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Megatrends and the Future of Democracy in Africa

**How Do the Youth Bulge, Urbanization and
Digitalization Shape African Politics?**

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Executive summary

Africa's future will be young, urban and digital, but will it also be more democratic? Put differently, are the youth bulge, urbanization and digitalization individually and jointly conducive to more democracy or instead enhance autocratization? Previous comparative politics research is far from conclusive. It also pays little attention to the interlinkages between urbanization, demographic change and digitalization. This paper proposes an analytical framework to analyse the individual and combined effects of the youth bulge, urbanization and digitalization on African politics. More concretely, it explores how age, urbanization and access to social media shape African citizens' political attitudes, their willingness to participate in democratic institutions, and various forms of collective action. Building on a comprehensive literature review of how these megatrends affect African politics, the paper explores Afrobarometer data to analyse political attitudes and behaviour. Although we do not assume that structural factors by themselves lead to democratization or autocratization, we suppose that they can create context conditions in which individual actors and institutions might find it easier to press for political reforms.

Our analysis points to the complex ways in which the megatrends contribute to shaping politics in Africa. Whereas the youth tend to participate less in elections and are slightly less supportive of democracy than older age cohorts, young Africans have been at the forefront of the "third wave of protests" in Africa since 2011. Urbanites, on average, do not seem to be more supportive of democracy than Africa's rural citizens, nor do they engage more with formal democratic institutions. However, they seem to be more supportive of the opposition, and they participate more in political protests. Social media facilitates access to information and allows marginalized groups to organize collective protests and voice their concerns. At the same time, disinformation and fake news weaken support for democracy, and African governments can use digital technologies to manipulate elections in their favour.

With respect to the interlinkages between the three megatrends, we identify two patterns. First, we find that there is a low level of support for democracy and a lack of willingness to vote among the urban youth. Compared to older generations or to African youth living in rural areas, urbanites are less likely to vote or join political parties. Second, Afrobarometer data on social media with urbanization and age suggests that the role of social media for political attitudes and political protests is much more limited than might be expected.

Our analysis suggests that more knowledge is needed about the role of youth in African politics. Given their sheer number, African youth, especially urban youth, might be a key factor for political reforms across the continent in the coming years. Further, more research on the role of young urban citizens – particularly young women, feminist groups and women's networks – in political protests would help in better understanding recent political transitions. This paper takes a broad perspective and proposes a conceptual framework that intersects three megatrends with political attitudes and participation. Future research could take this forward by highlighting country context conditions more extensively. Finally, further research is needed to investigate the longer-term effects of the megatrends on democratization and autocratization processes in Africa.

In more practical terms, our analysis demonstrates that the political consequences of the megatrends on the continent need to be addressed much more prominently in German and European cooperation with African countries. On the one hand, external democracy support will need to consider the fundamental structural changes shaping African societies. To date, German and European cooperation with African partners, is mostly geared towards managing the socio-economic effects of urbanization or demographic changes. Moreover, our analysis highlights the importance of taking an integrated policy perspective with regard to cooperating with African countries on the megatrends instead of viewing individual megatrends as isolated phenomena.

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Introduction

Africa's future will be young, urban and digital. But do the youth bulge, urbanization and digitalization individually and jointly also contribute to more democracy, or do they enhance autocratization? This is one of the most pressing questions when thinking about politics on the African continent.

Neither research on the megatrends nor recent studies on African politics have comprehensively addressed this issue. Scholars and policymakers largely agree that the youth bulge, high urbanization rates and a wave of digitalization – including the spread of social media – will shape African societies today and for the foreseeable future. Previous studies have explored how these megatrends unfold, and they have analysed their potential socio-economic effects. Their influence on African politics, however, has received insufficient attention. Comparative research on African politics recently provided the first valuable insights into how the youth bulge, urbanization and social media affect politics on the continent.¹ These studies are scattered across different disciplines – mostly analysing individual megatrends in isolation rather than identifying interlinkages between the trends – and they have produced mixed answers on the effects of the megatrends on democratization and autocratization processes.

Results from these academic works and anecdotal evidence give us reason to expect that the youth bulge, urbanization and digitalization individually and jointly have a significant impact on politics in Africa. The Arab Spring as well as political transitions in Burkina Faso (2014), Ethiopia (2018) and Sudan (2018) were led by movements in cities with strong youth participation and facilitated by access to social media, which smoothed information-sharing and the organization of protests. Yet, these political transitions were often not followed by longer-term democratization.

Indeed, whether and under what conditions the youth bulge, urbanization and digitalization lead to short-term political transitions, and whether they enhance longer-term democratization or instead foster autocratization is empirically and theoretically unclear. For example, urbanization could positively affect democratization, as urban citizens might be mobilized more easily to request improvements in public goods provision and accountability from political leaders. At the same time, urban societies might be more easily controlled and co-opted by authoritarian governments. Similarly, the spread of social media may improve access to information and increase demands for democracy. Yet, new technologies also open up possibilities of control for authoritarian rulers and can thereby contribute to the stabilization of authoritarian regimes.

Against this background, our analysis has three main objectives. First, we introduce two mechanisms of how the youth bulge, urbanization and digitalization could influence African politics, focussing on African citizens' political attitudes and behaviour. Second, we analyse Afrobarometer data² and review the state-of-the-art research on what we already know about how the megatrends individually affect African politics through these mechanisms. Third, we identify interlinkages between the megatrends and propose avenues for a new research agenda on the megatrends and the future of democracy in Africa.

¹ Danielle Resnick, "Urban Politics," in *Handbook of Democratization in Africa*, ed. Gabrielle Lynch and Peter VonDoepp (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), 404–16; Wisdom J. Tettey, "Digital Media, Networked Spaces, and Politics," in *Routledge Handbook of Democratization in Africa* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), 378–91.

² Afrobarometer, Round 8 (2019-2021) Merged Round 8 data (34 countries) (Afrobarometer, 2022), accessed April 24, 2024. <https://www.afrobarometer.org/survey-resource/merged-round-8-data-34-countries-2022/>.

We do not assume that urbanization, digitalization or the youth bulge lead to regime transitions or enhance democratization or autocratization in Africa. Yet, we suppose that these structural factors could create context conditions in which individual or collective actors may find it easier to foster democratization or autocratization processes. Whereas over the past three decades, comparative politics work has often focussed on the role of actors and institutions in political transitions, we thus seek to bring structural factors back into the picture.

In the remainder of the paper, we proceed as follows. In Section 2 we introduce two mechanisms that illustrate how the youth bulge, urbanization and digitalization could affect African politics. Sections 3 to 5 review what we know from secondary literature and Afrobarometer data about the relationship between individual megatrends and African politics. Section 6 identifies potential implications of the interlinkages between the three megatrends for African politics. Section 7 summarizes the main findings and develops avenues for future research.

How Could the Megatrends Shape African Politics?

Megatrends are characterized by at least four dimensions: They are long-term processes of structural changes that last several decades; they have consequences for all aspects of society, economy, politics and the lives of individuals; they are global phenomena that occur across many countries; and they are complex and multidimensional and mutually reinforce each other.³

In this paper, we focus on three megatrends that are particularly relevant for African politics: the youth bulge, urbanization and digitalization, with a focus on the spread of social media. African populations are the fastest-growing in the world. The continent's population is projected to double between 2015 and 2050 to reach 2.5 billion people. High fertility rates are one key factor driving population growth. They also explain why Africa has the youngest population worldwide. In 2022, the median age was 18.7; about 70 per cent of Africa's population is younger than 30.⁴ Starting from a very low urbanization rate, African urban areas are growing faster than those elsewhere in the world. By 2050, two-thirds of all Africans will live in cities.⁵ In addition, social media usage has spread quickly. The share of people with regular access to social media has tripled, from 10 per cent in 2010 to about 30 per cent in 2022.⁶

These three megatrends have important empirical interlinkages. For instance, demographic change is one important driver of urbanization. In particular, young citizens move to the cities while at the same time population growth contributes to high growth rates in cities.⁷ Moreover, most social media users are young and live in cities. More than 30 per cent of African youth (18–35 years) access social media daily to receive information on politics, whereas only 10 per cent of those 56 years and older rely on social media.⁸ In rural areas, more than 65 per cent never engage with social media, whereas 35 to 45 per cent of Africans living in cities access social media regularly.⁹

The youth bulge, urbanization and the spread of social media are unfolding at a time when a “third wave of autocratization”¹⁰ is shaping African states and societies. After a period of political openings and democratization in Africa in the 1990s, many African countries did not become democracies but instead established “hybrid regimes” or “electoral autocracies”, that is, authoritarian regimes with formal democratic institutions, including regular elections, but without meaningful political competition.¹¹ Only one-third of African

³ Zukunft Institut, “The Megatrends,” 2022, accessed Nov 29 2024, <https://www.zukunftsinstitut.de/dossier/megatrends/>; John Naisbitt, *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives* (Warner Books, 1982).

⁴ World Bank, “World Development Indicators: Population Ages 0-14 (% of Total Population) – Sub-Saharan Africa” (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2022), <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.0014.TO.ZS?locations=ZG>.

⁵ OECD, UN ECA and AfDB, *Africa's Urbanisation Dynamics 2022: The Economic Power of Africa's Cities* (Paris: West African Studies, OECD Publishing, 2022), 4.

⁶ Afrobarometer, Round 8 (2019-2021) Merged Round 8 data (34 countries) (Afrobarometer, 2022), accessed April 24, 2024. <https://www.afrobarometer.org/survey-resource/merged-round-8-data-34-countries-2022/>.

⁷ David Castells-Quintana and Hugh Wenban-Smith, “Population Dynamics, Urbanisation without Growth, and the Rise of Megacities,” *Journal of Development Studies* 56, no. 9 (2020): 1663–82.

⁸ Afrobarometer, Round 8 (2019-2021) Merged Round 8 data (34 countries) (Afrobarometer, 2022), accessed April 24, 2024. <https://www.afrobarometer.org/survey-resource/merged-round-8-data-34-countries-2022/>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Anna Lührmann and Staffan I. Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here: What Is New about It?,” *Democratization* 26, no. 7 (2019): 1095–113.

¹¹ Gabrielle Lynch and Gordon Crawford, “Democratization in Africa 1990-2010: An Assessment,” *Democratization* 18, no. 2 (2011): 275–310.

citizens live in liberal and electoral democracies, whereas most Africans live in electoral autocracies.¹²

Drawing on previous studies about the influence of youth, urbanization and digitalization on politics,¹³ we propose to distinguish two main mechanisms to reflect on how these megatrends could influence African politics: (1) they could affect individual political attitudes and political participation; (2) they could shape different forms of collective action.



Figure 1: How the megatrends could influence African politics, Source: by Authors.

(1) How the megatrends could shape political attitudes and participation

The first mechanism concerns African citizens' support for democracy and their willingness to participate in formal democratic institutions and processes. Research on political attitudes has shown that democracies only consolidate when a large majority of citizens view democracy "as the only game in town".¹⁴ Democracy is less likely to erode when most citizens view democracy as the preferred political regime.¹⁵ Democracy also relies on citizens who participate in formal democratic processes and institutions. Low voter turnout, for instance, undermines the legitimacy of incumbent governments.

Whether and how the megatrends shape African citizens' political attitudes and participation could, therefore, shape the long-term prospects for the consolidation or erosion of democratic regimes. Put differently, if African youth or Africans living in cities strongly support democracy and participate in elections, join political parties and engage in other democratic processes, this could strengthen longer-term democratization processes. On the contrary, if support for democracy and the level of political participation among African youth or urban dwellers were low, this could enhance autocratization.

How age affects political attitudes and behaviour has been widely studied in Western consolidated democracies. Young people in Europe and North America are generally found to be less likely to vote and engage in other formal democratic processes compared to older generations.¹⁶ Individual traits explain these generational differences; young people are expected to have fewer financial means and less time to engage politically, as they are still in the process of building their socio-economic conditions.¹⁷ Expanding on research from other regions, one could therefore expect that African youth are less likely to become politically engaged than older generations.

