

# The GLOCEPS

## Commentary Today

Security and Defence Pillar

### Voter apathy in Kenya's 2022 general elections: rethinking our democratic consolidation process

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Kenya's 2022 general elections held on the 9th of August have confirmed what political commentators had intimated before the polls. There were predictions that voter apathy among youth was likely to feature in this election. Disillusionment with politics, marked by a general mistrust of the politicians and pessimism about the future has been attributed to the low civic engagement with the electoral process. The signs of voter apathy were further demonstrated by a low turnout for fresh registration of voters by the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) before the 2022 elections.

The August 9 poll voter turnout is projected provisionally at about 65 percent of the total number of registered voters slightly above 22 million. This trend compared to the 2017 (turnout was 79.51 percent and 2013 elections (83 percent) raises several concerns for Kenya's democratic consolidation process. This voter apathy has been more pronounced among younger voters (18-34 age range). This is equivalent to 29 percent of the Kenyan population as per the 2019 national census which put them at 13,777,600.

This category may very well influence those transitioning to the voting roll in the 2027 general election.

Voter apathy in the 2022 polls is linked to several reasons. One is a growing disillusionment with local and national politics. The youth especially have continued to express frustrations with elected leaders. The overriding perspective in everyday conversations and social media platforms is that politicians promise exciting policies and programs on their manifestos and campaigns, yet these aspirations are hardly addressed post the electoral process. Failures by successive politicians to fix the economy and improve the dignity of the electorate has created this discord. This was an election that has largely been framed around economics and social welfare. The high cost of food and fuel, including a poor economic outlook partly linked to externalities, was a factor in this election. These externalities would include the ongoing Russian-Ukraine war and a global economic recession. While a majority of of countries

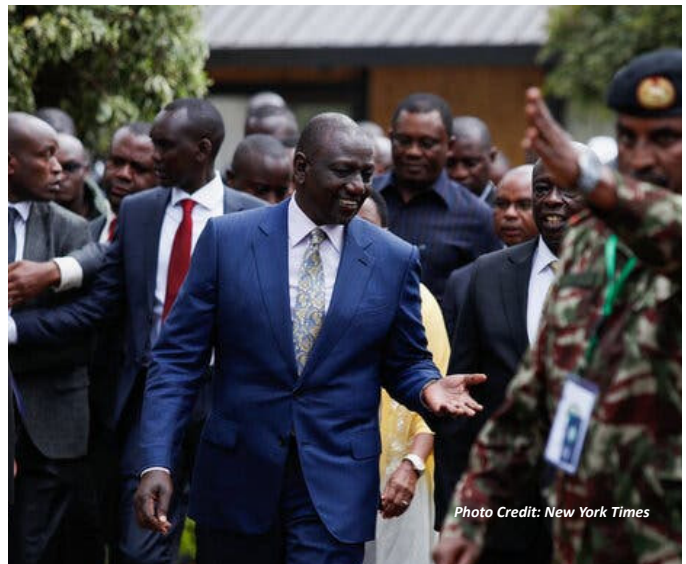


Photo Credit: New York Times



including Kenya are readjusting to the Covid 19 attributed slow economic growth, gaps in government responsiveness have been linked to this voter apathy.

Secondly, and linked to the wider disillusionment with politics is a waning political party culture. The youth are cognizant that political parties are hardly founded on ideology, and merely serve as political vehicles for election. Furthermore, they remain at the periphery of political parties and have hardly been engaged in building a solid



political party culture marked by a clear ideology and programs of action. Additionally, the youth only take peripheral roles within parties such as crowds for hire and low levels of political mobilization. They are often neglected by the politicians, post their election victories.

Third, the youth have become conscious that the political elites they put in power and electoral losers continue to be linked to elite interests. While popular rhetoric and mobilization narratives differ across political alliances, elite cooperation has created the perception that elected leaders may still be non-responsive to public policy concerns. Abstaining from the political process, therefore, remains a form of 'protest' from the electoral processes that they perceive to be predetermined.

Fourth, widespread corruption in successive governments continues to drive voter apathy. Elected leaders have been involved in numerous corruption scandals, further shrinking the development expenditure. The slow prosecution of corruption cases further results in distrust of

corruption scandals, further shrinking the development expenditure. The slow prosecution of corruption cases further results in distrust of government institutions. When combined with a culture of impunity, citizens' distrust of the electoral process becomes a consequence.

The implications of voter apathy are therefore critical to address if Kenya's democratic consolidation is to be strengthened. The national and devolved governments need to be accountable to the electorate much more. Accountability would involve fixing the economy and addressing public goods such as access to jobs, a conducive business environment, health, security, and education. Being accountable to the electorate is at the heart of the social contract that voters sign with the leadership during elections. Key institutions such as the legislature should oversight with relevant laws and regulations. Gaps in addressing the shortfalls in the social contract would result in governments marked by legitimacy deficits. The civil society and political parties need to work collectively to build a robust civic culture that would be attractive and relevant for Kenya's growing youth demographic. Politics in Kenya is shifting away from ethnicity to issues and therefore civic engagement would be critical. Elected leaders need to be accountable and deliver on their manifestos. Deficits in accountability for elected leaders mean that voter apathy is likely to characterize future elections.

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