

YOUTH INCLUSIVITY IN SOUTH AFRICA'S 2024 ELECTIONS

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The declining participation of young voters in elections around the world is viewed by many as indicative of a global democratic recession (Carothers & Press 2022). In both industrialised and developing nations, citizens increasingly appear to have lost faith in the ability of the democratic state to effect progress and prosperity. In the context of what some term a 'polycrisis' – signifying a world facing a confluence of economic, social, technical, and environmental problems – governments, especially democratic ones, are grappling with unprecedented complexities.

These trends are apparent across Africa, with growing numbers of Africans questioning the efficacy of democratic systems to address their aspirations. In its flagship report, 'African Insights 2024: Democracy at Risk – The People's Perspective', Afrobarometer notes that although most young Africans remain committed to democratic values, there has been a notable drop in recent decades in the proportion of individuals who believe these values translate into concrete enhancements in their quality of life. The survey-based project found that young individuals are becoming less inclined to engage in democratic procedures and, alarmingly, more prone to endorse military intervention when democratic practices fail to fulfil their promises (Afrobarometer 2024).

In light of the above, this paper focuses on matters of inclusion of young people in relation to South Africa's 2024 general elections. While political participation can be measured in various ways, voting still represents the quintessential form of democratic participation. In this contribution, I focus on that dimension as an indicator of the extent to which young South Africans feel included and have confidence in the mechanisms that South Africa's democracy offer for their participation. I employ the categorisation of young people – or 'youth' – based on South Africa's National Youth Policy, which classifies this group as people aged between 14 and 35 years (Government of South Africa 2008). According to the 2024 mid-year population estimates by Statistics South Africa (2024b), 61% of South Africans are under the age of 35, and 31% fall within the designated youth category of 14–35 years.

Before proceeding, it is important to note that the granular measurement of voter participation by age category for this paper involved some challenges. No exit polls in the wake of the 2024 general elections have tracked voter participation by age group. As a result, this analysis relies on data pertaining to voting intentions prior to the 2024 election. More generally, different datasets cluster age groups in different ways. Voting registration data from the Independent Electoral Commission, for example, is not reported in categories that neatly overlap with the National Youth Policy's categorisation of youth. I thus draw on a number of sources that may give an approximate, but not perfect, picture of participation among young people in South African elections to date.

This contribution starts by locating the plight of young South Africans within the country's so-called triple challenge of poverty, inequality, and unemployment. This systemic feature of the country's socio-economic landscape continues to reinforce historically skewed patterns of resource and opportunity distribution. Whereas the vote represents political agency, such agency means little when it is ineffectual in creating the economic agency that is required for South Africans to determine their own material destiny, with limited dependence on the state.

The main focus of this paper is the scourge of unemployment, which remains the most critical impediment to overcoming intergenerational cycles of poverty and inequality. Not surprisingly, according to the Afrobarometer, employment creation has featured as the most urgent government priority in the eyes of ordinary South Africans (Afrobarometer 2024). An assumption here is that an evaluation of the government's performance in creating employment also provides a proxy measure for people's satisfaction with the broader efficacy of the country's democratic system.

The paper proceeds to evaluate the functioning of democracy in South Africa, as reflected in data from the South African rounds of the Afrobarometer Survey. The trends over time are examined, from the fifth round of the survey in 2011 until the ninth round in 2022. The discussion highlights differences in the way that people in specific age categories have responded, to gauge whether there is a generational difference between their responses.

Finally, reported voting participation in past elections is examined, together with an age breakdown of the data at hand. Again, this discussion is based on responses from public opinion surveys, which, for various reasons, do not always provide results that strictly correspond with actual historical turnout at the polls. In some instances, respondents cannot recall whether they have voted or not, while others may provide responses they deem desirable within the particular interviewing context. These responses do, however, give a sense of the extent to which respondents view voting as a worthwhile endeavour in terms of influencing the people who govern their affairs.

UNEMPLOYMENT: A TEST OF CONFIDENCE IN DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

South Africa has a relatively young population, with more than six out of ten people being younger than 35 years. Out of its total working-age population of 41.3 million people (between the ages of 15 and 65), about 21 million (roughly 50%) fall within the 16–34 age category.¹ Typically, such a youthful population holds the prospect of an economic boon to society, given the potential productivity benefits it offers.

