



PARLIAMENT
OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



7th Parliament and Youth Participation Empowering the Future

Youth Participation in Politics in
South Africa

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1. Introduction¹

South Africa's journey towards democracy was marked by the active participation of young people, who played a pivotal role in dismantling apartheid. However, despite these historical contributions, youth engagement in politics remains inconsistent across the political spectrum. This paper briefly highlights the significance of youth participation in politics in South Africa, examining its challenges, opportunities, and the imperative for fostering a politically active youth demographic.

The youth of South Africa have a rich history of political activism, dating back to the days of the anti-apartheid struggle. Young activists like Hector Pieterse symbolize the spirit of defiance against injustice and oppression. The Soweto Uprising of 1976, led primarily by students, demonstrated the power of youth mobilization in challenging discriminatory policies. This legacy of resistance underscores the potential of young people to effect meaningful change through political engagement.

2. Challenges to Youth Participation

It is essential that young people actively engage in formal political processes and contribute to defining the current and future political landscapes in order to promote long-lasting change. In addition to being a basic democratic right, inclusive political engagement is also essential for building societies that are stable and peaceful and for developing policies that specifically address the needs of younger generations. Nevertheless, several obstacles stand in the way of achieving these goals.²

Despite their historical role, South Africa's youth face numerous obstacles in engaging with the political process. Structural barriers such as unemployment, poverty, and inadequate education limit their ability to participate effectively. Additionally, there is a perceived disconnect between youth and mainstream political institutions, characterized by disillusionment, apathy, and distrust. Furthermore, youth from marginalized communities often encounter systemic discrimination, hindering their access to political opportunities.

3. Opportunities for Empowerment

Amidst these challenges, there are promising opportunities for empowering youth participation in politics. The digital age has revolutionized communication and activism, providing young people with platforms to amplify their voices and advocate for change. Social media, in particular, has emerged as a powerful tool for mobilization and organizing grassroots movements. Civil society organizations and youth-led initiatives play a vital role in providing avenues for political education, leadership development, and civic engagement. Moreover, the constitutional framework of South Africa guarantees the rights of citizens, including youth, to participate in political processes, offering a legal basis for their inclusion.

¹ Author: T. Matthews

² Malikram, A. (2023). Challenges of youth participation in politics: Youth Politics

Since 1997 Parliament has hosted annual Youth Parliament events aimed at commemorating Youth Day and increasing the participation of youth in parliamentary processes. At the same time, these events have provided an opportunity to raise awareness of Parliament and its processes amongst the youth, and to provide the youth with an opportunity to raise their issues before the Members of Parliament who represent them.

Generally, these have been once-off annual events that have not always been incorporated into regular parliamentary programming. Similarly, recommendations and resolutions have not always been incorporated into the regular parliamentary programme through debates or committee meetings on a regular basis. During the 6th Parliament, matters related to youth were focused on by the Portfolio Committee on Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities. However, larger events like youth parliament have been inconsistent. This should be considered and improved in the 7th Parliament.

In terms of youth as Members of Parliament:

In its fourth biennial Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) review of youth participation in national parliaments, the review builds on the previous 2018 report by adding new data from the last two years, using age data from 148 parliamentary chambers, as well as other quantitative and qualitative data from 258 chambers. The data is current as at 14 September 2020 (aligned with data from South Africa's 6th Parliament. The table³ below displays the top-ranking countries for parliamentarians under ages 30, 40 and 45 (upper chambers).⁴ South Africa ranked 7th and 10th for MPs under the age of 30 and 40 respectively. In terms of lower houses or the National Council of Provinces, the study is silent. This could be related to the fact that South Africa does not have a significant of youth to represented in this House of Parliament.

