Elections, Democracy and the rise of political distrust among youths in Kenya.

Kenya's youth are disillusioned with the institutions that supposedly represent them. Indeed, only nine percent of young people trust political parties, the police and the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (Kithinji, 2026) - a staggering figure that underscores just how deep institutional fragility runs. However, this distrust is not the same as apathy. Rather, it reflects a generation that has watched the bodies meant to safeguard democracy fail them repeatedly. Consequently, this erosion of confidence reaches the ballot box, too. Youth turnout in the 2022 election fell to just under forty percent among registered eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds, driven down not only by disillusionment and economic hardship but also by weak civic education and fears of electoral violence (Maswanku, 2026).

These systemic issues carry profound implications, as Kithinji (2026) highlights the under-representation of young people in elective office, bureaucratic barriers to obtaining identification documents, and a long history of youth being mobilised for political violence rather than included in decision-making. Economic pressures compound these barriers. As a result, many young Kenyans have waited too long for stable income, meaning 'hustler politics' became an outlet for their frustration with elite failure (Lockwood, 2023). High youth unemployment and rising inequality have also been linked to growing disenfranchisement and, at times, violent confrontation with state power (Ahluwalia, 2025).

Nevertheless, alienation from formal politics does not signal a complete abandonment of civic engagement. Traditional participation through voting may have declined, but other forms of engagement have emerged in its place (Gaard, 2024). This shift is most visible online. Onduko (2025) and Ogenga (2025) describe how Gen-Z have turned to digital platforms to demand accountability (most notably through the #RejectFinanceBill2024 movement) changing how young Kenyans understand civic agency. Crucially, this activism does not displace formal participation. In fact, rural youth who took part in the protests of 2024 - 2025 were more likely to vote than those who did not (Moore et al., 2026). Thus, rather than serving as a replacement, protest can actually reinforce formal political participation.

Taken together, this evidence shows that youth distrust in Kenya does not represent a rejection of democratic values. Instead, it signifies a clear demand not only for responsive institutions and transparent processes but also for meaningful spaces where young people's voices are genuinely heard in decision-making.

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