Yet this is not the case in South Africa. Young South Africans find it extremely difficult to get a foothold in the labour market. The current official unemployment rate for South Africans under 35 who are actively looking for employment is 55%. This figure is 24 percentage points higher than the country's already high national average of 31%, as reported in the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS, Q1) published by Statistics South Africa for the second quarter of 2024 (see Figure 1). The same survey shows that the actual labour absorption rate for people in the under-35 category is only 28%. This means that close to three-quarters of young South Africans are not in employment. Most disconcertingly, the QLFS also reports that 44% of South Africans in the 16–34 age group fall within the so-called NEET category – meaning 'not in employment, education or training' (Statistics South Africa 2024a). This figure is 6 percentage points higher today than it was when the dimension was first measured in 2012.

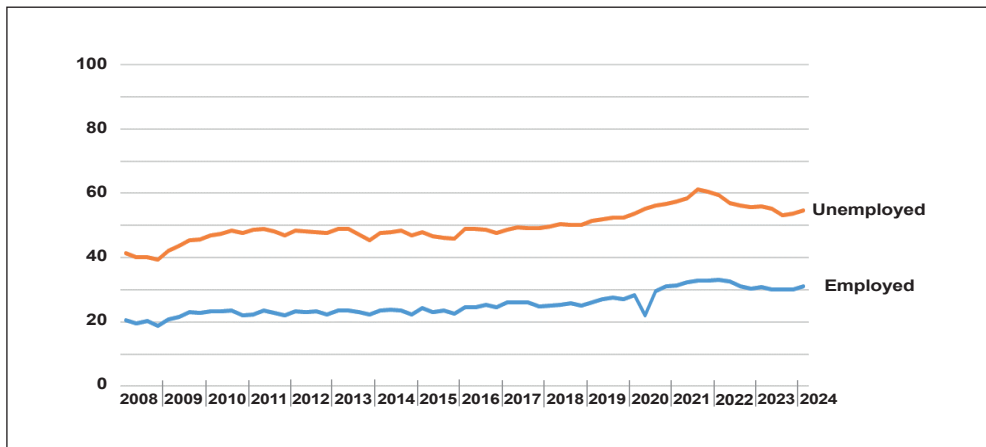


Figure 1: Unemployment in South Africa: A comparison of overall and youth unemployment

(Source: Statistics South Africa, 2024a)

1 Differences in the cutoffs for the youth category differ slightly across data sources.

In light of the above, it is not surprising that 51% of respondents in Afrobarometer’s 2022 survey for South Africa (Round 9) singled out unemployment as the most urgent problem facing the country (Moosa & Mpako 2023). The long-term trajectory illustrated in Figure 1 bears testimony to a dismal track record to date. In addition, more than three-quarters of the 2022 survey respondents indicated that the government was performing very poorly in this area. The relevant item read as follows: ‘How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven’t you heard enough to say: – Creating jobs?’ The results are shown in Figure 2. Higher percentages indicate that more people agreed that the government’s performance in this area was either ‘bad’ or ‘very bad’.²

