

Research Article

Youth Political Participation in African Democracies

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Article History:

Received: 17.05.2024

Revised : 12.07.2024

Accepted: 13.08.2024

Published: 30.09.2024

Abstract & Keywords:

Abstract

Africa's youth, constituting over 60% of the continent's population, hold immense potential to shape the trajectory of its democratic development. This article critically examines the dynamics of youth political participation in Africa, exploring trends in conventional and non-conventional engagement, including voting patterns, protests, digital activism, and informal political expression. Despite growing visibility in movements and advocacy, youth remain underrepresented in formal governance due to structural, economic, and cultural barriers. Drawing from recent elections, protests, and case studies—including Nigeria, Senegal, and South Africa—this analysis highlights both the disillusionment and determination driving youth political behavior. The article evaluates legal reforms like Nigeria's "Not Too Young to Run" initiative, civic education efforts, and the role of social media in youth mobilization. It concludes with strategic policy recommendations to reduce institutional barriers, promote inclusive civic education, enhance economic opportunities, and ensure safe, equitable political environments. Empowering African youth is not only a democratic imperative but a prerequisite for sustainable governance and development across the continent.

Keywords: youth political participation, Africa, civic engagement, voter turnout, digital activism, social movements, youth protests, governance, electoral reform, civic education, #EndSARS, Not Too Young to Run, youth democracy

INTRODUCTION

Africa's youth—those aged 15-35—make up over 60% of the continent's population, representing both a demographic powerhouse and a vital engine for the future of democracy. However, translating numerical strength into actual political influence remains fraught with structural, economic, and cultural challenges. As Africa's electoral calendars fill, youth are emerging as visible catalysts for political change, yet their sustained participation and representation in governance remain limited. This article examines the evolving landscape of youth political participation in African democracies, analyzing patterns, challenges, innovations, and prospects for the continent's youthful majority.

The Demographic Imperative

Africa is home to the world's youngest population; its median age is only 19. In nations like Nigeria, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and South Africa, youth constitute the largest cohort of eligible voters and citizens. Thirteen primary and presidential elections across Africa in 2024 demonstrated that youth engagement—at the polls or in the streets—can drive significant political shifts^{[1][2]}. Yet, despite their numbers, data consistently show lower rates of conventional political participation (such as voting and party membership) among youth compared to older age groups^{[3][4][5]}.

Patterns of Youth Participation

Voter Turnout and Conventional Involvement

- **Lower Youth Turnout:** Studies in South Africa and across the continent reveal a consistent decline

in youth voter registration and turnout. For instance, South Africa's youth voter registration in the 18-19 age group dropped from 30% in 2005 to just 15% in 2021^[6].

- **Weaker Partisanship:** Younger Africans are less likely to identify with any political party and are more likely to attach themselves to opposition parties than to incumbents^[7].
- **Limited Representation:** Youth remain grossly underrepresented in legislatures; globally, only 10% of parliamentarians are under 35, with Africa reflecting and at times lagging behind this average^{[3][8]}.

Age Group	Registration Rate (2005)	Registration Rate (2021)
18-19	30%	15%
20-24	69%	67%
25-34	74%	69%

Example: South Africa's youth registration trend^[6]

Non-Conventional and Alternative Engagement

- **Protests and Movements:** Youth are often at the forefront of social movements—driving pro-democracy protests in Nigeria (#EndSARS), Kenya (#EndFinanceBill), South Africa (#FeesMustFall), and Senegal. These movements seek government accountability and reforms, often outside formal party structures^{[9][11]}.

- **Digital and Social Media Activism:** With rising internet penetration, platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok have become arenas for civic mobilization, policy advocacy, and rapid information-sharing^{[9][1]}.
- **Informal Political Participation:** Many young Africans engage politically through music, art, satire, and community initiatives, reflecting broader frustrations and aspirations^{[3][9]}.

Barriers to Youth Political Participation

Structural and Institutional Hurdles

- Political systems are often dominated by older elites who view youth as inexperienced or unfit for leadership^[9].
- High candidacy fees and restrictive age requirements for political office, combined with limited access to party structures and networks, restrict young candidates' participation^[9].

Economic and Social Exclusion

- Youth unemployment rates are among the highest globally; 45.5% in South Africa in 2024, for example, forcing many to prioritize economic survival over civic engagement^[2].
- Poverty and lack of social capital diminish the resources available for young people to organize or campaign^{[3][4]}.