¹² Christine Hackenesch, Julia Leininger and Karina Mross, "What the EU Should Do for Democracy Support in Africa: Ten Proposals for a New Strategic Initiative in Times of Polarisation" (Bonn: German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), 2020).

¹³ See for instance Edward L. Glaeser and Bryce Millett Steinberg, "Transforming Cities: Does Urbanization Promote Democratic Change?," *Regional Studies* 51, no. 1 (2017): 58–68; Danielle Resnick and Daniela Casale, "Young Populations in Young Democracies: Generational Voting Behaviour in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Democratization* 21, no. 6 (2014): 1172–94.

¹⁴ Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, "Toward Consolidated Democracies," *Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 2 (1996): 15.

¹⁵ Robert Mattes and Michael Bratton, "Learning about Democracy in Africa: Awareness, Performance, and Experience," *American Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 1 (2007): 192–217.

¹⁶ Abdurashid Solijonov, *Voter Turnout Trends around the World* (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2016), <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/voter-turnout-trends-around-the-world.pdf>.

¹⁷ Henry E. Brady, Sidney Verba and Kay Lehman Schlozman, "Beyond SES: A Resource Model of Political Participation," *American Political Science Review* 89, no. 2 (1995): 271–94.

Regarding urbanization, evidence from other regions would lead us to expect that urbanization has positive effects on citizens' support for democracy and their willingness to contribute to formal democratic processes. Modernization theory argues that above certain thresholds, higher incomes, higher levels of education, easier ways to communicate and more forms of transport lead to urban areas becoming strongholds in democratization processes. Indeed, cross-country quantitative research on urbanization and its role in democratization processes shows that after 1960, countries with higher levels of urbanization were more democratic.¹⁸ Extending insights from other regions and historical periods would thereby lead us to expect that African citizens living in urban areas show higher levels of support for democracy and are more willing to participate in formal democratic processes. At the same time, the population share of the middle class and the levels of economic incomes in African cities are not as high as in other regions where urbanization has contributed towards democratization. Whether the insights from other regions and historical events can be extended to Africa is therefore very uncertain.

We conceive of social media as an instrument that can increase access to political information. Social media usage could increase the demand for political change and strengthen citizens' willingness to engage in formal democratic institutions. On the other hand, if social media mainly propels misinformation and polarization, widespread use could also reduce citizens' support for democracy and willingness to engage in democratic institutions.

(2) How the megatrends could shape citizens' willingness to engage in collective action

The second mechanism is about individuals' willingness to engage in collective action, such as social movements or political protests, that could – in turn – contribute to short-term political transitions or long-term political change.

African youth may be less interested in voting during elections or joining political parties than older generations, as research on European and other OECD countries has shown.¹⁹ However, the youth could be more easily mobilized to engage in social movements and political protests.

The density of cities could facilitate the organization of popular uprisings. These can be directed against military coups or other non-democratic practices,²⁰ but they can also work against (formally) democratic governments. Organizing social movements or political protests could be easier in cities. Indeed, historical evidence from across the world shows that revolutions often started in cities.²¹ At the same time, instability and disorder in cities could also increase the public's demand for a strong dictator who can guarantee security and stability.

Social media could not only help strengthen access to information but also allow for the mobilization of collective action. Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and Telegram could help organize political protests and social movements more easily and rapidly. At the same time, misinformation, fake news and polarization via social media could weaken support for democracy and lead to disengagement from formal democratic processes.

In sum, as a first step into the debate on how the megatrends shape the prospects for democracy in Africa, our analysis focusses on the relationship between the megatrends and the political attitudes and behaviour of African citizens. We review secondary literature and complement this with a descriptive analysis of Afrobarometer data to identify what we already know about the political attitudes and behaviour of African youth, citizens living in

¹⁸ Glaeser and Steinberg, "Transforming Cities: Does Urbanization Promote Democratic Change?"

¹⁹ Solijonov, *Voter Turnout Trends around the World*

²⁰ Glaeser and Steinberg, "Transforming Cities: Does Urbanization Promote Democratic Change?"

²¹ Ibid.

urban areas and the role of social media. Whether and under what conditions the political attitudes and behaviour of African citizens influence short-term political transitions or longer-term democratization processes is a different question that we leave for future research.

In the following three sections, we review secondary literature and Afrobarometer data on how the youth bulge, urbanization and social media *individually* shape African citizens' political attitudes and behaviour. Section 6 then discusses how *interlinkages* between these three megatrends might shape support for democracy and political behaviour.

The Youth Bulge and African Politics

Demographic growth and the resulting generational change are some of the most significant megatrends in contemporary Africa. The continent still seems to be a long way off from a demographic dividend.²² The region's rapid population growth of 2.5 per cent per year has so far prevented sustained poverty reduction and livelihood improvements, despite Africa's high economic growth levels since the start of the century. Instead, mass unemployment is a pervasive problem among African youth. In 2015, the African Development Bank estimated that one-third of the continent's then 420 million young people (15 to 35 years) were unemployed, another third was vulnerably employed and only 1 in 6 was in (stable) wage employment.²³

Many young people remain "youthmen" and are blocked in their transition to adulthood. They are caught in a state of "waithood", a prolonged period of suspension between childhood and adulthood when access to social adulthood is delayed or denied.²⁴ The African Youth Charter therefore defines "youth" as the relatively long age segment between 15 and 35, whereas the United Nations defines "youth" as those between 15 and 24 years old.

Much research reflects binary views whereby jobless, poor and increasingly restless youth are either "makers or breakers" or "vanguard or vandals".²⁵ Whereas Afro-optimists depict youth as harbingers of Africa's hopeful future and drivers of progressive political change towards more inclusive and accountable government, Afro-pessimists describe them as forces of chaos and disorder, easily manipulated by corrupt politicians or falling prey to radicalization. These perspectives assume uniform attitudes among Africa's youth. However, as argued elsewhere, there is not "one" youth with common and stable characteristics.²⁶ Instead, the term subsumes a great variety of shifting identities and categories in terms of status, class, education, norms, etc. Even though the following review requires some simplification, we seek to take into account some other markers, such as the levels of education or socio-economic status, as far as possible.

Demographic growth rates have been extensively discussed regarding their potential social and economic consequences, such as health, education and economic welfare. Less attention has been paid to how the youth bulge may influence politics. This question is the main focus of this section. Based on Afrobarometer data and secondary literature, we review existing evidence regarding African youth's political attitudes and behaviour.

²² Jakkie Cilliers, "Getting to Africa's Demographic Dividend," *SSRN Electronic Journal* (May 2018).

²³ African Development Bank, "Jobs for Youth in Africa Catalyzing Youth Opportunity across Africa," 2016.

²⁴ Alcinda Honwana, "'Enough Is Enough!': Youth Protests and Political Change in Africa," in *Collective Mobilisations in Africa / Mobilisations Collectives En Afrique*, vol. 15 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 45–66.

²⁵ Alcinda Honwana and Filip de Boeck, *Makers & Breakers: Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa* (James Currey, 2005); Jon Abbink and Ineke van Kessel, *Vanguard or Vandals: Youth, Politics, and Conflict in Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

²⁶ Nic Cheeseman, "Why Africa's Youth Is Not Saving Democracy," *The Africa Report*, July 8, 2022, accessed Nov 29 2024, <https://www.theafricareport.com/221141/why-africas-youth-is-not-saving-democracy/>.

Political Attitudes and Participation of African Youth

What are the political attitudes of African youth and to what extent and under what conditions do African youth participate in formal democratic institutions and processes? Where are the key similarities and what are differences between the attitudes and participation of African youth compared to other regions?

Support levels for democracy are lower among African youth compared to other age groups. A cursory review of Afrobarometer data (2022) suggests that levels of support for democracy are lower among the youth than other age groups (Figure 2). Young people show slightly less support for selecting leaders through elections and slightly more support for military rule. Young peoples' level of satisfaction with democracy is similar to that of the rest of the population (fairly satisfied: 30.5% vs 30.1%). At the same time, research shows that a large youth cohort has a positive effect on support levels for democracy among young people. This effect, however, is mitigated by the quality of democracy in countries where the youth live.²⁷ Young people who live in newer democracies show less support for democracies than youth living in established democracies.²⁸ Whereas this brief review of political attitudes describes average positions across the continent, country-specific differences exist.

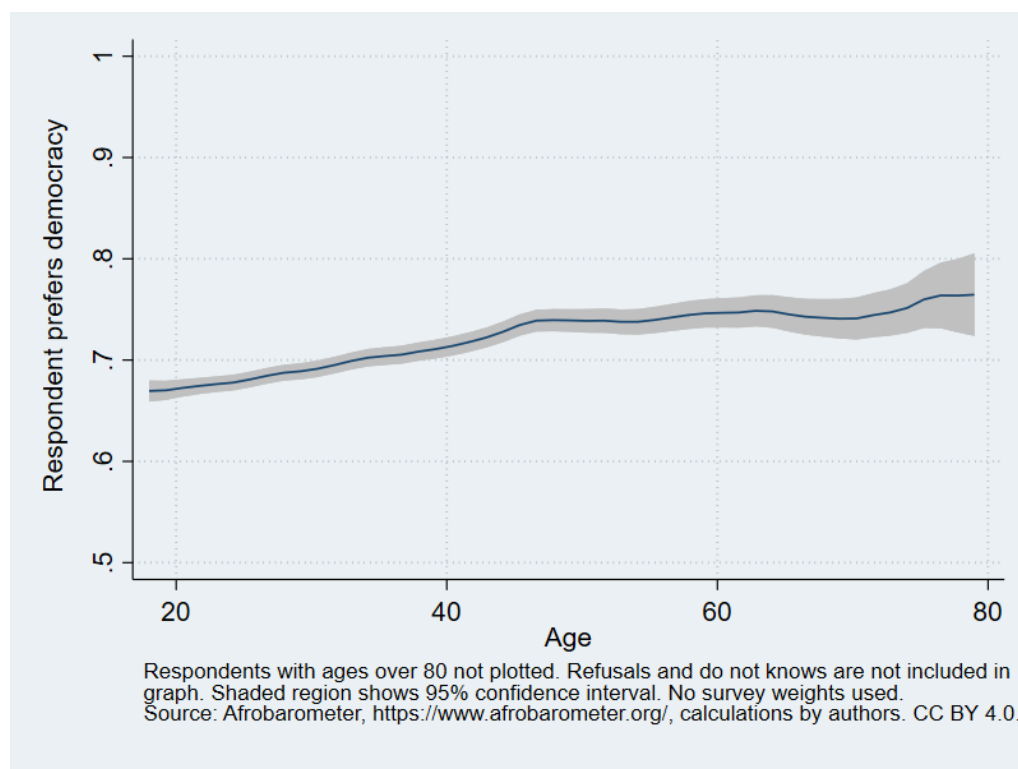


Figure 2: Support for democracy by age, Source: Afrobarometer Round 8 (2019/2020).

Participation levels for elections are lower among African youth compared to older age groups. Participation in political institutions and processes can take many forms, such as voting in elections, contacting local officials, discussing politics or being a member of a

²⁷ Godfred Bonnah Nkansah and Attila Bartha, "Anti-Democratic Youth? The Influence of Youth Cohort Size and Quality of Democracy on Young People's Support for Democracy," *Contemporary Politics* 29, no. 5 (2023): 553–75.

²⁸ Ibid.

political party. Young Africans are substantially less likely to attend community meetings, contact their local politicians and become members of a political party than their older countrymen and women.

