



Transforming Participation into Institutional Power Youth Leadership in Sports Governance a Scoping Review

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Abstract:

Background: Youth participation in sport is widespread, yet their representation in formal governance structures remains limited. Although inclusive and democratic governance is increasingly emphasized, it is unclear whether youth leadership translates into meaningful institutional power within sport organizations. This scoping review maps existing scholarship on youth leadership in sports governance, examines how youth roles are conceptualized, and evaluates the extent of decision-making authority afforded to young leaders across governance levels.

Methods: Following the Wong framework and reported in line with PRISMA-ScR guidelines, a comprehensive search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, SPORTDiscus, ERIC, and Google Scholar. Studies addressing youth leadership or representation in sport governance were included. Records were screened using predefined criteria, and data were charted to capture governance levels, leadership roles, authority structures, and reported barriers or outcomes. Findings were synthesized thematically.

Result: Youth leadership is increasingly visible through advisory boards, athlete commissions, and youth councils; however, substantive authority such as voting rights and strategic influence remains limited. Key barriers include age-based legitimacy bias, hierarchical governance cultures, short-term appointments, and limited mentorship pathways. Where formal authority and governance training exist, youth leaders contribute to improved legitimacy and policy responsiveness.

Conclusion: Youth leadership in sports governance remains positioned between symbolic inclusion and genuine power-sharing. Advancing toward institutional authority requires structural reforms, including formal representation, voting rights, and intergenerational governance models to strengthen democratic legitimacy and long-term sustainability.

Keywords: Athlete Representation, Institutional Power, Intergenerational Governance, Governance Reform, Participatory Governance, Stakeholder Theory, Sports Governance, Youth Leadership

1. INTRODUCTION

Governance has become a central concern in contemporary sport due to recurring crises of legitimacy, ethical misconduct, financial opacity, and declining public trust in sport organizations. Over the past two decades, scholars and policymakers have increasingly emphasized principles such as transparency, accountability,

stakeholder representation, and democratic participation as cornerstones of “good governance” in sport (Thompson et al., 2023). Within this reform agenda, attention has largely focused on structural mechanisms board composition, regulatory oversight, compliance frameworks, and integrity systems. However, comparatively limited scholarly attention has been directed toward a critical governance stakeholder group: youth.

Globally, young people constitute a substantial proportion of sport participants, volunteers, and emerging professionals within the sport ecosystem. The United Nations defines youth as individuals aged 15–24 years, though many sport policy frameworks extend the age range up to 29 years (Patton et al., 2016). Despite their demographic centrality and direct engagement in sport systems, youth remain significantly underrepresented in formal decision-making structures of national federations, Olympic committees, professional leagues, and community sport organizations. This

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underrepresentation presents both a governance gap and a legitimacy challenge. If governance is premised on stakeholder inclusion, the systematic marginalization of youth from institutional power structures raises normative and practical concerns (Li & Goerzen, 2024).

The discourse surrounding youth in sport has traditionally concentrated on athlete development, physical literacy, coaching pedagogy, and psychosocial outcomes (Müjdeci et al., 2026). In contrast, the governance dimension of youth involvement specifically youth leadership within decision-making bodies remains conceptually underdeveloped and empirically fragmented. Existing studies often situate youth participation within advisory councils or athlete commissions, yet these structures frequently operate without formal voting authority or strategic influence. Consequently, youth presence does not necessarily translate into institutional power (Augsberger, 2024). This distinction between participation and authority is central to understanding the current state of youth leadership in sports governance.

From a theoretical perspective, stakeholder theory posits that organizations derive legitimacy through meaningful engagement with those who affect or are affected by organizational activities (Mahajan et al., 2023). In the context of sport governance, athletes and youth participants represent primary stakeholders whose voices should be institutionally recognized. Similarly, participatory governance frameworks emphasize inclusive decision-making as a mechanism to enhance organizational responsiveness and democratic legitimacy (Huang, 2025). However, institutional theory suggests that governance bodies are often resistant to redistributing power, particularly when such redistribution challenges entrenched hierarchies and traditional authority structures. Age-based power asymmetries, credentialism, and generational bias may therefore operate as structural barriers to youth leadership within sport governance systems (Nerets & Līcis, 2025).