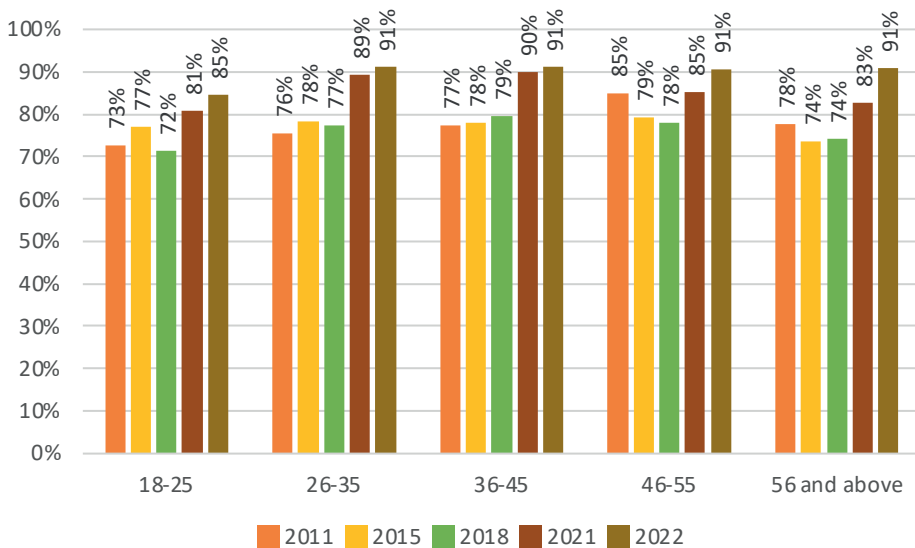


Figure 2: Public sentiment on poor government performance in job creation

(Source: Afrobarometer ODA 2024)

Figure 2 provides a breakdown of the overwhelmingly negative sentiment towards the government’s effort to create employment. This sentiment cuts across all age categories and points to a deterioration in public opinion on this matter

2 All Afrobarometer graphs in this paper were sourced from the Afrobarometer online data analysis (ODA) tool, available at <https://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis/> (hereafter ‘Afrobarometer ODA 2024’). Afrobarometer collects and provides public survey data for the African continent, starting from 2000 and updated continually. The South African national partner is the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (ICJ), and the University of Cape Town and Michigan State University provide technical support to the network. See <https://www.afrobarometer.org/about/> for more information.

over time, particularly from 2021 onwards. Such harsh judgement of the state's failure to address the most critical obstacle to a better life for South Africans, over several administrations, arguably has a bearing on young people's evaluations of the efficacy of democratic governance as a whole and voting in particular. Bold promises about employment have been made in successive election campaigns.

DO YOUNG SOUTH AFRICANS STILL HAVE ANY FAITH IN DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE?

When an issue as crucial for the economic agency of young people as that of employment remains unresolved for three decades, it raises questions about the effectiveness of governance processes in fostering prosperity. Failure in this regard inevitably has implications for intergenerational poverty and inequality. Along with unemployment, these two issues are the other dimensions of the country's triple challenge.

No recent comprehensive study has been conducted on poverty rates in South Africa. The last such research was published as 'Poverty Trends in South Africa: An Examination of Absolute Poverty in South Africa between 2006 and 2015' by Statistics South Africa (2017). The findings suggest that after initial gains in bringing down the percentage of South Africans living below the country's upper-bound poverty line between 2006 and 2011, this trend was reversed between 2011 and 2015 (Statistics South Africa, 2017). During the latter period, poverty under the upper-bound poverty line increased from 53.2% to 55.5%. In the years since that study, amid rising unemployment and the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, this figure has surely risen further.

Although an imperfect measure, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, at constant 2021 dollar prices, provides a reasonable estimate of the material situation of South African households. After following a consistent upward trajectory between 1994 and 2013, this metric declined by 4 percentage points in the following decade (The World Bank Group 2023). This decline was accompanied by a deterioration in the country's overall fiscal position over the same period, leading to rising debt service costs, which impeded the state's ability to balance social spending with investment in growth infrastructure. Afrobarometer data from 2011 to 2022 show that during that period, the percentage of South Africans who believed the country was moving in the wrong direction increased from 65% to 83% (Afrobarometer ODA 2024). One might wonder how these changing circumstances have impacted how South Africans of different generations view democracy.

Figures 3 and 4 report on the respective demand and supply of democracy in South Africa and break responses down into different age categories. Figure 3

illustrates the percentage of South Africans who indicated that they preferred democracy over any other form of government. The Y axis shows the proportion of respondents who agreed with the following statement: ‘Democracy is preferable to any other form of government.’ Responses of ‘agree’ and ‘strongly agree’ were pooled to yield the percentages shown. The X axis provides the survey years, with a breakdown by age groups.