As regards elections, previous research concurs that young Africans – similar to young generations in Europe and North America – are also less likely to vote than older generations.²⁹ A cursory analysis of recent Afrobarometer data,³⁰ shown in Figure 2, also confirms this trend. In addition, only 44.4 per cent of younger citizens (18 to 25) had voted during the most recent national election, compared to 67.2 per cent for the total population (Figure 3).³¹ Gender differences are minimal for African youth: Young men vote about as often as women; only men in older age groups were more likely to vote.³²

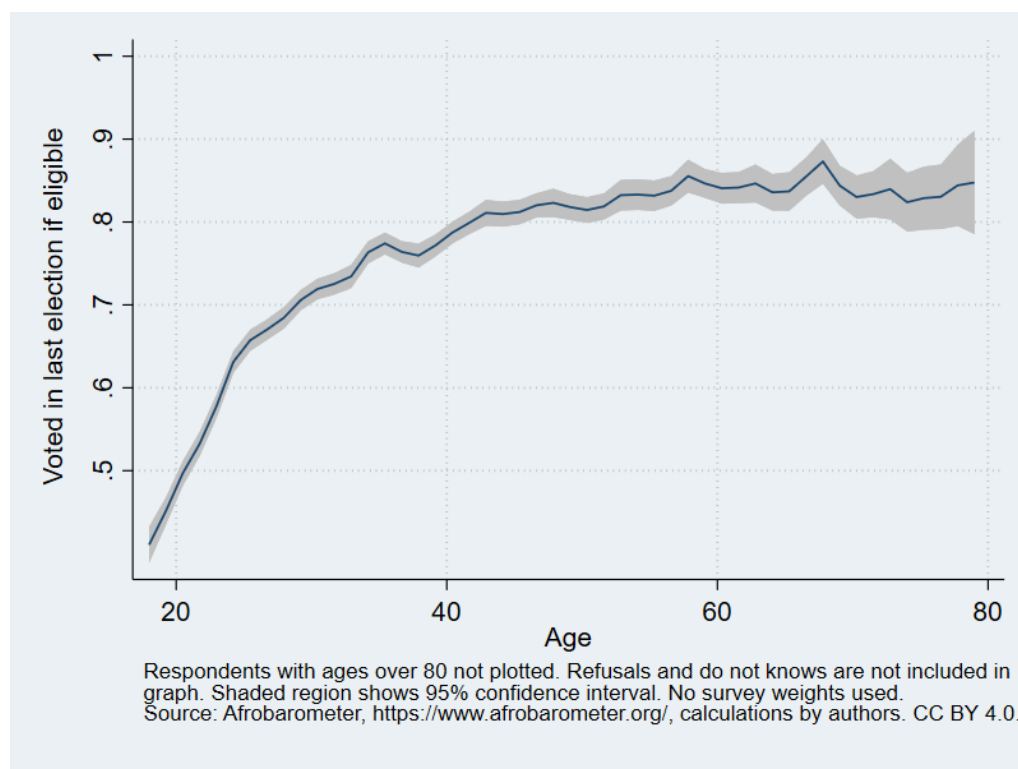


Figure 3: Voting by age, Source: Afrobarometer Round 8 (2019/2020).

Possible explanations for higher youth abstention rates include young people tending to be more sceptical about the fairness of elections than other citizens, being more doubtful that the electoral process can remove incumbent leaders and being less likely to vote the longer the ruling party has been in power.³³ Other reasons may be limited access to information and limited knowledge about politics,³⁴ though other studies find that this holds for African voters regardless of age.³⁵ Low voter turnout among the youth could also be connected to

²⁹ Michelle Kuenzi and Gina M. S. Lambright, "Who Votes in Africa? An Examination of Electoral Participation in 10 African Countries," *Party Politics* 17, no. 6 (2011): 767–99; Resnick and Casale, "Young Populations in Young Democracies: Generational Voting Behaviour in Sub-Saharan Africa"; Elvis Bisong Tambe and Elizaveta Kopacheva, "Age and Political Participation in Africa's Electoral Regimes," *Representation* 60, no. 1 (2024): 97–115.

³⁰ Afrobarometer, Round 8 (2019–2021) Merged Round 8 data (34 countries) (Afrobarometer, 2022), accessed April 24, 2024. <https://www.afrobarometer.org/survey-resource/merged-round-8-data-34-countries-2022/>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Kuenzi and Lambright, "Who Votes in Africa? An Examination of Electoral Participation in 10 African Countries."

³³ Resnick and Casale, "Young Populations in Young Democracies: Generational Voting Behaviour in Sub-Saharan Africa."

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Fredline M'Cormack-Hale and Mavis Zupork Dome, "Support for Elections Weakens among Africans; Many See Them as Ineffective in Holding Leaders Accountable," *Afrobarometer Dispatch*, 2021, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/publications/ad425-support-elections-weakens-among-africans-many-see-them-ineffective-holding-leaders-accountable>.

limited support for democracy³⁶ or their limited interest in joining political parties, which play a key mobilization role.³⁷

Inconclusive findings regarding the role of education and socio-economic status. Survey research widely uses education and socio-economic status as key variables in determining political attitudes and degree of participation, but previous survey results are inconclusive.

On the one hand, in their cross-country analysis of African youth, Resnick and Casale³⁸ did not find a relation between the level of education and voter turnout. On the other hand, country case studies show that a higher education level indeed reduces citizens' willingness to engage politically in electoral autocracies.³⁹ In the case of Zimbabwe, it is argued that education increases political awareness and a critical assessment of government policies. Higher-educated Zimbabweans might, therefore, assume that their participation legitimizes autocrats and does not lead to political change.⁴⁰

Previous studies are also inconclusive regarding the relationship between economic status and African citizens' propensity to vote. Resnick and Casale⁴¹ show that unemployed young Africans are less likely to vote, whereas Tambe and Kopacheva⁴² do not find a significant relationship between income and voting. Without focussing on African youth, Kuenzi and Lambright⁴³ find that poverty is associated with a higher propensity to vote, whereas Tambe⁴⁴ finds that Africans with higher socio-economic status are slightly more likely to vote.

Youth Mobilization, Protests and Other Forms of Collective Action

To what extent do African youth engage in protests and collective action that may contribute to short-term political transitions?

The decline of formal and institutional forms of youth participation contrasts sharply with the importance of informal political engagement.⁴⁵ In particular, over the past two decades, the number of protests in which African youth have played an important role has continuously increased. According to the event database ACLED, the number of protests in Africa rose from only 112 in 2000 to more than 10,500 in 2020, with sharp surges in 2011 and 2019 (Figure 4). This has been described as Africa's "third wave of protest".⁴⁶ Previous protest

³⁶ Elvis Bisong Tambe, "Electoral Participation in African Democracies: The Impact of Individual and Contextual Factors," *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 55, no. 2 (2017): 119–40.

³⁷ Kuenzi and Lambright, "Who Votes in Africa? An Examination of Electoral Participation in 10 African Countries."

³⁸ Resnick and Casale, "Young Populations in Young Democracies: Generational Voting Behaviour in Sub-Saharan Africa."

³⁹ Kevin Croke et al., "Deliberate Disengagement: How Education Can Decrease Political Participation in Electoral Authoritarian Regimes," *American Political Science Review* 110, no. 3 (2016): 579–600.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Resnick and Casale, "Young Populations in Young Democracies: Generational Voting Behaviour in Sub-Saharan Africa."

⁴² Tambe and Kopacheva, "Age and Political Participation in Africa's Electoral Regimes."

⁴³ Michelle Kuenzi and Gina M. S. Lambright, "Who Votes in Africa? An Examination of Electoral Participation in 10 African Countries."

⁴⁴ Tambe, "Electoral Participation in African Democracies: The Impact of Individual and Contextual Factors."

⁴⁵ Richard Banégas, Florence Brisset-Foucault and Armando Cutolo, "Espaces Publics de La Parole et Pratiques de La Citoyenneté En Afrique," *Politique Africaine* 127, no. 3 (2012): 5; Edalina Rodrigues Sanches, *Popular Protest, Political Opportunities, and Change in Africa*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2022).

⁴⁶ Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly, *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015); Zachariah Mampilly, "The Promise of Africa's 'Youth Bulge,'" *Foreign Affairs*, 2021, 1–7.

waves were recorded in the 1950s and 1960s when African nations were fighting for independence, as well as from the 1970s onwards when people were demonstrating against the austerity policies introduced to counter the oil crisis.⁴⁷

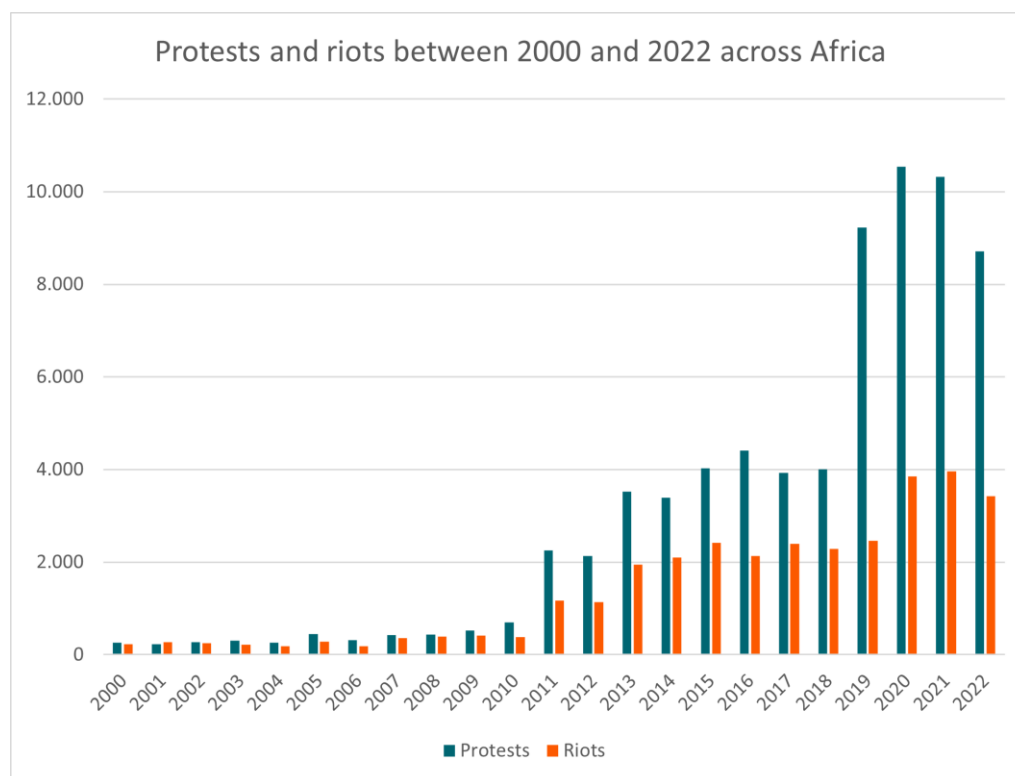


Figure 4: Protests and riots between 2000 and 2022 across Africa, Source: ACLED⁴⁸

This phenomenon is a potential signifier of heightened political awareness, translating into political action as a form of “voice” to engage with politics, government and society.⁴⁹ The implication here is that the (youth) “exit” from political engagement and public life may be less salient than common representations of a disillusioned, apathetic and marginalized youth may suggest. Aptly put, the youth may suffer more from “voting apathy” rather than “political apathy”.⁵⁰ To provide but one telling example, in Uganda some citizens have resorted to “walking” rather than voting as a form of political participation.⁵¹

The contrasting degree of participation between formal and informal politics is often linked to constraints predicated on gender- and age-based hierarchies, which perpetuate gerontocratic power structures.⁵² It is this perception of exclusionary politics and the growing dissatisfaction with the performance of electoral democracies that some authors use to

⁴⁷ Lisa Mueller, “Popular Protest and Accountability,” in *Handbook of Democratization in Africa*, ed. Gabrielle Lynch and Peter VonDoepp (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), 392–403; Branch and Mampilly, *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change*.

⁴⁸ ACLED, “Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED),” 2022, <https://acleddata.com/>, data were downloaded on April 28, 2023.

⁴⁹ Kadya Tall, Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle and Michel Cahen, *Collective Mobilisations in Africa / Mobilisations Collectives En Afrique* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

⁵⁰ Daniel Assamah and Shaoyu Yuan, “Elections in Africa: The Youth Vote and Implications for 2020,” Columbia SPIA: Comment, 2020, <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/news/elections-africa-youth-vote-and-implications-2020>.