Recent developments in international sport governance indicate growing acknowledgment of youth inclusion. For example, youth commissions within international federations and national Olympic committees have been established to promote youth voice in policy discussions. Global policy agendas, including sport-for-development initiatives, increasingly advocate youth engagement as a driver of innovation and sustainability (Hwang, 2026). Nonetheless,

questions remain regarding the substantive influence of these initiatives. Are youth leaders granted meaningful authority in strategic decision-making, or are they confined to consultative roles with limited institutional impact? Moreover, what structural and cultural factors enable or constrain youth leadership within governance contexts?.

The emerging literature suggests that youth leadership in sport governance is characterized by several tensions. First, there is a tension between symbolic inclusion and substantive authority. While organizations may highlight youth representation as evidence of progressive governance, the actual scope of decision-making power afforded to young leaders is often constrained (Lucy, 2024). Second, there exists a tension between short-term engagement and long-term institutional continuity. Youth appointments are frequently time-bound and lack structured mentorship pathways that facilitate sustainable leadership transitions. Third, intersectional dimensions including gender, socio-economic status, and geographic location shape access to governance opportunities, yet remain underexplored in empirical research.

Despite these complexities, youth leadership has been associated with several potential organizational benefits. Youth inclusion may enhance organizational legitimacy among younger stakeholders, foster policy innovation, and contribute to safeguarding reforms by incorporating lived experiences of emerging generations. Furthermore, intergenerational governance models suggest that structured collaboration between senior administrators and youth leaders can promote adaptive governance and strategic renewal. However, the evidence base remains dispersed across case studies, policy reports, and limited empirical investigations, underscoring the need for systematic mapping of the field (Lucy, 2024).

Given the fragmented and evolving nature of scholarship in this area, a scoping review is particularly appropriate. Scoping reviews are designed to map the breadth and characteristics of research in emerging or conceptually diffuse fields (Scott et al., 2023). Unlike systematic reviews that evaluate intervention effectiveness, scoping reviews examine how a topic has been conceptualized, what evidence exists, and where knowledge gaps persist. In the context of youth leadership in sports governance, such an approach enables identification of governance levels where



youth are represented, typologies of leadership roles, theoretical frameworks employed, and structural barriers documented in the literature (Cotterill & Fransen, 2021).

Accordingly, this study aims to map and synthesize existing research on youth leadership within sports governance structures. Specifically, it seeks to examine how youth leadership is conceptualized in governance contexts, identify the organizational levels at which youth participate, analyse the extent of decision-making authority afforded to youth leaders, explore structural enablers and barriers, and highlight gaps for future research. By situating youth leadership within broader governance reform discourse, this review advances the argument that meaningful transformation requires movement beyond participation toward institutional power-sharing. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing debates regarding democratic legitimacy, stakeholder inclusion, and intergenerational governance in contemporary sport systems.

2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

This study adopted a scoping review design to systematically map the breadth and nature of existing literature on youth leadership in sports governance. The review followed the methodological framework proposed by Woo (2026) and further refined by O'Brien et al. (2016), and was reported in alignment with the PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews guidelines (Gottlieb et al., 2021). A comprehensive search was conducted across major electronic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, SPORTDiscus, ERIC, and Google Scholar to capture both peer-reviewed and relevant grey literature. Search terms combined keywords related to youth (e.g., youth leadership, young leaders, athlete representation, youth participation) and governance (e.g., sports governance, sport policy, governing bodies, board representation).

Studies were included if they were published in English, addressed governance structures within sport organizations, and explicitly examined youth leadership or youth representation in decision-making contexts. Studies focused solely on coaching, athlete development, or non-governance leadership contexts were excluded. Retrieved records were screened based on titles, abstracts, and full texts against predefined inclusion criteria. Data were charted using a structured extraction

framework capturing study characteristics, governance level, conceptualization of youth leadership, roles and authority, and reported barriers or outcomes. The findings were synthesized thematically to identify recurring patterns, conceptual gaps, and emerging directions within the field.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Result

3.1.1 Overview of Included Studies

The search strategy yielded a body of literature primarily published after 2010, reflecting the broader governance reform movement within sport. The majority of studies originated from Europe, North America, and Australia, with limited empirical contributions from the Global South. The included literature consisted of qualitative case studies, policy analyses, governance evaluations, and conceptual papers. Only a small proportion employed mixed-method or quantitative designs. Consistent with broader sport governance scholarship (O'Boyle & Shilbury, 2016), research on youth leadership was often embedded within discussions of board reform, stakeholder engagement, or athlete representation rather than treated as a standalone governance construct.

