



Re-engaging Youth Voters through the Auspices of Public Participation

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1. Introduction

In light of the upcoming local government elections, this paper discusses public participation as a tool for improving political participation by the youth. A widening gap between local government institutions and community members lingers as social infrastructure decays under the constraints of corruption and weak institutional capacity. While the weight of public participation is generally shouldered by communities, a critical question emerges as to who is contributing meaningfully to the participatory democracy. This concern is further exacerbated by crucial developmental concerns such as limited public accountability and escalating water insecurity which continue to strain fragile state-society relations. This paper weighs in on the discussion and argues that youth participation in local government elections is affected by structural socioeconomic constraints and political disillusionment that limit meaningful engagement in participatory processes. It is in light of this background that the argument presented is that youth participation has emerged outside the formal processes, with the aim of disrupting local government elections due to structural socioeconomic inequalities and expanding political apathy.

2. What is public participation

Public participation is a form of political behaviour within a democratic dispensation, referring to the effective involvement of citizens in the politics that affect their lives (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa n.d.: 13). A democratic regime that promotes public participation is characterised by rulers being accountable to the people, the prioritisation of their followers' interests rather than their own, constraints on the

exercise of power, and equality in political participation. Public participation can occur through various political activities such as public hearings, protests, community activism, petitions and voting in elections, as well as boycotting, apathy and non-participation (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa n.d.: 13). In contrast to the latter activities that signal a lack of involvement, representative and active participation would require all community members to meaningfully influence the decisions that directly affect their lives.

A key aspect of public participation is the communication between a local mayor and the public with the help of a ward committee. The main role of the ward committee is to assist a democratically elected ward representative or councillor. According to Ramphal and Naidoo (2018), indicates that the councillor encourages community participation through working with the ward committee which typically consists of members of the community who have in-depth knowledge of the sectors of the community. We can therefore conclude that, firstly, public participation is a tool used in a representative democracy to encourage the equal participation of communities in order to make local governments and their wards aware of the issues they face. Secondly, public participation is highly effective when there is clear communication between the local mayor and ward committee. For this reason, ward committee members need to be closely involved with local affairs and work collaboratively with each other as this enables them to identify persistent issues within their communities.

Lastly, public participation does not require various formal processes and can be conducted by various community members, depending on the type of engagements conducted. For instance, public participation that takes the form of a protest can often signal deep dissatisfaction with the level at which the local government or ward committee is delivering services or addressing the needs of the community. On the other hand, community members would be more willing to cooperate with local government representatives in the case of a budget hearing, for example, if they can influence where specific portions of their budget are going to be spent.

3. The weight of public participation

Public participation in today's democracy is uneven. Individuals from higher socio-economic backgrounds, including educated and professional groups, are more likely to participate as they have greater access to political information about government policies, manifestos, elections and voting processes through media platforms. Access to these sources grants them the privilege of not only participating politically but also of making informed decisions. Conversely, those from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to engage as a result of limited capacity to exercise their rights. Factors such as youth unemployment and political apathy contribute to finite resources and limited time to engage meaningfully. Furthermore, current education models frequently result in low civic literacy rates among young people, with the result that the youth are not empowered to engage meaningfully in political processes within their respective communities. This may be argued to demonstrate how the education system affects and shapes current and future participation.

Non-participation in political processes can be understood as a form of political behaviour or even a form of political participation, which can be shaped by a number of factors. In some instances, individuals choose not to participate due to political apathy, where they perceive that their involvement will not lead to a significant transformation in the socio-economic challenges they are faced with. This is driven by no confidence in political leaders, specifically due to corruption, promises that are not met or poor service delivery. In other cases, it could be a reflection of feeling excluded, where certain groups believe that the type of rule does not align with their values and interests. An instance where the gap between the principles of public participation and actual governance outcomes can be observed is in Hammanskraal, where residents continue to encounter severe water shortages. Despite the expectation that the government should respond to citizens' needs through participatory governance, service delivery remains inadequate. One resident explained, 'There's no water. People are striving [*sic*] for water. For two months there's no water. Our kids need to wash every day, their uniforms need to be washed and we have no water' (BBC News 2026).

4. Youth voter turnout: the shift to protest vs voting

The Public Affairs Research Institute (2025) reports a decline in youth voting as registration by young people of 18 and 19 years dropped significantly from 30% in 2005 to just 15% in 2021. This trend reflects youth voter apathy and a declining trust in formal institutions meant to serve and represent the needs of the people. Overall, registration rates among those whose ages are from 18 to 34 decreased slightly from 69% in 2005 to 67% in 2021.