⁵¹ Michael Mutyaba, “From Voting to Walking: The 2011 Walk-to-Work Protest Movement in Uganda,” *Popular Protest, Political Opportunities, and Change in Africa*, no. April 2011 (2022): 163–80.

⁵² Ibrahim Bangura, *Youth-Led Social Movements and Peacebuilding in Africa* (Oxon: Routledge, 2022).

explain the youth's propensity for "developing alternative sites for social and political intervention beyond party politics and within civil society organisations".⁵³ However, it is doubtful that this reflects a causal mechanism. Does marginalization lead to political mobilization in order to contest prevailing power structures or, on the contrary, to retreat? As Oinas Onoder and Suurpää⁵⁴ have argued, "the frequency of public protest can indicate declining trust in public institutions. It may also be so that a paucity of civic engagement and demonstrations signals that faith in the state has been lost."

Tertiary education has an ambiguous effect on youth engagement in collective action. Education and, in particular, tertiary education can have ambiguous effects on the willingness of youth to engage in collective action. Traditionally, tertiary education has been assumed to contribute to young peoples' support of democratization processes and to increase the opportunity costs of being mobilized for violent conflict. However, recent empirical evidence suggests that tertiary education reduces the risk of armed conflict but increases the impact of a youth bulge on terrorism, rioting and violent demonstrations.⁵⁵ Recent studies also find that a higher level of tertiary education does not lead to higher levels of support for democracy but to the expression of dissatisfaction with the political system. Indeed, in some countries, higher levels of tertiary education are associated with increased government instability and internal conflict.⁵⁶

⁵³ Honwana, "‘Enough Is Enough!’: Youth Protests and Political Change in Africa"; Ruchi Chaturvedi, "Agentive Capacities, Democratic Possibilities, and the Urban Poor: Rethinking Recent Popular Protests in West Africa," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 29, no. 3 (2016): 307–25; Abubakar Momoh, "Youth Culture and Area Boys in Lagos," in *Identity Transformation and Identity Politics under Structural Adjustment in Nigeria*, ed. Attahiru Jega (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute Uppsala. Kano. Centre for Research and Documentation, 2000), 181–203.

⁵⁴ Elina Oinas, Hensry Onodera and Leena Suurpää, "Evasive Youth, Oblique Politics," in *What Politics? Youth in a Globalizing World* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

⁵⁵ Henrik Urdal, "A Clash of Generations? Youth Bulges and Political Violence," *International Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (2006): 607–29.

⁵⁶ Nasser Al-Jabri et al., "The Role of Youth Bulge on Political Instability: Cross-Country Evidence," *Economic Analysis and Policy* 76 (2022): 1053–74.

Box 1: Seeking Opportunities Abroad – Youth, Migration and Politics

Migration is a relevant megatrend connecting Africa's youth, urbanization and politics. In some countries, for example Sierra Leone, more than half of the young people consider international migration.⁵⁷ Migration aspirations fall almost linearly with age. Hence, in large young populations, there is, on average, more migration.⁵⁸

Migrants typically first seek local opportunities elsewhere in the country, creating more urbanization. International migration becomes particularly prevalent in countries with insecurity, bad governance, low-growth environments, unemployment and poor amenities,⁵⁹ which are factors that are often related to authoritarianism.

The relation between migration and politics is twofold: Firstly, emigration has long been seen as a pressure valve. Individuals who are discontent with domestic politics can remain docile and appear loyal, voice concerns – peacefully or violently – or exit, that is, emigrate.⁶⁰ Authoritarian regimes, at times, also encourage critical voices to migrate.

Secondly, diasporas can exert considerable pressure from the outside to press for political change.⁶¹ The transferring of values and norms, often termed “social remittances”, can create institutional change, thereby facilitating democratization and decreasing levels of corruption.⁶² The values picked up by migrants and transmitted to their countries of origin depend on the environment in which migrants find themselves. Social remittances thus have a long tradition of being used, for example by China, which offers thousands of stipends to students every year. Compared to migrants moving to Western democracies, we can expect that African students migrating to China who have a positive impression of the Chinese development model will be less likely to press for democratization in their origin countries.⁶³

Politics can quickly change migration dynamics. The Gambia is an instructive case: For a long time, the country has had the highest emigration rate per capita in West Africa and such a large number of migrants attempting to cross into the European Union (EU) that – despite its population of only about 2 million – the country became a focal point of attention for EU member states' returns policies of failed asylum seekers. When the long-term dictator Yahya Jammeh was replaced in an election in 2016 and finally left office under pressure from ECOWAS, the number of irregular migrants fell sharply. This is likely a combination of better prospects for opportunities at home, fewer chances of obtaining asylum in Europe and changes in migration politics.⁶⁴ Nowadays, the youth would rather pursue migration to neighbouring Senegal than attempt irregular migrations to Europe.⁶⁵ Still, politicians have to navigate the interests of the diaspora and their families carefully, for example when it comes to the country's relationship with the EU, which, on the one hand, aims to foster young democracy and, on the other, is interested in returning migrants to The Gambia.

⁵⁷ Josephine Appiah-Nyameky Sanye, Carolyn Logan and E. Gyimah-Boadi, “In Search of Opportunity: Young and Educated Africans Most Likely to Consider Moving Abroad,” *Afrobarometer Dispatch*, vol. 288 (2019).

⁵⁸ Tobias Heidland et al., “Analyse und Prognose von Migrations- Bewegungen” (Kiel, 2021).

⁵⁹ Christian Dustmann and Anna Okatenko, “Out-Migration, Wealth Constraints, and the Quality of Local Amenities,” *Journal of Development Economics* 110 (2014): 52–63; Heidland et al., “Analyse und Prognose von Migrations- Bewegungen.”

⁶⁰ Albert O. Hirschman, “Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations and States,” 1970.

Interim Conclusion

How does Africa's youth reshape political life on the continent? There is no clear-cut answer to this question, as youthful engagement with politics and society is complex, variegated and far from uniform. That is not surprising given the diversity of young populations within and across societies and the diversity of political realities they encounter. What seems to be relatively well-established is the dissatisfaction of the youth with the prevailing political order, including its failure to provide socio-economic benefits, which leads some to migrate, some to disengage from formal political participation, and others to engage in protests and social movements as a form of contestation. Research on political attitudes has identified age as a key variable for political participation and behaviour in Africa. Similar to other regions, the level of support for democracy in Africa is lower among youth, and they are less likely to vote or engage in other formal democratic processes.

What the short- and long-term effects are of youth attitudes and behaviour on African democracy is a different question that goes beyond this paper. Several authors bemoan that the youth may have been instrumental in organizing social protests but that these did not usher in political change, nor did the youth gain sustained political influence in formal decision-making processes.⁶⁶ Instead, numerous studies have shown how youth protests – expressions of their yearning for a new social and moral order – end up as (violent) tools of political entrepreneurs.⁶⁷ Frequently, these youths have defended chauvinistic and ethnic interests.⁶⁸ That is not to say that youth-driven political change is not possible. Social movements and protests in Senegal (Y'en a marre), Burkina Faso (le Balai citoyen), South Africa (Rhodes Must Fall) and Nigeria (#endSARS) represent striking examples of how youth activism may help to hold political authorities accountable.⁶⁹ Moreover, the focus on outcomes may obfuscate gradual and underlying changes.⁷⁰ The extant research also strongly suggests that context and history matter greatly in explaining the impact of youthful agency.⁷¹

⁶¹ Yossi Shain and Aharon Barth, "Diasporas and International Relations Theory," *International Organization* 57, no. 3 (2003): 449–79.

⁶² Toman Barsbai et al., "The Effect of Labor Migration on the Diffusion of Democracy: Evidence from a Former Soviet Republic," *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 9, no. 3 (2017): 36–69; Lisa Sofie Höckel, Manuel Santos Silva and Tobias Stöhr, "Can Parental Migration Reduce Petty Corruption in Education?," *World Bank Economic Review* 32, no. 1 (2018): 109–26.

⁶³ Axel Dreher and Shu Yu, "The Alma Mater Effect: Does Foreign Education of Political Leaders Influence UNGA Voting?," *Public Choice* 185, nos. 1–2 (2020): 45–64; Antonio Spilimbergo, "Democracy and Foreign Education," *American Economic Review* 99, no. 1 (2009): 528–43.

⁶⁴ Omar N. Cham and Ilke Adam, "The Politicization and Framing of Migration in West Africa: Transition to Democracy as a Game Changer?," *Territory, Politics, Governance* (2021): 1–20.

⁶⁵ Tijan L. Bah et al., "Can Information and Alternatives to Irregular Migration Reduce 'Backway' Migration from the Gambia?," World Bank Policy Research Working Papers, 2022.

⁶⁶ Anna Naa Adochoo Mensah, "The Heroes of Burkina Faso's 2014 Revolution and the Mirage of Hope," in *Youth-Led Social Movements and Peacebuilding in Africa*, ed. Ibrahim Bangura (London: Routledge, 2019), 101–13; Sen Saatchi, "Embracing Change: Young People and Social Movements in Post-Arab Spring Tunisia," in *Youth-Led Social Movements and Peacebuilding in Africa*, ed. Ibrahim Bangura (London: Routledge, 2019), 217–32.

⁶⁷ Peter Mwangi Kagwanja, "Clash of Generations? Youth Identity, Violence and the Politics of Transition in Kenya, 1997–2002," in *Vanguard or Vandals: Youth, Politics and Conflict in Africa*, ed. Jon Abbink and Ineke van Kessel (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 81–109; George M. Bob-Milliar, "Party Youth Activists and Low-Intensity Electoral Violence in Ghana: A Qualitative Study of Party Foot Soldiers' Activism," *African Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (2014): 125–52; Kate Meagher, "Hijacking Civil Society: The Inside Story of the Bakassi Boys Vigilante Group of South-Eastern Nigeria," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 45, no. 1 (2007): 89–115.

⁶⁸ Adam Branch Zachariah Mampilly, *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).

⁶⁹ Mueller, "Popular Protest and Accountability."

⁷⁰ Branch and Mampilly, *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change*.

⁷¹ Oinas, Onodera and Suurpää, "Evasive Youth, Oblique Politics," 1–20.

Urbanization and African Politics

Africa has the fastest urbanization rate of any continent in the world. Urbanization was responsible for almost a third of annual gross domestic product growth per capita across Africa between 2001 and 2020.⁷² At the same time, urban economies have grown slowly since 1990, and the share of skilled jobs in cities or ownership rates of durable consumer goods have remained constant or increased minimally.⁷³ Put differently, urbanization is characterized by two different trends: First, as urbanization has increased, so has the number of the urban-based poor; second, African middle classes and the richest people mostly reside in cities. As a result, inequality is particularly high in cities. Much urbanization happens without job creation and instead reinforces existing inequalities rather than reduces them. Cities attract not only elites and wealthier citizens, they are also inhabited by those who have left the countryside in search of economic opportunities. More than half of all urban dwellers in sub-Saharan Africa live in informal settlements without adequate access to basic services.⁷⁴ On average, however, urbanites' socio-economic status is much better than that of their rural counterparts. Urbanites earn more per hour and work in more high-skilled jobs.⁷⁵ Whereas in the countryside, up to 60 per cent of the population work in agriculture or fishing, the urbanites work more often as hawkers, manual labourers, mid-level and upper-level professionals, or in sales.⁷⁶

What are the implications of these trends for African politics? Do urban dwellers hold different political attitudes than their rural counterparts? How do the urban poor and the urban middle class relate to politics? The remainder of this section reviews evidence on how urbanization affects political attitudes, participation and collective action.

Urbanites, Their Political Attitudes and Participation

What are the political attitudes of Africa's urban citizens, and to what extent do they participate in formal democratic institutions and processes?

Urbanities' level of support for democracy does not differ much from that of rural citizens. Afrobarometer data shows that differences pertaining to attitudes towards democracy between rural and urban areas are rather small on average. Support levels for democracy are even slightly lower among urbanites than rural citizens (Figure 5).