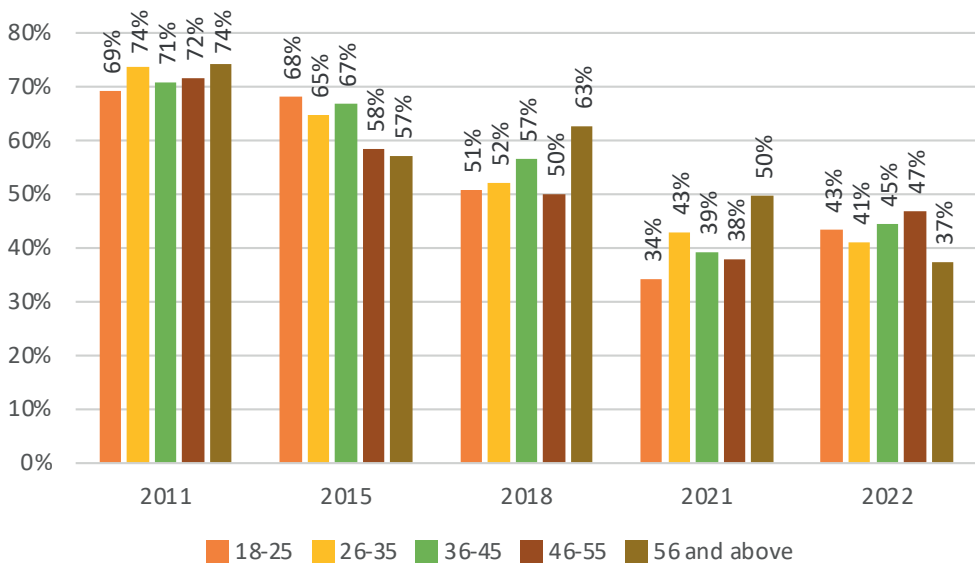


Figure 3: Demand for democracy, 2011–2022, by age group

Source: Afrobarometer ODA 2024

Figure 4 indicates the level of satisfaction that the country’s people felt regarding the functioning of democracy. The relevant survey item read, ‘Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in South Africa?’ Responses for ‘satisfied’ and ‘very satisfied’ were pooled to yield the percentages shown. Between 2011 and 2022, there was no distinct pattern differentiating the age categories, and all age groups followed a similar downward trajectory. It is, however, apparent that the demand for democracy consistently outstripped the supply during this period.

While the decline in satisfaction might not automatically translate into people’s absence at the polls, it does provide important context about their sense of inclusion and participation in electoral processes. Turning to the matter of elections as the most symbolic dimension of democratic governance, the disjuncture between supply and demand is again apparent.

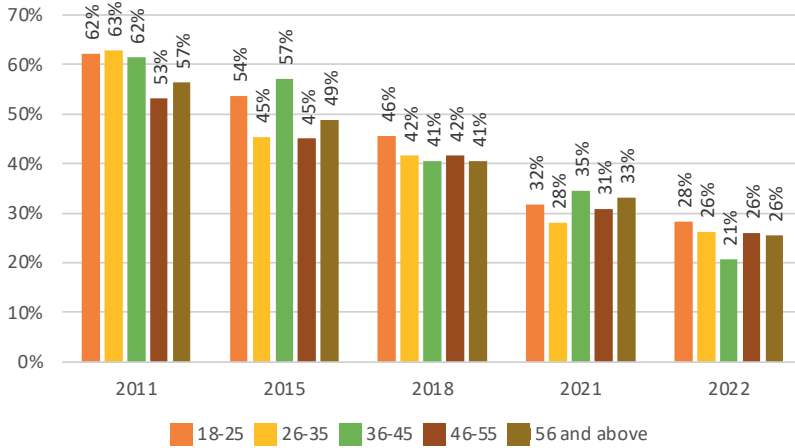


Figure 4: Supply of democracy (measured as satisfaction), 2011–2022, by age group

Source: Afrobarometer ODA 2024

Figure 5 shows that despite a slight and gradual decline in agreement with the idea that leaders should be chosen through regular elections, support for this notion has remained robust since 2011. More than 60% of respondents (all ages combined) agree or strongly agree that ‘We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open and honest elections’. In fact, there was a small increase in agreement with this statement between Round 8 (2021) and Round 9 (2022) of the survey. Overall, the demand for elections as a tool of democratic expression remains strong.

