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# The Columbia Journal of International Affairs

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### Elections in Africa: The Youth Vote and Implications for 2020

DANIEL ASSAMAH AND SHAOYU YUAN /MAY 05, 2020

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Despite their growing numbers, African youths are underrepresented in [governance](#) and their aspirational needs in areas like employment and education are often met with [disappointments](#), as during the [Arab Spring](#). Consequently, the continent has suffered from “brain drain” as much of its talented youth migrated abroad. To [most Africans](#), the escape route from deficient economic and political policies in their home country is [migration](#). Within the past decade, [countries](#) like the United States, Israel, United Kingdom, Germany, and France, however, are [closing](#) their borders by enacting increasingly restrictive immigration policies. 2020 is a critical year, as presidential and parliamentary elections will take place in a number of African countries. Coupled with the significant number of young people on the African continent, the ballot box remains a fundamental avenue for young Africans to elect leaders who will foster social change and generate economic opportunities on the continent.

According to the Mo Ibrahim Foundation “about [60%](#) of Africans, and especially youth, think that their governments are doing a very bad or a fairly bad job at addressing the needs of young people.” Some argue that the situation is more so one of [voter apathy](#), rather than political apathy. For instance, South Africa’s 2019 presidential elections recorded the [lowest](#) number of youth voter turnout [since 1999](#). Most of the youths chose to stay home on election day because they felt all the [political parties](#) were more or less the same.

Some young people, including political activists, even refrain from participating in electoral processes because they believe African [elections](#) are [not free](#) and fair. For instance, [Ugandan](#) youths, despite their large population, perceive their influence on presidential elections compared to local elections to be quite minimal. This might explain their low turnout rate during presidential elections. What makes this issue critical for Africa is that by [2050](#) one-third of youths in the world will be Africans.

A key challenge for young people vying for political positions is [funding](#). To overcome this challenge, some young Africans have begun associating themselves with the [old guard](#), employing rhetoric that parallels that of their godfathers. An issue that arises from this

strategy, however, is that the older generation of politicians dictate their political messaging, leaving little to no chance for the younger politicians to make independent policy decisions. Kenya's model, on the other hand, engages the youth voter base through campaign and outreach programs. Prior to its 2017 elections, Kenya started Youth Vote ([YVOTE](#)), a digital outreach initiative that educated and motivated young people to participate in the electoral process. The YVOTE campaign was a collaboration between the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC). The [campaign](#) adopted a face-to-face and door-to-door strategy, including a digital campaign and voter educational games.

Globally, elections remain the primary mechanism for proving popular sovereignty. Thus, universal participation is a check to balance distortions and illegitimacy. According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), youth participation in elections affects [overall turnout](#). In fact, it serves as a mechanism for ensuring early political socialization, strengthens democracy, and helps individuals exercise their political influence. A substantive vote from young Africans could affect the nature of representation in African politics and in public policy.

What could then be done to increase the turnout of young people during elections? An IDEA [report](#) indicates that at the institutional level, mandatory voting although controversial, will have a direct impact. Providing newly enfranchised young voters with a special rite of passage and/or other privileges could also incentivize them to come out to vote. Lastly, the voting system's structure and process should be reformed in order to be more appealing to young people.

As one-third of the youths on this planet will be located in Africa by 2050, the low turnout of young Africans during elections is a now global concern that we must address. In a globalized world, what affects Africa will have implications for the rest of the world. It is therefore imperative for the international community, regional organizations, and agencies to support campaigns to increase youth voter engagement on the African continent.

Notwithstanding, the role of transnational and local non-governmental organizations is critical on this front, due to their perceived neutral position in local and national politics. By effectively designing programs for and educating young people about election process and logistics, as well as teaching them about the roles, rights, and responsibilities of young voters are just some of the ways NGOs could help empower the youth on the continent. Social media platforms will also play a role, with free live broadcasts possibly acting as an effective and efficient means of youth empowerment. With all these techniques, it is paramount to consider change at the behavioral mindset level so that African youth voters will always make meaningful choice at the poll.

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