expose social issues often risk harassment, detention, or legal action. This environment creates a climate of fear and self-censorship, limiting the availability of diverse political perspectives in the public sphere. International organizations such as Human Rights Watch and the UN Human Rights Office have expressed concern about these restrictions, noting their negative impact on transparency and public trust. In the absence of free and fair access to information, citizens - especially first-time voters and marginalized communities are unable to

⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org>

⁵ <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/rm/2015/244384.htm>

make informed electoral choices. The dominance of state-controlled narratives further weakens political debate and reinforces the perception that elections are symbolic rather than substantive.

Thus, media control not only restricts freedom of expression but also silences the public's ability to hold leaders accountable through democratic means.

To address the decline in voter participation and strengthen political engagement in Uzbekistan, several key reforms are necessary. First and foremost, the government should prioritize **civic education** in schools and universities, ensuring that young people are equipped with the knowledge to understand their political rights and responsibilities. This education should focus not only on the mechanics of voting but also on fostering critical thinking, political discourse, and an understanding of democratic values. In parallel, there needs to be **legal reform** to ensure greater **freedom of the press** and support for independent media. This would allow for a broader range of viewpoints to circulate, giving citizens the information they need to make informed decisions during elections. Furthermore, creating a more **inclusive political environment** - by encouraging the formation of genuine opposition parties and allowing political pluralism - would lead to a more competitive electoral process. Additionally, **youth participation initiatives**, such as political workshops, debates, and direct engagement with decision-makers, could help restore faith in the electoral process among young people. Lastly, the international community should continue to apply pressure on Uzbekistan to uphold its constitutional guarantees for political rights, ensuring that reforms are not only enacted but also implemented effectively. By addressing these key areas, Uzbekistan can begin to rebuild a more vibrant and participatory democratic system that engages all citizens, particularly the younger generation, in the political process.

In conclusion, while Uzbekistan has made significant progress in its political and social spheres, there remains potential for enhancing citizen participation in the electoral process. The government's commitment to modernizing the political system is evident in recent reforms, but there is an opportunity to further improve public engagement, especially among youth. Strengthening civic education, promoting diverse political discourse, and ensuring open access to information are important steps that can support informed participation. By continuing to foster an inclusive political environment, Uzbekistan can build a more robust democracy where every citizen feels empowered to actively contribute to shaping the future of the nation.

Encouraging political involvement through well-informed, transparent, and accessible channels will help further the goals of stability and development, ensuring that the country's progress remains driven by the collective participation of its people.

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