While young people have increasingly positioned themselves at the forefront politically, leading protests as a way to express their political engagement. Local government elections have experienced low youth voter participation, with a decline in voter turnout from 58% in 2016 to 46% in 2021. This suggests that while local government elections are weakened by their low youth voter turnout, political participation is not decreasing but rather experiencing a transformation. This underscores a reconstruction of public participation where the youth are increasingly becoming more engaged in processes that reflect their frustration with weak institutions, low youth representation in local government structures and incompetent leadership. The youth are therefore expressing themselves through protests rather than through putting their trust in formal institutions and procedures. In contrast to the more formal options, protests become an immediate and transformative mechanism to ensure visibility in political structures that remain unresponsive and weak. This evolving and cyclical pattern of political engagement, particularly in the context of local government elections, needs to be restructured in order to regain the youth's trust in the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

5. The fragility of public participation: A developmental analysis

While several attempts have been made by various political organisations to bridge the information gap relating to participation in budgetary processes, local governments still face growing challenges. Some of these challenges include inheriting weak institutional capacity, corruption, political interference and leadership deficits (Ndlovu and Muringa 2026). What this translates to is a growing socioeconomic crisis in service delivery where people living in low-resourced communities are prone to low civic literacy, with a

growing digital gap contributing to the unsuccessful attempts to inform communities on public participatory processes. As a result, growing mistrust between citizens and government institutions is evident through cyclical protests and a lack of confidence in formal institutions and processes.

This lack of trust illustrates a number of issues that local governments are faced with. Firstly, communities struggling with unemployment and inadequate access to basic services often lack the time, knowledge and resources to effectively and meaningfully engage in participatory processes. This underlies the dilemma where local governments who want to improve the living conditions of community members are met with resistance to attempts made to engage them in dialogue, community hall sessions or voting processes. Secondly, Maziwisa and Stevens (2025) note that racial exclusion during Apartheid laid the foundation for ensuring that public participation in South Africa is now an institutionally embedded feature of South Africa's approach to governance. However, any reform made to include all those previously excluded is countered by the problem of making community members understand the purpose of public participation. This particular problem extends beyond race related issues to public participation being exclusionary, but also contends with trying to ensure that communities' experiential and grounded perspectives are recognised so that their needs can be addressed. Lastly, public participation as a legal process assumes that citizens have the capacity to meaningfully contribute to decision-making.

As a result of socioeconomic constraints such as unemployment, low civic literacy levels where, in 2023, children from birth to the age of 17 made up 43.1 per cent of the poor population (Stats SA 2023), and the development of a low public participation turnout, formal education is often focused on equipping pupils with the necessary tools to express, write and meaningfully contribute to their communities. Additional constraints to effective public participation include the increasingly challenging issue of water governance in South African communities (Tyhotyholo and Ncube 2023). Poor water governance in rural areas has led to one of the worst cases of inadequate service provision as the majority of homes in the Eastern Cape account for 31 per cent of water usage, while only 27.2 per cent in Limpopo have access to water (South African Human Rights Commission 2014). Notably, rural areas disproportionately tend to have poorly

developed infrastructure and limited access to critical social services, particularly required by students.

This demonstrates how institutional capacity and leadership competence play a major role in ensuring that the development of key social institutions influences the rate at which public participation grows. When local governments fail to function and meet the needs of the community because of widespread corruption, financial mismanagement and a failure to sustain and build new social services and public infrastructure, this leads to community members prioritising the necessary public obligation as that which ensures their needs are met. This persistent cyclical problem is enforced by the assumption that the financing models municipalities use will depend on the municipalities raising sufficient revenue through service charges and property taxes. However, in a country riddled by unemployment and poverty, this has spilled over into municipalities becoming financially indebted and local governments not being able to function optimally.

6. Conclusion

Youth public participation in the upcoming local elections can be understood within the broader study of the political economy, and specifically with regard to how public engagement takes shape. This issue of public participation underscores the erosion of trust in local governance caused by fragile institutional capacity, structural inequalities and cyclical failures in service delivery. The shift from young people engaging politically in electoral processes to increasingly informal disruptive public participation sheds light on how young people continue to shape political participation based on their growing distrust of formal processes. Conclusively, as we approach the upcoming local government elections, efforts to increase youth voter turnout will remain stagnant, if not continue to decline, unless the underlying socioeconomic constraints are addressed. Meaningful participation can be rebuilt through a developmental approach that increases the quality of civic education and ensures accessible participatory process in conjunction with focusing on the lived realities of young people.

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