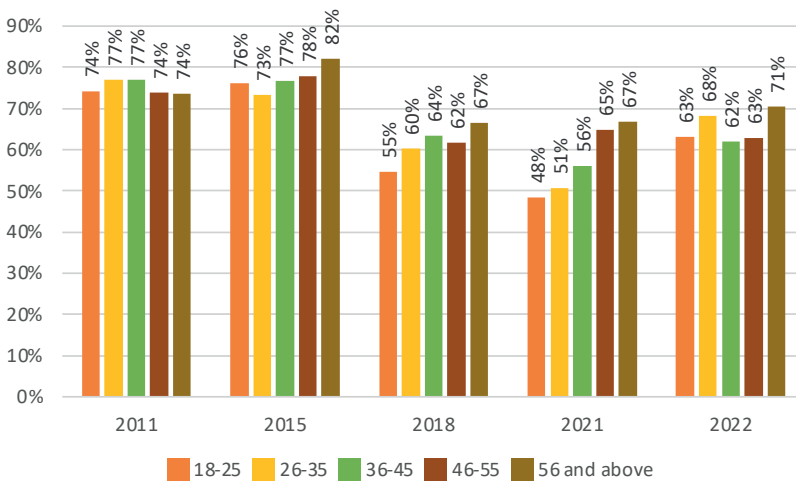


Figure 5: Leaders should be elected through regular elections, 2011–2022, by age group

Source: Afrobarometer ODA 2024

Figure 6 covers three data points, namely 2008, 2015, and 2022. The relevant survey item was ‘Thinking about how elections work in practice in this country, how well do elections: – Ensure that representatives to the National Assembly reflect the views of voters?’ The responses of ‘well’ and ‘very well’ were combined. The results indicate that the perceived return on voting, namely the extent to which elected officials reflect the will of voters, has declined substantially across all groups. For almost all categories, there have been declines in excess of 15% since 2008. The emerging picture is one of unmet democratic expectations among South Africans, across all age categories.

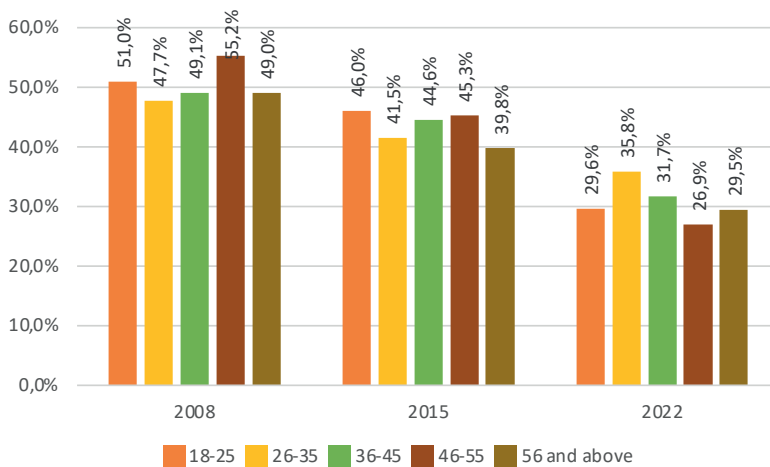


Figure 6: Responsiveness of MPs in National Assembly, 2008–2022, by age group

Source: Afrobarometer ODA 2024

CHANGES IN YOUTH PARTICIPATION

The preceding discussion focused on the relationship between governance effectiveness and the evaluation of democratic processes. I noted that both aspects may provide insight into the extent that people would feel included and motivated to participate in electoral processes.

It is clear that the 58% turnout of youth during the 2024 election has been the lowest since South Africa’s democratic transition. As noted earlier, no age-specific exit poll data was available at the time of writing, which made it challenging to evaluate whether there were distinct age differences in voter turnout. Hence, this paper relies on public opinion data from Afrobarometer surveys, which ask respondents whether they voted in the most recent national election. Such information may not be a perfect indicator in terms of clarifying the reasons behind

voter turnout (i.e. whether the process was inclusive enough), but it provides a useful pointer regarding how the elections are perceived by each age category.