Cultural Norms and Discrimination

- Traditional hierarchies and gender norms frequently relegate young people, especially women, to subordinate societal roles, limiting opportunity and voice^[9].
- Political intimidation, violence, and harassment perpetuate apathy and disillusionment, especially in contexts of state oppression or electoral violence^[9].

Disaffection with Democracy

- Afrobarometer surveys highlight a growing sense of democratic disillusionment: only 57% of Africans aged 18-35 prefer democracy to other government forms, and many perceive elections as ineffective in ousting unpopular leaders^{[3][7][10]}.
- High levels of dissatisfaction are driven by persistent governance failures, corruption, and slow economic progress^{[10][2]}.

CASE STUDIES AND RECENT TRENDS

2024–2025 Election Cycle: Youth as Change Agents

- In 2024, youth-led protests and voter turnout contributed directly to electoral upsets and the removal of long-standing incumbents in Ghana, Senegal, and South Africa^{[1][2]}.
- Senegal's 2024 election was postponed in the face of widespread youth-led demonstrations, ultimately resulting in the election of Bassirou Diomaye Faye—a candidate whose campaign

resonated with youth priorities: job creation and anti-corruption^{[1][2]}.

- In Namibia, two-thirds of the 1.4 million registered voters were youth, signaling a generational shift that reshapes national politics^[1].
- Despite these events, comprehensive surveys still reveal a lack of optimism and faith among youth regarding their countries' trajectory and leadership^[2].

Social Media and Grassroots Organizing

- Hashtag movements such as #ShutItAllDown in Namibia and the "Not Too Young to Run" law campaign in Nigeria have led to legal reforms and increased public awareness of youth political rights^[9].

Innovations and Promising Reforms

- **Lowering Age Barriers:** Legislative reforms—like Nigeria's "Not Too Young to Run" law—have created new entry points for young political aspirants^[9].
- **Civic Education:** NGOs and youth-led initiatives, including the Mandela Washington Fellowship, are working to fill knowledge gaps about the political process and leadership^[9].
- **Electoral Body Initiatives:** African Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) have begun to develop creative strategies, such as youth engagement platforms and youth-targeted public service campaigns, to promote registration and participation^[11].

Impact and Prospects

Youth participation is not only a right but critical for robust, responsive democracies. Inclusive governance, which integrates youth voices in policymaking, offers practical solutions for addressing unemployment, education, and digital equity^{[9][5]}. While challenges persist, current trends—increased protest activity, legal reforms, and digital organizing—point to growing agency among African youth.

Visualizing Youth Participation Trends

Youth Voter Registration in South Africa (2005–2021)

A sharp decline in the 18–19 age group from 30% to 15% illustrates both waning trust and structural obstacles in democratic processes, echoing continent-wide patterns^[6].

Youth-Driven Political Movements (2024–2025)

A map or infographic would highlight the eruption and impact of youth-led protests in Nigeria, Kenya, Senegal, and South Africa, reflecting their power to shift political outcomes.

Youth Population Proportion Across Africa

A bar graph can demonstrate the demographic 'youth bulge,' with over 60% of African populations under the age of 25—a trend set to intensify in the coming decades^{[1][11]}.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Remove Structural Barriers:** Lower age and financial thresholds for office; develop mechanisms for youth party integration.
- **Invest in Civic Education:** Strengthen educational curricula to include practical civic and political literacy.
- **Foster Economic Inclusion:** Address unemployment and economic barriers that inhibit youth political engagement.
- **Promote Safe Participation:** Protect young activists and candidates from intimidation, violence, and digital harassment.
- **Expand Digital Inclusion:** Continue investment in access to digital tools and resources that foster participation and representation.
- **Ensure Gender Equity:** Prioritize the removal of double discrimination against young women in politics.

CONCLUSION

Africa's young generation is pivotal to the continent's democratic transformation. Their current underrepresentation poses critical risks to the legitimacy and vibrancy of African democracies. As youth continue to organize, demand reforms, and innovate in their pursuit of political inclusion, it is imperative for policymakers and civil society to dismantle barriers and cultivate environments where young voices are genuinely heard and heeded. The future of African democracies is inseparable from the civic energy and leadership promise of its youth.