⁷² OECD, UN ECA and AfDB, *Africa's Urbanisation Dynamics 2022*, 43.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷⁴ World Bank, "World Development Indicators: Population Living in Slums (% of Urban Population) – Sub-Saharan Africa" (The World Bank, 2022), <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.POP.SLUM.UR.ZS?locations=ZG>.

⁷⁵ OECD, UN ECA and AfDB, *Africa's Urbanisation Dynamics 2022*, 12.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

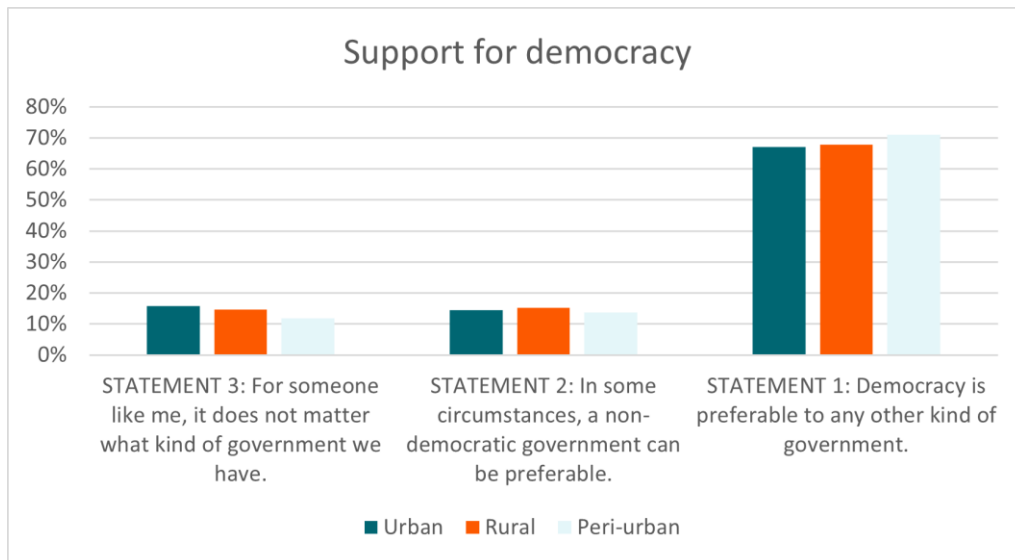


Figure 5: Support for democracy, all countries, Source: Afrobarometer Round 8 (2019/2020)

A clear difference is observed concerning approval for one-party rule: The share of urbanites who “strongly disapprove” of one-party rule is five percentage points higher than in the countryside.⁷⁷ This is in line with the observation that opposition parties tend to be more successful in cities than in the countryside.⁷⁸

Overall, urbanites tend to be much more critical of the performance of their governments and the state of democracy in their countries. They also have less trust in institutions. For instance, even though access to public services is better in cities than in rural areas, urbanites are not more satisfied with their living conditions but rather less.⁷⁹ The level of support for incumbents is higher in rural areas across Africa, which can be attributed to political incentives to favour the rural majority’s interests.⁸⁰ This dynamic might be reverse once urban areas begin to host most of a country’s population.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Dominika Koter, “Urban and Rural Voting Patterns in Senegal: The Spatial Aspects of Incumbency, c. 1978–2012,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 51, no. 4 (2013): 653–79; Danielle Resnick, “Opposition Parties and the Urban Poor in African Democracies,” *Comparative Political Studies* 45, no. 11 (2012): 1351–78; Gina M. S. Lambright, “Opposition Politics and Urban Service Delivery in Kampala, Uganda,” *Development Policy Review* 32, no. SUPPL1 (2014): 39–60.

⁷⁹ Afrobarometer, Round 8 (2019–2021) Merged Round 8 data (34 countries) (Afrobarometer, 2022), accessed April 24, 2024. <https://www.afrobarometer.org/survey-resource/merged-round-8-data-34-countries-2022/>.

⁸⁰ Robin Harding, “Urban-Rural Differences in Support for Incumbents Across Africa,” Afrobarometer Working Paper, 2010, <https://www.ptonline.com/articles/how-to-get-better-mfi-results>.

Box 2: Women in African Cities

There is no discernible difference between female and male voting behaviour, overall satisfaction with democracy and participation in protests. However, African female urbanites support democracy less, and they join community meetings less often. This gender gap is not unique to urban areas but is equally observable in rural populations.⁸¹ Possible explanations for women's lower levels of attendance in community groups could be patriarchal norms or obligations for carework, even though women in cities have fewer children and have to take care of fewer dependent household members than their rural counterparts.⁸² Overall, women benefit from structural opportunities in the cities, as reflected in the smaller gender gap regarding education.⁸³ They work more often in skilled jobs than their rural counterparts, even if the gender gap is still significant (50% men vs 25% women).⁸⁴ There are large regional disparities, though, with much fewer women in the workforce in Northern Africa than in sub-Saharan Africa.⁸⁵ At the same time, female-headed households in urban areas are poorer than male-headed ones, and women disproportionately work in the informal sector.⁸⁶

Urbanites' critical attitudes do not translate into more political participation. Urban citizens are less likely to attend a campaign rally and significantly less likely to attend community meetings compared to rural citizens. They are less likely to join a political party and were less likely to have voted in the most recent national elections (62% urban vs 72% rural voters). These numbers are counterintuitive, as analysts often assume that the young and educated urban population will participate more in politics, demand government accountability and push for programmatic politics.⁸⁷ At the same time, some researchers have argued that African citizens living in rural areas are more likely to vote because vote-buying is more common in rural areas.⁸⁸ Moreover, partisanship is stronger in rural areas, and ruling parties mobilize voters more easily in rural areas.⁸⁹

Urban middle-class voters are not challenging the status quo. Studies suggest that urban middle-class voters are disillusioned with their lack of influence and are instead turning to the private sector or relying on clientelism instead of demanding programmatic politics and accountability from incumbent regimes.⁹⁰ For instance, Resnick shows in her

⁸¹ Afrobarometer, Round 8 (2019–2021) Merged Round 8 data (34 countries) (Afrobarometer, 2022), accessed April 24, 2024. <https://www.afrobarometer.org/survey-resource/merged-round-8-data-34-countries-2022/>.

⁸² OECD, UN ECA and AfDB, *Africa's Urbanisation Dynamics 2022*, 19.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁸⁶ Amlaksetegn Zenebe Ede'oo, Jibril Haji Ketebo and Badassa Wolteji Chala, "Feminization of Multidimensional Urban Poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa," *African Development Review* 32 (2020): 632–44; Cecilia Tacoli, "Urbanization, Gender and Urban Poverty: Paid Work and Unpaid Carework in the City" (London: International Institute for Environment and Development, IIED, 2012).

⁸⁷ Amaka Anku and Tochi Eni-Kalu, "Africa's Slums Aren't Harbingers of Anarchy—They're Engines of Democracy: The Upside of Rapid Urbanization," *Foreign Affairs*, December 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/africa/africas-slums-arent-harbingers-anarchy-theyre-engines-democracy>.

⁸⁸ Kuenzi and Lambright, "Who Votes in Africa? An Examination of Electoral Participation in 10 African Countries"; Resnick and Casale, "Young Populations in Young Democracies: Generational Voting Behaviour in Sub-Saharan Africa."

⁸⁹ Kuenzi and Lambright, "Who Votes in Africa? An Examination of Electoral Participation in 10 African Countries"; Resnick and Casale, "Young Populations in Young Democracies: Generational Voting Behaviour in Sub-Saharan Africa"; Robin Harding and Kristin Michelitch, "Candidate Coethnicity, Rural/Urban Divides, and Partisanship in Africa," *Party Politics* 27, no. 4 (2021): 791–802.

⁹⁰ Noah L. Nathan, *Electoral Politics and Africa's Urban Transition: Class and Ethnicity in Ghana* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Antoinette Handley, "Varieties of Capitalists? The Middle-Class, Private Sector

research on Zambia that the middle class is particularly distrustful of political institutions but does not participate more in politics by voting or joining demonstrations. She argues that the more significant divide is between wealthier individuals and the rest.⁹¹ As the powerful are usually found within the top decile of the income pyramid, the urban middle class does not necessarily have the political power to effect changes,⁹² even if they want to. Furthermore, Nathan⁹³ contends that ethnically homogenous neighbourhoods in urban areas are easy targets for clientelism, as politicians target them for private or club goods and create an expectation of favouritism. The result is that citizens vote along ethnic lines, despite their urban middle-class status. Only neighbourhoods that have high socio-economic status AND are ethnically mixed display a low propensity to vote along ethnic lines. Hence, the modernization theorists' expectation that cities facilitate contact between people who are not part of the same social grouping (e.g. ethnic or religious group) or have the same socio-economic background⁹⁴ has not been confirmed in Africa.

The skewed wealth distribution is key to understanding political participation. Sub-Saharan Africa's cities are among the most unequal worldwide.⁹⁵ South African cities, reach a Gini index of 60 and above, and several other African cities, such as Kigali (Rwanda) and Blantyre (Malawi), reach values above 50.⁹⁶ There is evidence that high inequality could be detrimental to democratic development. The demand for democracy is lower among people who feel relatively worse off or better off than others.⁹⁷ Thus, inequality seems to lessen the demand for democracy.⁹⁸ This is in line with the finding that commercial elites, for the most part, do not have any incentives to challenge the status quo, as they depend on the cronyism of incumbent regimes.⁹⁹

Cities and Collective Action

Cities are known to facilitate collective action. According to Afrobarometer, participation levels in demonstrations and protest marches are slightly higher in urban areas than in rural areas. Among those who did not have the chance to participate in such an event, more urbanites declared their willingness to do so. This is due to the critical mass of people coming together in cities as well as lower transport, communication and organizational costs.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, the presence of elites and educated leaders also contributes to

and Economic Outcomes in Africa," *Journal of International Development* 27 (2015): 609–27; Dominic Burbidge, "Can Someone Get Me Outta This Middle Class Zone?! Pressures on Middle Class Kikuyu in Kenya's 2013 Election," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 52, no. 2 (2014): 205–25.

⁹¹ Danielle Resnick, "Varieties of African Populism in Comparative Perspective," *The Promise and Perils of Populism: Global Perspectives*, 2015, 317–48.

⁹² Henning Melber, "The African Middle Class(es)—in the Middle of What?," *Review of African Political Economy* 44, no. 151 (2017): 142–54.

⁹³ Nathan, *Electoral Politics and Africa's Urban Transition: Class and Ethnicity in Ghana*.

⁹⁴ Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (1959): 69–105.

⁹⁵ OECD, UN ECA and AfDB, *Africa's Urbanisation Dynamics 2022*, 24.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁹⁷ Thomas Isbell, "Only Game in Town? Inequality and Demand for Democracy in Africa – a Micro Perspective," Afrobarometer Working Paper, 2022.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Richard P. Cincotta, "Half a Chance: Youth Bulges and Transitions to Liberal Democracy," *Environmental Change and Security Program (ECSP)*, no. 13 (2009): 10–18, <http://www.poline.org/node/207725>; Antoinette Handley, "Constructive Contestation: Reassessing the State–Business Relationship," *Focus* 58 (2010): 36–43.

¹⁰⁰ Glaeser and Steinberg, "Transforming Cities: Does Urbanization Promote Democratic Change?"

social mobilization. For instance, cities host large numbers of formal civil society organizations, of which some are active in lobbying and advocacy and might form issue-based coalitions or join forces with social movements.¹⁰¹

The current “third wave of protests”¹⁰² (see also Section 3.2) is often described as being driven by young urbanites. While protest organizers are predominantly urban middle class, they use their resources to mobilize the poor around popular grievances over service delivery and jobs.¹⁰³ However, our data cautions against interpreting protests exclusively as an urban phenomenon. Urban protests might receive more media attention than rural protests and might therefore be more visible.

At the same time, protestors do not necessarily support democracy more than non-protesters.¹⁰⁴ The reasons for joining protests are diverse, and protesters can also be supporters of autocratic rulers.¹⁰⁵ Branch and Mampilly¹⁰⁶ argue that protests characterized by significant participation of the urban poor might be without a clear agenda, leaderless and sometimes violent.