Figure 7 presents the responses of survey respondents between 2011 and 2022. The relevant survey item was, 'In the last national election, held in [YEAR], did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote?' Positive responses were pooled to yield the percentages shown in the figure.

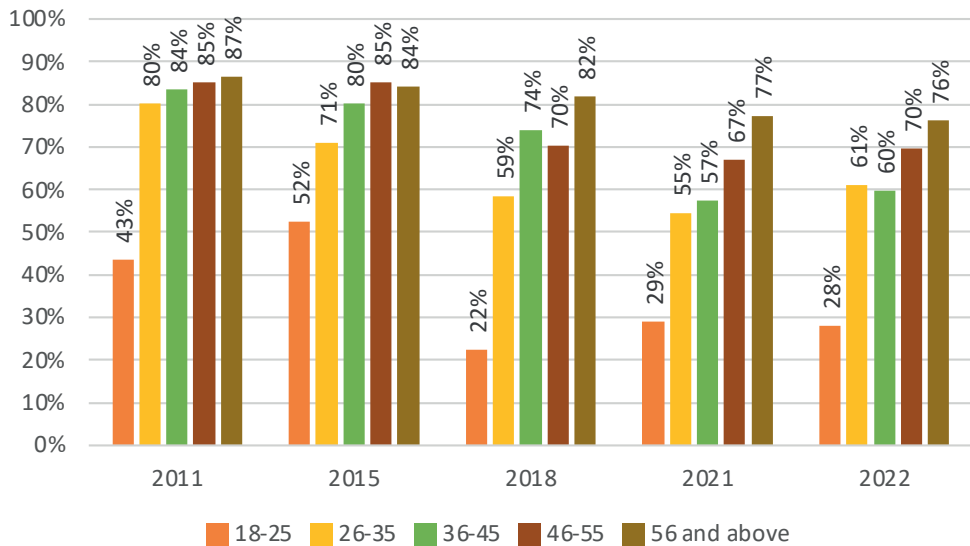


Figure 7: Proportion of South Africans who voted in a previous general election, 2011–2022, by age group

Source: Afrobarometer ODA 2024

For all age groups combined, there has been a steady downward trajectory in affirmative responses. In each year except 2022, the two youngest categories reported the lowest voting turnout among all the age groups; in 2022, marginally more 26–35-year-olds voted than those aged 36–45. It is clear that people in the very youngest (18–25) group have consistently felt less motivated to cast their votes than any other age group. Their reasons may vary, but it has been suggested in preceding sections that government performance on key issues that affect young people, such as employment, may be a significant contributing factor. In addition, data has been presented that points to a growing dissatisfaction with the return on voting, namely the representativeness of elected leaders in legislatures. More targeted research may be required to obtain data that could provide clearer findings in this regard.

CONCLUSION

This paper situates the marginal participation of young people in South Africa's electoral politics within a broader global trend of public scepticism towards democratic processes, especially among youth. While the ideals of democracy remain widely supported, the disconnect between democratic promises and tangible outcomes is particularly pronounced among young South Africans. Persistent unemployment, a critical determinant of economic agency, has exacerbated this disillusionment. Despite representing a substantial share of the electorate, young people face systemic exclusion from opportunities that could enable them to participate meaningfully in shaping the nation's future.

Analysis of voter turnout and public opinion data highlights a worrying trajectory. There is evidence of limited electoral participation among youth, rooted in their dissatisfaction with the government's performance on key issues (such as job creation) and the perceived responsiveness of elected representatives. This trend underscores a broader crisis of confidence in democratic institutions, as unmet expectations weaken the perceived value of participating in democratic processes.

Addressing this challenge requires more than rhetorical commitments during election campaigns. Concrete, sustained efforts to deliver on promises, particularly in addressing youth unemployment, are essential to restore people's trust in democracy. Furthermore, fostering a culture of meaningful engagement through inclusive policymaking and responsiveness to the needs of young people can enhance their sense of political efficacy. Ultimately, the inclusion of youth in South Africa's electoral processes is not only a test of the country's democratic resilience but also a vital step towards achieving a more equitable and sustainable future.

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