3.1.2 Conceptualisations of Youth Leadership in Governance

Across the literature, youth leadership was conceptualised in three dominant ways. First, as advisory participation through youth councils or youth commissions within international federations and national Olympic committees. Second, as athlete representation mechanisms designed to incorporate young athletes into governance conversations. Third, as emerging board-level inclusion, where youth members hold formal governance positions, albeit often without full voting authority.

However, conceptual clarity regarding leadership authority was inconsistent. While some studies equated presence with participation, others emphasized the distinction between symbolic inclusion and substantive influence (Abdeladim & Yahyaoui, 2024). Drawing on stakeholder theory (Freeman, 2016), several authors argued that representation without decision-making power

risks reinforcing tokenism rather than enhancing democratic governance. The literature therefore reveals ambiguity regarding whether youth involvement constitutes genuine power-sharing or consultative engagement.

3.1.3 Governance Levels and Institutional Roles

Youth leadership was most frequently identified at the international and national levels, particularly within youth commissions of Olympic structures and sport federations. At the community sport level, youth board representation was sporadic and often dependent on local initiatives rather than institutional mandates. Studies examining governance structures consistently noted that youth members rarely chaired committees or controlled strategic portfolios, suggesting hierarchical containment of youth authority (Pinandhita, 2025).

Where youth were formally integrated into governance systems, their roles typically included policy consultation, event planning input, athlete welfare advocacy, and safeguarding discussions. Voting rights were inconsistently granted, and in several cases youth representatives lacked equal board status.

3.1.4 Structural Barriers to Youth Leadership

Recurring barriers emerged across contexts. Age-based legitimacy bias was frequently reported, with youth leaders perceived as inexperienced or lacking technical governance expertise. Institutional inertia and established power hierarchies limited opportunities for authority redistribution. Winand et al. (2019) emphasize that sport governance systems are embedded in long-standing institutional cultures that resist disruptive change, including generational power shifts.

Limited governance education and mentorship pathways were also identified as constraints. Without structured capacity-building initiatives, youth representatives often struggled to navigate complex policy environments. Additionally, intersectional factors such as gender and socio-economic status shaped access to governance opportunities, mirroring broader inequalities documented in sport leadership research (Parent & Hoye, 2018).

Short-term appointments further constrained continuity and institutional learning. Youth

positions were often time-bound, with limited succession planning, reducing long-term policy impact. These findings suggest that structural barriers are not merely procedural but embedded within governance norms and institutional logics.

3.1.5 Enablers and Emerging Positive Outcomes

Despite these constraints, several studies highlighted enabling conditions. Formalized voting rights, mentorship programs pairing youth with senior board members, and governance literacy training enhanced meaningful engagement. Where youth leaders were granted substantive authority, organizations reported improved stakeholder legitimacy and increased responsiveness to athlete welfare and safeguarding concerns.

Participatory governance frameworks indicate that inclusive decision-making enhances organizational accountability and adaptability (Andrews, 2023). In cases where youth involvement moved beyond consultation, evidence suggested greater innovation in digital engagement strategies and athlete-centered policy reforms. However, empirical measurement of these outcomes remains limited, and causal relationships between youth leadership and governance performance require further investigation.

3.2. Discussion

This scoping review reveals that youth leadership in sports governance remains an emerging yet structurally constrained domain. Although visibility of youth participation has increased, the transition from consultative presence to institutional power remains incomplete. The findings suggest that governance reforms have prioritized representational optics without consistently addressing authority redistribution.

The distinction between participation and power is central. Participation refers to inclusion in deliberative processes, whereas power denotes the capacity to influence binding decisions. Consistent with stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), meaningful governance reform requires not only recognition of youth as stakeholders but institutional mechanisms that enable influence over strategic direction. Without formal authority such as voting rights, committee leadership, or agenda-



setting capacity youth leadership risks remaining symbolic.