Box 3: Cities as Opposition Strongholds and What Governments Do About It

Incumbent governments often have ambivalent relations with urban populations, as towns and cities in Africa are known to be opposition strongholds.¹ In several countries, ruling parties have relied on land redistribution as a legitimization strategy, supporting major rural constituencies.¹ As a result, ruling parties often have their support base in rural areas, whereas the opposition focusses on major cities.¹ In addition, as opposition parties typically have fewer resources for campaigning than the ruling party, they focus on urban areas, which are more densely populated.¹ In situations in which the opposition controls municipal authorities (vertically divided authority), incumbent regimes have used several tactics to curb the local opposition’s influence in urban areas: delaying elections, withholding transfers, reducing the size of the mayor’s territorial mandate or even replacing elected municipal bodies with institutions that are appointed by the federal level.¹ For instance, this recentralization happened in Kampala in 2010 when the Kampala Capital City Act was passed, which instituted the Kampala Capital City Authority. This central government agency is now in charge of most of the city’s affairs, taking away power from a popular elected council and mayor.¹

Whether (urban) protests lead to more democratic accountability or even regime change is a different question. Uprisings in large cities – and particularly in capital cities – tend to be more effective because of the proximity of the protests to elites and decision-makers.¹⁰⁷ A statistical analysis including 435 non-democratic regimes in more than 100 countries shows that larger cities and higher levels of urban concentration negatively affect regime survival,

¹⁰¹ There is a broad range of civil society organizations and their involvement in contentious politics varies quite dramatically. Informal sector associations are, for instance, known for engaging in protest activities, while donor-funded organizations are less so. See also L. Gutheil, “The Impact of Urbanisation on Political Regimes in Africa: A Literature Review,” Megatrends Afrika Working Paper No. 3, December 2022.

¹⁰² Mueller, “Popular Protest and Accountability.”

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Glaeser and Steinberg, “Transforming Cities: Does Urbanization Promote Democratic Change?”

¹⁰⁶ Branch and Mampilly, *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change*.

¹⁰⁷ Jeremy L. Wallace, *Cities and Stability: Urbanization, Redistribution and Regime Survival in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Glaeser and Steinberg, “Transforming Cities: Does Urbanization Promote Democratic Change?”

suggesting that protests are indeed effective.¹⁰⁸ However, this finding seems to only be valid for non-democratic regimes; studies that included democratic regimes did not corroborate this effect.¹⁰⁹ One possible explanation would be that citizens in democratic regimes find other ways than protest to express their grievances.

Interim Conclusion

Urbanites are on average younger, better educated and more critical vis-à-vis government authorities than their rural counterparts. Middle-class as well as poor urbanites use their voices to demand better living conditions and employment opportunities by taking to the streets. The electoral success of opposition parties in cities reflects urbanites' critical attitudes and could be interpreted as a sign that urban voters are more inclined to vote for programmatic politics. At the same time, programmatic appeals to urban voters are increasingly framed in a populist manner, addressing the urban poor. Ethnic voting and patronage politics continue to dominate urban politics, irrespective of urbanites' socio-economic status. However, analyses of neighbourhood-level voting have shown that middle-class neighbourhoods that are ethnically diverse have the greatest potential to engage less in ethnic voting behaviour and clientelism.

Overall, urbanites are not bigger proponents of democracy than their rural counterparts. Both the middle class and the urban poor seem to be disenchanted with democracy due to the poor performance and responsiveness of political regimes. While urbanites are more likely to engage in non-institutionalized forms of political participation, such as protests, to express their grievances, the democratizing potential of these protests is not given. Digital communication tools play an important role as mobilizers in this regard (see Section 5).

At the same time, hybrid or autocratic regimes increasingly restrict civic space (online and offline) and use coercive means to suppress protests. The variety of tactics to curb the opposition's influence in African cities further attests to the fact that incumbent regimes will not easily relinquish their privileges. Thus, it is certain that the future of politics in Africa will, in one way or another, be shaped by how regimes manage urban populations.

¹⁰⁸ Wallace, *Cities and Stability: Urbanization, Redistribution and Regime Survival in China*.

¹⁰⁹ Glaeser and Steinberg, "Transforming Cities: Does Urbanization Promote Democratic Change?"

Social Media and African Politics

Digitalization and digitization are two terms that are closely related and often used interchangeably.¹¹⁰ Brennen and Kreis define digitization as the transfer of information and digitalization as the transformation process caused by digitization and the impact it has on society. Digitalization comes in many different forms and concerns almost all areas of life. In this section, we focus on social media and explore the relationships between social media and African politics. African citizens increasingly rely on Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Telegram to stay informed about political news (Figure 6). According to Afrobarometer data, the percentage of people using social media to stay informed about political news has tripled between 2014 and 2022, from about 10 to around 30 per cent, while the percentage of people who never access social media has dropped from 70 to 50 per cent. The level of education and the economic conditions thereby clearly matter. According to Afrobarometer,¹¹¹ Africans with higher education levels and who have not experienced poverty are considerably more likely to use social media daily. Young African men are slightly more likely to access social media than women, but these gender differences are minimal.

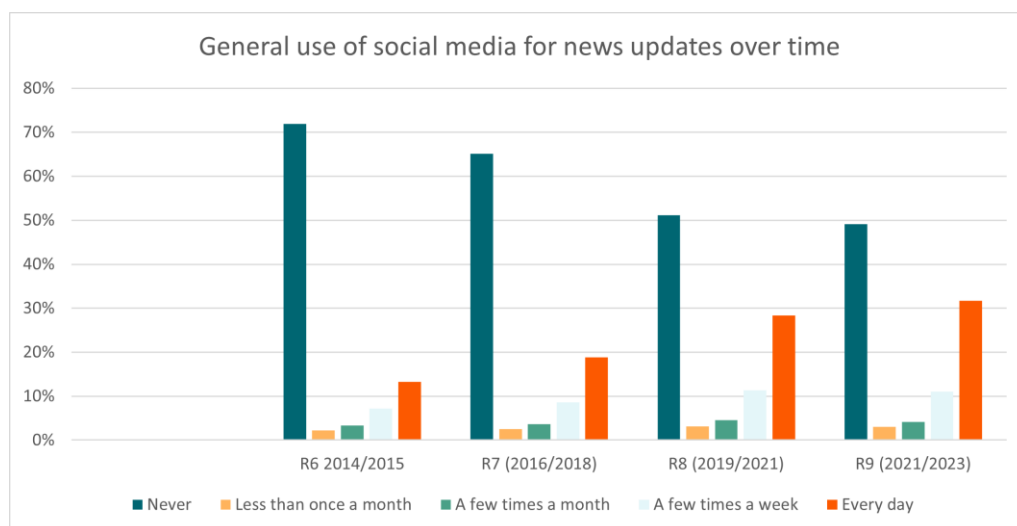


Figure 6: General use of social media for news updates over time, Source: Afrobarometer Round 8 (2019/2020).

At the same time, recent statistics indicate that, on average, only about 34 per cent of African residents have internet access.¹¹² In nine countries on the continent, the percentage of the population with internet access is below 10 per cent. Internet access is more widespread in cities compared to rural areas. Where internet access is available, other variables such as digital literacy, general literacy, as well as the cost of access/purchasing data¹¹³ are crucial in determining how much citizens use digital platforms. The Global System of Mobile

¹¹⁰ Scott J. Brennen and Daniel Kreis, "Digitalization," in *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022), 383–99.

¹¹¹ Afrobarometer, Round 8 (2019-2021) Merged Round 8 data (34 countries) (Afrobarometer, 2022), accessed April 24, 2024. <https://www.afrobarometer.org/survey-resource/merged-round-8-data-34-countries-2022/>.

¹¹² World Bank, "Individuals Using the Internet (% of Population)," dataset, 2023, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?locations=ET%2F&year=2022>.

¹¹³ International Telecommunication Union, "The Affordability of ICT Services 2022," ITU Policy Brief, 2023.

Communications (GSMA) estimates that about 515 million unique mobile subscribers were registered in Africa in 2021, half of which (252 million) owned a smartphone.¹¹⁴

Considering these issues as a given, this section explores to what extent and in which ways social media (1) affects access to information, influences political attitudes and promotes political participation; and (2) how social media influences collective action.

Social Media, Political Attitudes and Participation

The effects of the spread of social media on democracy continue to be controversially debated.¹¹⁵ Social media usage can have positive effects on democracy, as it provides spaces for engagement and access to information. Individuals make “microdonations of time and effort” in social and political participation by reading, commenting, liking and engaging in political discourse.¹¹⁶ Meta-analyses of research on social media use and political participation suggest a positive relationship, even though it remains open as to whether the relationship is causal.¹¹⁷ Through social media engagement, individuals increase their consumption of political news and might be better informed.¹¹⁸ At the same time, evidence of social media and political disinformation, especially in campaigning and political communication, is well established, including in Africa. Using the example of Kenya, Mungai shows that through disinformation, individuals develop apathy towards political systems and are less likely to be politically motivated to participate.¹¹⁹

Mixed findings regarding the role of social media in shaping political attitudes. A study of 185 countries shows a strong and positive correlation between the usage of Facebook and the proliferation of democratic values, especially in low-income countries.¹²⁰ Hassan notes¹²¹ a significant positive effect of social media (as sources of political news) on support for democracy but no effect of traditional media (e.g. television and newspapers).

However, social media can also adversely affect political attitudes and democracy more generally. Internet use is associated with undermining African citizens’ preferences for democracy and modifying perceptions of political institutions.¹²² Individuals can intensify

¹¹⁴ GSMA, “The Mobile Economy Sub-Saharan Africa 2022” (London, 2022).

¹¹⁵ Nathaniel Persily and Joshua A. Tucker, *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field and Prospects for Reform* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

¹¹⁶ Helen Margetts, Scott Hale and Peter John, “Political Turbulence: How Social Media Shapes Political Participation and the Democratic Landscape,” in *Society and the Internet: How Networks of Information and Communication Are Changing Our Lives*, ed. Mark Graham, William H. Dutton and Manuel Castells, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2019), 197–211.

¹¹⁷ Shelley Boulianne, “Social Media Use and Participation: A Meta-Analysis of Current Research,” *Information Communication and Society* 18, no. 5 (2015): 524–38.

¹¹⁸ Robert M. Bond et al., “A 61-Million-Person Experiment in Social Influence and Political Mobilization,” *Nature* 489, no. 7415 (2012): 295–98; Silvia Majo-Vazquez and Sandra González-Bailón, “Digital News and the Consumption of Political Information,” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2019; Ekaterina Zhuravskaya, Maria Petrova and Ruben Enikolopov, “Political Effects of the Internet and Social Media,” *Annual Review of Economics* 12 (2020): 415–38; Martin N. Ndlela and Winston Mano, *Social Media and Elections in Africa, Volume 2: Challenges and Opportunities*, ed. Martin N. Ndlela and Winston Mano, vol. 2 (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Martin N. Ndlela, “Young People, Social Media, and Political Participation. The Limits of Discursive (In)Civility in the Kenyan Context,” in *Social Media and Elections in Africa, Volume 2: Challenges and Opportunities*; Persily and Tucker, *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field and Prospects for Reform*.

¹¹⁹ Christine Mungai, “Disinformation, Mudslinging Induce Voter Apathy in Kenyan Youth,” *Al Jazeera*, July 1, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/7/1/apathy-and-disinformation-turn-agile-kenyan-youths-to-aloofo-voter>.

¹²⁰ Chandan Kuma Jha and Oasis Kodila-Tedika, “Does Social Media Promote Democracy? Some Empirical Evidence,” *Journal of Policy Modeling* 42, no. 2 (2020): 271–90.

¹²¹ Mazen Hassan, Elizabeth Kendall and Stephen Whitefield, “Media, Cultural Consumption and Support for Democracy in Post-Revolutionary Egypt,” *Political Studies* 64, no. 3 (2016): 534–51.