Under age 30			Under age 40			Under age 45		
Rank	Country	%	Rank	Country	%	Rank	Country	%
1	Belgium	10.00	1	Belgium	41.67	1	Belgium	48.33
2	Somalia	3.70	2	Burundi	28.21	2	Afghanistan	41.18
3	Trinidad and Tobago	3.33	3	Jamaica	23.53	3	Burundi	41.03
4	Australia	2.63	4	Trinidad and Tobago	23.33	4	Romania	34.56
5	Mexico	1.96	5	Myanmar	21.43	5	Colombia	33.02
6	Spain	1.89	6	Kenya	20.59	6	Myanmar	32.59
7	South Africa	1.89	7	Somalia	20.37	7	Kenya	30.88
8	Kenya	1.47	8	Colombia	16.98	8	Trinidad and Tobago	30.00
9	Netherlands (the)	1.33	9	Afghanistan	16.18	9	Somalia	29.63
10	Democratic Republic of the Congo	0.92	10	South Africa	15.09	10	Mexico	29.41

The section below provides a general scope for including youth in the political process.

³ Inter-Parliamentary Union (2021). Youth participation in national parliaments.

⁴ Inter-Parliamentary Union (2021). Youth participation in national parliaments.

4. Youth Participation in Politics

Ensuring meaningful youth participation in politics is not only a matter of democratic principles but also essential for the future of South Africa. The youth represent the demographic majority, and their perspectives, concerns, and aspirations must be integrated into policy-making and governance. Fostering an inclusive political culture that values diversity, equity, and youth representation is imperative for addressing pressing socio-economic challenges and building a more just and prosperous society. Political parties, government institutions, and civil society stakeholders must collaborate to create enabling environments that empower young people to actively participate in shaping their destinies.

For political systems to be representative, all parts of society must be included. When young people are disenfranchised or disengaged from political processes, a significant portion of the population has little or no voice or influence in decisions that affect group members' lives. A key consequence is the undermining of political systems' representativeness. The Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development Working Group on Youth and Peacebuilding (2021) provide the following guidelines and strategies to foster meaningful and active youth participation. These guidelines should be considered in the overall planning and oversight for the 7th Parliament.



Participation

- Prioritize young people's **participation** for peacebuilding.
- Promote that the majority of youth **strive for peace**; only a minority engages in violence.
- Link youth participation to all sectors (**social, economic, cultural and political**) and to all levels.



Diversity

- Value young people's **diversity** and **marginalized** voices.
- Develop targeted strategies to involve young people from **different backgrounds**.
- Respect the **experiences of all**, including those associated with conflict.



Gender

- Be sensitive to **gender dynamics**.
- Avoid **stereotypical assumptions** about the roles and aspirations of girls, boys, young women, men and transgender people.
- Identify strategies to seek **young women's engagement**.



Leadership

- Enable young people's **ownership, leadership, and accountability**.
- Find them, Learn from them, and Support them.
- Facilitate **mechanisms** for communication to enable young leaders to be accountable to their peers and communities.



Safety

- Always aim to **"Do No Harm"** and provide a **safe** environment for young people to participate.
- Ensure that facilitators are **trained** to handle difficult situations.
- Be cautious **not to incentivize violence**.
- Be sensitive to **inequalities**.



Involvement

- Involve young people **in all stages** of programming.
- Have decision makers, institutions and organizations **commit to accountability** to youth.
- Offer alternative sources of power to youth who have attained power **using violent means**.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the involvement of youth in politics is crucial for the advancement of democracy, social justice, and development in South Africa. Despite facing formidable challenges, young people possess the energy, creativity, and passion to drive positive change in their communities and the nation at large. By addressing the barriers to participation and harnessing the opportunities for empowerment, South Africa can unleash the full potential of its youth demographic, ensuring a more inclusive, vibrant, and resilient democracy for generations to come.

References

- Malikram, A. (2023). Challenges of youth participation in politics: Youth Politics
- Inter-Parliamentary Union (2021). Youth participation in national parliaments.
- Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development Working Group on Youth and Peacebuilding (2021). Guiding principles on young people's participation in peacebuilding



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