



The Myth of Youth Apathy: Rethinking Participation in South Africa's Local Elections

Thabiso Mthembu

Youth participation in South Africa's local government elections has been on a steady decline over the past decade, prompting widespread concern among policymakers, analysts and electoral bodies. This trend is often attributed to political apathy among young people — a supposed lack of interest in democratic processes. However, this explanation is both overly simplistic and analytically weak. Rather than reflecting indifference, youth disengagement from local elections is better understood as a rational response to persistent structural and political failures within local governance.

The narrative of youth apathy assumes that democratic participation is primarily expressed through voting. From this perspective, low turnout among young people signals disengagement from politics altogether. Yet this assumption overlooks the broader socio-economic and political context in which young South Africans are situated. South Africa continues to face one of the highest youth unemployment rates globally, with over 60 per cent of individuals aged 15–24 unemployed (Statistics South Africa 2023). This economic marginalisation shapes how young people perceive the state and its institutions, including local government.

Local municipalities, which are responsible for essential services such as water provision, sanitation and infrastructure development, are often the most immediate interface between citizens and the state. However, many municipalities have been plagued by governance failures, corruption and poor service delivery. Reports by the Auditor-General of South Africa consistently highlight widespread financial mismanagement and irregular expenditure across municipalities (Auditor-General of South Africa 2023). For many young people, these failures erode trust in local government and undermine the perceived value of participating in elections.

In this context, choosing not to vote can be seen not as apathy, but as a form of political expression — a withdrawal of legitimacy from institutions that are perceived as ineffective or unresponsive. Political scientists have long argued that participation is shaped by perceptions of efficacy: if individuals believe their participation will not lead to meaningful change, they are less likely to engage (Norris 2011). Among South African youth, there is growing evidence that local elections are viewed as having limited impact on their lived realities.

At the same time, it would be inaccurate to conclude that young people are disengaged from politics altogether. On the contrary, South Africa has witnessed significant youth-led political

mobilisation outside formal electoral processes. The #FeesMustFall protests of 2015–2016 demonstrated the capacity of young people to organise, mobilise and articulate demands for structural change in higher education (Booyesen 2016). Similarly, service delivery protests at the local level often involve significant youth participation, reflecting frustration with municipal governance rather than indifference to it.

These forms of engagement suggest that youth political participation is not declining, but rather transforming. Increasingly, young people are turning to informal and extra-institutional avenues — including protest action and digital activism — to make their voices heard. Social media platforms have also become important spaces for political expression, enabling youth to engage in public debate and hold leaders accountable in ways that extend beyond the ballot box.

This shift raises important questions about the nature and future of local democracy in South Africa. If electoral participation is declining while other forms of engagement are increasing, then the problem may not lie with youth themselves, but with the institutions that are meant to facilitate participation. Local government structures often provide limited opportunities for meaningful citizen involvement beyond periodic elections. Mechanisms such as ward committees and public consultations are frequently criticised for being ineffective or dominated by political elites (Piper and Deacon 2008).

The consequence is a growing disconnect between formal democratic processes and the lived experiences of young citizens. When participation is reduced to voting in contexts where governance outcomes remain unchanged, elections risk becoming symbolic rather than substantive. This poses a challenge to the legitimacy of local government institutions, particularly if younger generations continue to disengage from formal political processes over time.

Addressing this challenge requires moving beyond narrow voter mobilisation campaigns that seek to encourage youth turnout without addressing underlying grievances. While initiatives by the Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa to increase youth voter registration are important, they are insufficient on their own. Efforts to enhance participation must be accompanied by broader reforms aimed at improving governance, strengthening accountability and creating more inclusive and responsive local political systems.

This includes addressing corruption and mismanagement within municipalities, as well as expanding opportunities for meaningful youth engagement in decision-making processes. Participatory governance mechanisms — if effectively implemented — could provide channels for young people to influence policy and hold local officials accountable between elections. Additionally, greater investment in civic education may help bridge the gap between formal political institutions and emerging forms of youth activism.

Ultimately, reframing youth disengagement as a structural rather than individual problem shifts the focus from blaming young people to interrogating the quality of democracy itself. It recognises that participation is not simply a matter of choice, but is shaped by the broader political and socio-economic environment. If local government is to regain the trust of young citizens, it must demonstrate that participation can lead to tangible improvements in people's lives.

In the lead-up to South Africa's upcoming local government elections, the question is therefore not only how to get young people to vote, but how to make voting meaningful. Without addressing the underlying conditions that drive disengagement, efforts to increase youth participation are likely to have limited impact. A more sustainable approach requires rethinking the relationship between citizens and the state, and ensuring that democratic institutions are capable of responding to the needs and aspirations of a new generation.

References

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