¹²² Joël Cariolle, Yasmine Elkhateeb, and Mathilde Maurel, “(Mis-) Information Technology: Internet Use and Perception of Democracy in Africa,” FERDI Working Paper No. 303, 2022.

already-held beliefs and, therefore, end up in echo-chambers of narrowly held positions, which might lead to more polarization and extremism.¹²³

Social media plays a key role during election campaigns and can promote youth participation. Scholars have studied how social media facilitates political participation in Africa. Over the past decade, social media has emerged as a communication platform used by political parties and their candidates for sharing campaign messages and by citizens to obtain political information, engage in discussions and for activism. Through digital social networking, peoples' level of participation likely increases when that of their social networks increases.¹²⁴

In election campaigns, social media has become a mainstay.¹²⁵ An increase in the utilization of digital platforms has been observed in almost every recent election in Africa.¹²⁶ If we can argue that social media provides an "ear in the crowd", then we can suggest that it is in the politicians' interest to learn and maximize the potential of social media in listening and responding to the electorate. Therefore, the correlation between social media penetration and democracy becomes even stronger.¹²⁷

Studies have revealed that social media can promote youth participation in elections. For instance, in both Nigeria and Kenya, social networking was positively associated with political participation (e.g. attending campaign events) among the youth.¹²⁸ At the same time, digital illiteracy may mitigate political participation.¹²⁹ In addition, social media expands the platform for political communication, which would otherwise not be available to citizens.¹³⁰ In countries where access to news and other information is highly controlled (often by incumbent governments), social media thereby offers access.

On the other hand, social media is able to not only enhance democracy but also encourage misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories. Autocratizing governments are among those governments that most strongly rely on disinformation.¹³¹ On the other

¹²³ Ro'ee Levy, "Social Media, News Consumption, and Polarization: Evidence from a Field Experiment," *American Economic Review* 111, no. 3 (2021): 831–70; Majo-Vazquez and González-Bailón, "Digital News and the Consumption of Political Information"; Zhuravskaya et al., "Political Effects of the Internet and Social Media."

¹²⁴ Bond et al., "A 61-Million-Person Experiment in Social Influence and Political Mobilization."

¹²⁵ Ndlela and Mano, *Social Media and Elections in Africa, Volume 2: Challenges and Opportunities*; Ndlela, "Young People, Social Media, and Political Participation. The Limits of Discursive (In)Civility in the Kenyan Context"; Maggie Dwyer and Thomas Molony, *Social Media and Politics in Africa: Democracy, Censorship and Security* (Zed Books, 2019); Mathias Kamp, *Assessing the Impact of Social Media on Political Communication and Civic Engagement in Uganda* (Kampala: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2016).

¹²⁶ Ndlela and Mano, *Social Media and Elections in Africa, Volume 2: Challenges and Opportunities*; Martin N. Ndlela and Winston Mano, *Social Media and Elections in Africa, Volume 1: Theoretical Perspectives and Election Campaigns*, vol. 1 (Palgrave Macmillan Ltd., 2020); Bello Shehu Bello, Isa Inuwa-Dutse and Reiko Heckel, "Social Media Campaign Strategies: Analysis of the 2019 Nigerian Elections," *2019 6th International Conference on Social Networks Analysis, Management and Security, SNAMS 2019*, 2019, 142–49; Payidamoyo Nyoka and Mary Tembo, "Dimensions of Democracy and Digital Political Activism on Hopewell Chin'ono and Jacob Ngarivhume Twitter Accounts towards the July 31st Demonstrations in Zimbabwe," *Cogent Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (2022); Tunde Opeibi, "The Twittersphere as Political Engagement Space: A Study of Social Media Usage in Election Campaigns in Nigeria," *Digital Studies/ Le Champ Numerique* 9, no. 1 (2019): 1–32.

¹²⁷ Agreement L. Jotia, "The Role of Social Media in Freeing Botswana from State Control of the Media," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 36, no. 2 (2018): 264–78; Jha and Kodila-Tedika, "Does Social Media Promote Democracy? Some Empirical Evidence."

¹²⁸ Oluwasola Festus Obisesan, "The '#tag Generation': Social Media and Youth Participation in the 2019 General Election in Nigeria," *Africa Development* 47, no. 2 (2022): 107–45; Samuel C. Kamau, "Democratic Engagement in the Digital Age: Youth, Social Media and Participatory Politics in Kenya," *Communicatio* 43, no. 2 (2017): 128–46.

¹²⁹ Gado Alzouma, "The Opportunity Exists. Why Don't They Seize It?" Political (in)Competence and the Potential of ICTs for Good Governance in Niger Republic," *Stability* 4, no. 1 (2015): 1–17.

¹³⁰ Albert Chibuwe, "Social Media and Elections in Zimbabwe: Twitter War between Pro-ZANU-PF and Pro-MDC-A Netizens," *Communicatio* 46, no. 4 (2020): 7–30; Sherif H. Kamel, "Egypt's Ongoing Uprising and the Role of Social Media: Is There Development?," *Information Technology for Development* 20, no. 1 (2014): 78–91.

¹³¹ V-Dem, "Democracy Report 2023 – Defiance in the Face of Autocratization," ed. E. Papada and S. I. Lindberg, Working Paper, 2023.

hand, disinformation and misinformation weaken democracy.¹³² Using a longitudinal survey of online behaviour,¹³³ it was observed that misinformation was linked to lower levels of trust in mainstream media sources and increased levels of trust in government when their party of choice was in power. Several studies document disinformation in the media and during election cycles, for instance in Ethiopia¹³⁴ and Kenya.¹³⁵

Social Media as an Instrument to Organize Collective Action

Activists used social media during uprisings against autocratic governments in various countries such as Egypt,¹³⁶ Tunisia¹³⁷ and Sudan,¹³⁸ among others. During these revolutions, social media became the most common source of information and a major tool to coordinate protests. Cross-country evidence shows that as social media platforms expanded, so did the probability of revolting against incumbent governments. Studies about Facebook, for instance, show how Facebook enables protests by providing a platform to mobilize collective action, partly based on shared grievances.¹³⁹ In the Tunisian revolution, citizens noted that they perceived independent media, including social media, as more reliable sources of information than government-controlled media (e.g. national newspapers, radio and television).¹⁴⁰ Cross-country evidence suggests that a higher reliance on the internet as the main source of news was linked to a reduction in government trust over the past decade. Lower levels of trust in government translated into participation in political protests instead of participation in formal political processes.¹⁴¹

Social media can also give voice to and allow for collective action among hitherto unreached, excluded, marginalized sub-populations. This can include marginalized agendas that might not be central to electoral or other campaigns. In Uganda, for instance, a

¹³² Samantha Bradshaw and Philip N. Howard, "Social Media and Democracy in Crisis," in *Society and the Internet: How Networks of Information and Communication Are Changing Our Lives*, ed. Mark Graham, William H. Dutton and Manuel Castells (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Spencer McKay and Chris Tenove, "Disinformation as a Threat to Deliberative Democracy," *Political Research Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (2021): 703–17; Anya Schiffrin, "Disinformation and Democracy – The Internet Transformed Protest but Did Not Improve Democracy," *Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 1 (2017): 117–25; Valenzuela et al., "The Paradox of Participation versus Misinformation: Social Media, Political Engagement, and the Spread of Misinformation," *Digital Journalism* 7, no. 6 (2019): 802–23; Alex S. Wilner, "Cybersecurity and Its Discontents: Artificial Intelligence, the Internet of Things, and Digital Misinformation," *International Journal* 73, no. 2 (2018): 308–16.

¹³³ Ognyanova et al., "Misinformation in Action: Fake News Exposure Is Linked to Lower Trust in Media, Higher Trust in Government When Your Side Is in Power," *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 1, no. 4 (2020): 1–19.

¹³⁴ Kinfe Micheal Yilma, "On Disinformation, Elections and Ethiopian Law," *Journal of African Law* 65, no. 3 (2021): 351–75.

¹³⁵ Fortune Agbele, "Disinformation and Misinformation During Kenya's 2022 Election. Implications for Voter Confidence in the Electoral Process," *Megatrends Policy Brief* 14, 2023, <https://www.megatrends-africa.de/publikation/policy-brief-14-disinformation-during-kenyas-2022-election>.

¹³⁶ Kamel, "Egypt's Ongoing Uprising and the Role of Social Media: Is There Development?"; Hassan, Kendall and Whitefield, "Media, Cultural Consumption and Support for Democracy in Post-Revolutionary Egypt."

¹³⁷ Anita Breuer, Todd Landman and Dorothea Farquhar, "Social Media and Protest Mobilization: Evidence from the Tunisian Revolution," *Democratization* 22, no. 4 (2015): 764–92; Kavanaugh et al., "Media Use by Young Tunisians during the 2011 Revolution vs 2014 Elections," *Information Polity* 22, nos. 2–3 (2017): 137–58.

¹³⁸ Alaa Daffalla et al., "Defensive Technology Use by Political Activists during the Sudanese Revolution," *Proceedings - IEEE Symposium on Security and Privacy* 2021 - May (2021): 372–90; Saadia Izzeldin Malik, "Sudan's December Revolution of 2018: The Ecology of Youth Connective and Collective Activism," *Information Communication and Society* 25, no. 10 (2022): 1495–510.

¹³⁹ Leopoldo Fergusson and Carlos Molina, "Facebook Causes Protests," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2020.

¹⁴⁰ Kavanaugh et al., "Media Use by Young Tunisians during the 2011 Revolution vs 2014 Elections."

¹⁴¹ Cariolle et al., "(Mis-) Information Technology: Internet Use and Perception of Democracy in Africa."

campaign for sanitary pads for young adolescent girls was taken up by opposition politicians.^{142,143} The “Zuma Must Fall” and “Fees Must Fall” campaigns,¹⁴⁴ the “Rhodes Must Fall” student activism¹⁴⁵ in South Africa and the “End SARS” demonstrations in Nigeria¹⁴⁶ all give an insight into how social media was instrumental in raising voices of dissent and activism.

Apart from bringing issues of the youth to the forefront, social media also provides space for often marginalized sub-groups such as LGBTQ people.¹⁴⁷ Increasingly, marginalized groups build alliances, create communities and increase their voices to have their own space in the democratic dispensation.

¹⁴² Florence Namasinga Selnes and Kristin Skare Orgeret, “Women and Election Activism in Uganda: The Pads4Girls Social Media Campaign,” in *Social Media and Elections in Africa, Volume 2: Challenges and Opportunities*.

¹⁴³ Juma Kasadha et al., “Social Media Taxation and Its Impact on Africa’s Economic Growth,” *Journal of Public Affairs* 20, no. 2 (2020): 1–5.

¹⁴⁴ Ndlela and Mano, *Social Media and Elections in Africa, Volume 1: Theoretical Perspectives and Election Campaigns*; Dwyer and Molony, *Social Media and Politics in Africa: Democracy, Censorship and Security*.

¹⁴⁵ Tanja Bosch, “Twitter Activism and Youth in South Africa: The Case of #RhodesMustFall,” *Information Communication and Society* 20, no. 2 (2017): 221–32; Shepherd Mpofu, “Disruption as a Communicative Strategy: The Case of #FeesMustfall and #RhodesMustfall Students’ Protests in South Africa,” *Journal of African Media Studies* 9, no. 2 (2017): 351–73.

¹⁴⁶ Akerele-Popoola et al., “Twitter, Civil Activisms and EndSARS Protest in Nigeria as a Developing Democracy,” *Cogent Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (2022); Prince Chiagozie Ekoh and Elizabeth Onyedikachi George, “The Role of Digital Technology in the End Sars Protest in Nigeria During COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work* 6, no. 2 (2021): 161–62; Ojedokun et al., “Mass Mobilization for Police Accountability: The Case of Nigeria’s #EndSARS Protest,” *Policing (Oxford)* 15, no. 3 (2021): 1894–903.