Institutional theory offers further explanatory insight. Sport governance bodies operate within entrenched cultural norms that privilege seniority, experience, and established networks. These norms may inadvertently marginalize youth, reinforcing age-based hierarchies. As [Winand et al. \(2019\)](#) note, governance change in sport often occurs incrementally rather than transformation ally. Youth inclusion appears to follow a similar trajectory: incremental reforms that stop short of structural redistribution of power.

The review also highlights a lack of longitudinal and comparative research. Most studies are case-specific and geographically concentrated in Western contexts. There is limited understanding of youth leadership dynamics in emerging sport systems or within Global South governance structures. Moreover, quantitative assessments linking youth representation to governance performance indicators remain scarce. This represents a significant research gap, particularly given increasing global emphasis on youth empowerment within sport-for-development policy agendas.

Importantly, the findings suggest that intergenerational governance models may offer a pathway forward. Rather than positioning youth leadership as oppositional to established authority, collaborative governance frameworks emphasize mentorship, shared decision-making, and structured succession planning. Embedding youth within governance pipelines through education, gradual responsibility allocation, and institutional continuity mechanisms may facilitate sustainable leadership transitions.

Overall, the evidence indicates that youth leadership in sports governance currently operates along a continuum: presence, participation, influence, and institutional power. Most governance systems remain situated between presence and participation. Achieving institutional power-sharing will require deliberate structural reforms, including mandated board representation, formal voting rights, governance capacity-building, and accountability mechanisms ensuring youth voices are integrated into strategic outcomes.

4. CONCLUSION

This scoping review set out to map and synthesise existing scholarship on youth leadership within sports governance and to examine how youth participation translates into institutional authority. The findings indicate that while youth inclusion has become more visible within governance reform discourse, meaningful power-sharing remains limited across most sport organizations. Youth are increasingly represented in advisory boards, athlete commissions, and consultative forums; however, their roles frequently lack formal voting rights, agenda-setting authority, and sustained strategic influence. As a result, youth participation often remains symbolic rather than transformative.

A central insight emerging from the review is the distinction between presence, participation, and power. Many sport organizations have progressed toward including youth at the discussion table, yet relatively few have embedded youth leaders within core decision-making structures. This gap highlights a structural imbalance within governance systems that continue to privilege seniority, experience-based legitimacy, and established leadership networks. Without intentional mechanisms to redistribute authority, youth leadership risks being framed as a representational gesture rather than a substantive governance reform. At the same time, the review identifies promising developments. In contexts where youth representatives are granted formal board membership, voting rights, and structured mentorship opportunities, there is evidence of enhanced organizational responsiveness, stronger athlete-centered policy development, and improved stakeholder legitimacy. These examples suggest that youth leadership can contribute meaningfully to governance innovation when embedded within institutional frameworks rather than isolated in parallel advisory structures. Intergenerational collaboration models, in particular, appear to offer a sustainable pathway for integrating emerging leaders into governance hierarchies while preserving organizational continuity.

The review also exposes significant research gaps. Empirical evidence measuring the direct impact of youth leadership on governance performance remains scarce. Most studies are qualitative and geographically concentrated in Western contexts, limiting comparative and global insights. Furthermore, longitudinal research examining leadership pipelines and succession pathways is

largely absent. Future investigations should therefore move beyond descriptive accounts toward analytical and outcome-based approaches that assess how youth authority shapes governance effectiveness, transparency, and accountability.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings reinforce stakeholder governance arguments that legitimacy depends on meaningful inclusion of affected groups. Youth constitute a primary stakeholder population within sport systems, not only as participants but as future custodians of governance structures. Ensuring their institutional representation is therefore not merely a symbolic commitment to diversity but a strategic imperative for organizational sustainability.

Youth leadership in sports governance is at a transitional stage. The shift from participation to institutional power has begun but remains incomplete. For governance reform to be genuinely transformative, sport organizations must adopt deliberate structural measures that move beyond consultative inclusion toward embedded authority, capacity-building, and intergenerational power-sharing. Only through such structural commitment can youth leadership contribute fully to democratic legitimacy, policy innovation, and the long-term resilience of sport governance systems.

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6. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

All the authors equally contributed in compilation of the article.

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