¹⁴⁶ Simangele Mkhize, Reema Nunlall and Nirmala Gopal, “An Examination of Social Media as a Platform for Cyber-Violence against the LGBT+ Population,” *Agenda* 34, no. 1 (2020): 23–33; Cecilia Strand and Jakob Svensson, “‘Fake News’ on Sexual Minorities Is ‘Old News’: A Study of Digital Platforms as Spaces for Challenging Inaccurate Reporting on Ugandan Sexual Minorities,” *African Journalism Studies* 40, no. 4 (2019): 77–95; Ukonu et al., “Climate of Conformism: Social Media Users’ Opinion on Homosexuality in Nigeria,” *SAGE Open* 11, no. 3 (2021).

¹⁴⁷ Simangele Mkhize, Reema Nunlall and Nirmala Gopal, “An Examination of Social Media as a Platform for Cyber-Violence against the LGBT+ Population”; Strand and Svensson, “‘Fake News’ on Sexual Minorities Is ‘Old News’”; Ukonu et al., “Climate of Conformism: Social Media Users’ Opinion on Homosexuality in Nigeria.”

Box 4: Government Reactions to the Spread of Social Media

Although social media empowers political rights and strengthens citizens' political demands, governments have created control measures to reduce online freedoms. These might range from social media taxes¹⁴⁸ to full-scale internet shutdowns.¹⁴⁹ Data from the surveillance monitoring company SurfShark shows that in 2021, there were 16 African countries that imposed social media restrictions during elections-related events.¹⁵⁰

To some extent, social media protests are easy for autocratic governments to quell, especially where governments control internet service providers through regulatory authorities. Many countries have become more aggressive in imposing limits on content that can be accessed or posted. This included blocking foreign or other websites and social media, among other restrictions.

Government laws or restrictions on social media may mitigate citizens' freedom to share and receive information, subsequently affecting democratic participation. Laws that create things such as social media taxes circumvent social media's ability to serve as an alternative platform for citizen participation.¹⁵¹ In Uganda, introducing a social media tax changed retailers' behaviour, as they perceived it as too expensive, leading to their reduced use of social media.¹⁵² The tax also reduced the number of Twitter users by 13 per cent, with greater impacts for poorer and less frequent users.¹⁵³

Another way that governments have constrained internet usage is through surveillance. Recent reports document an increase in the surveillance of African citizens.¹⁵⁴ Roberts and colleagues¹⁵⁵ find that in South Africa, Egypt, Senegal, Kenya, Nigeria and Sudan, there has been an increase in illegal citizen surveillance as states procure more advanced and sometimes illegitimate technologies.

Controls on internet use are, therefore, more likely to weaken diverse democratic voices from the population. While regulations such as social media taxes and restrictive laws might be met with resistance and rescinded (as in Uganda¹⁵⁶), they crowd out marginal voices for whom the costs of demonstration and dissent might be too high. Governments might thus be successful in suppressing a substantial proportion of the public.

¹⁴⁸ Levi Boxell and Zachary Steinert-Threlkeld, "Taxing Dissent: The Impact of a Social Media Tax in Uganda," *World Development* 158 (2022): 105950; Adrienne Lees and Doris Akol, "There and Back Again: The Making of Uganda's Mobile Money Tax," ICTD Working Paper Series (Brighton, 2021), https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/16727/ICTD_WP123.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

¹⁴⁹ Yohannes Eneyew Ayalew, "The Internet Shutdown Muzzle(S) Freedom of Expression in Ethiopia: Competing Narratives," *Information and Communications Technology Law* 28, no. 2 (2019): 208–24.

¹⁵⁰ Tobore Ovuorie, "Increased Social Media Use Puts African Leaders on Edge," *DW News*, 2022, <https://corporate.dw.com/en/increased-social-media-use-puts-african-leaders-on-edge/a-61303854>.

¹⁵¹ Selnes and Orgeret, "Women and Election Activism in Uganda: The Pads4Girls Social Media Campaign."

¹⁵² Evelyn Kigozi Kahiigi and Agnes Rwashana Semwanga, "Understanding the Retail Business Owners' Perception of Social Media Tax in Uganda," *Electronic Journal of Information Systems in Developing Countries* 87, no. 2 (2021): 1–11.

¹⁵³ Boxell and Steinert-Threlkeld, "Taxing Dissent: The Impact of a Social Media Tax in Uganda."

¹⁵⁴ CIPESA, "The State of Internet Freedom in Africa 2021: Effects of State Surveillance on Democratic Participation in Africa," 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/PT/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016R0679&from=PT%0Ahttp://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:52012PC0011:pt:NOT>.

¹⁵⁵ Roberts et al., *Surveillance Law in Africa: A Review of Six Countries* (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, 2021).

Interim Conclusion

Social media can represent an opportunity as well as a serious challenge for political attitudes and behaviour in African societies. Social media usage has become widespread, particularly among younger generations. At the same time, considerable differences exist across countries, also in light of the fact that access to the internet still differs widely across African societies.

Consequently, our review reveals mixed findings regarding the role of social media in shaping political attitudes and behaviour. Whereas some studies suggest a positive relation between social media usage and democratic values, other research finds that social media undermines Africans' support for democracy and instead promotes polarization. Similarly, social media can promote youth participation during elections, but governments can shut down the internet or block access to selected social media sites to curb this participation. Social media can give voice to and allow for collective action among hitherto unreached, excluded, marginalized sub-populations. However, disinformation in particular can be detrimental to the longer-term prospects of democracy in Africa. In light of these mixed findings, the main question is: Under which conditions does social media support democratization, and under which conditions does it undermine democratization?

¹⁵⁶ Boxell and Steinert-Threlkeld, "Taxing Dissent: The Impact of a Social Media Tax in Uganda"; Lees and Akol, "There and Back Again: The Making of Uganda's Mobile Money Tax."

Young, Urban and Digital: What Implications for Political Attitudes, Participation and Collective Action?

As the previous sections have demonstrated, the youth bulge, urbanization and the spread of social media all matter individually for African politics. At the same time, they do not only work in isolation, but they also jointly shape African politics. This section reflects on how the megatrends jointly affect political attitudes, participation and collective action.

The Afrobarometer data allow a glimpse into recent patterns across the continent. In this paper, we only analyse broad patterns, not whether differences between groups are, for example, due to country characteristics or cohort effects. We also do not account for self-selection, that is, whether there are underlying differences that jointly cause a factor such as social media use and political behaviour.

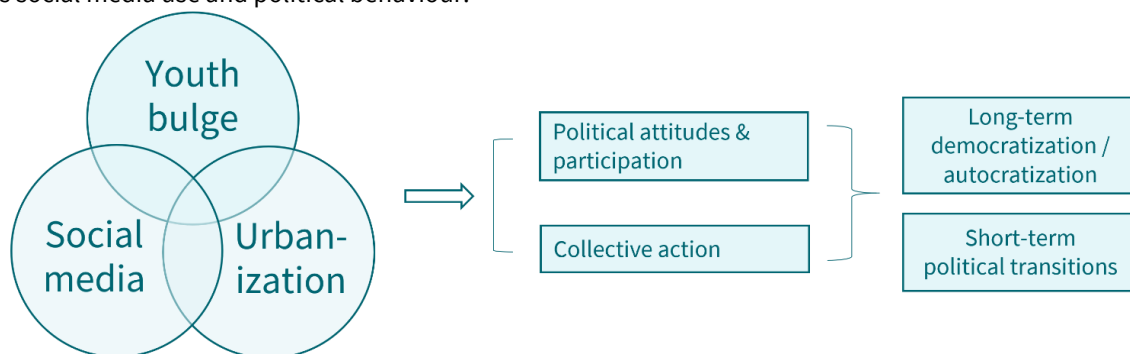


Figure 7: Interlinkages between the megatrends and African politics, Source: by Authors

Do young Africans who live in cities support democracy, and how do they engage in politics? How does social media usage among the youth or urban dwellers shape support for democracy and political behaviour? A first glimpse at recent Afrobarometer data reveals two main tendencies in how the megatrends jointly shape African political attitudes and behaviour. First, there is a low level of support for democracy and a lack of willingness to vote among the urban youth. Second, intersecting Afrobarometer data on social media with urbanization and age suggests that the role of social media for political attitudes and political protests is much more limited than what might be expected based on current debates in the literature.

African Urban Youth: Low Levels of Support for Democracy and Participation?

Analysing the interlinkages between youth and urbanization suggests that there is a low level of support for democracy and a lack of willingness to participate in formal democratic processes among African urban youth (Figures 8 and 9). In our analysis of the relationship

between age and political attitudes and participation (Section 3.1.), we saw that young Africans are less likely to vote and that their level of support for democracy is on average lower than among older generations. Differences regarding political attitudes and participation are small among rural and urban dwellers (Section 4.1.). However, if we distinguish between different age groups in urban (and rural) areas, this picture becomes much more nuanced.

Intersecting age and urbanization suggests that young urban dwellers might be particularly disengaged from democratic processes. Among the urban youth, the level of support for democracy seems to be even lower when compared to their rural peers, whereas the level of support for democracy among older urban citizens is higher than it is with their rural counterparts (Figure 8). One potential explanation for these differences among older generations in rural and urban areas might stem from the experiences of these generations during the political liberalization processes in the 1990s, which were partly driven by mobilization in urban areas.¹⁵⁷

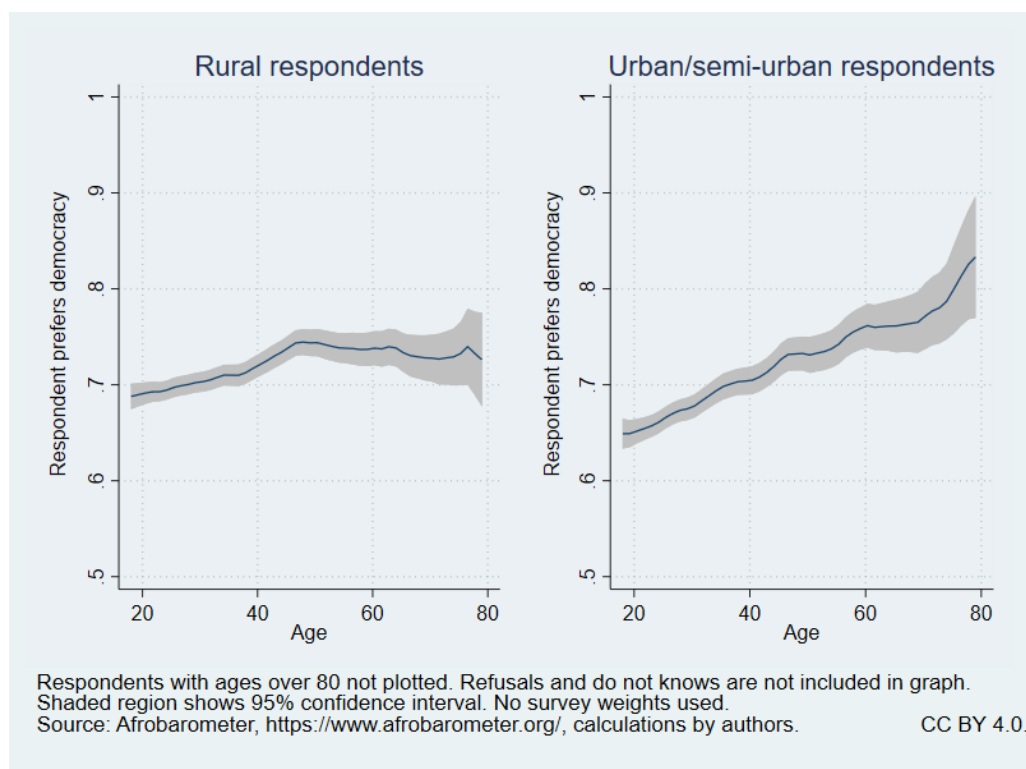


Figure 8: Support for democracy by age among rural and urban citizens, Source: Afrobarometer Round 8 (2019/2020)

Young urban citizens are not only less supportive of democracy, they are also particularly disengaged from elections and other formal democratic institutions, which might be due to dissatisfaction with the performance of these institutions in their respective country contexts. Although voting rates are generally low among the youth, they are particularly low among African urban youth. Among older generations, urban citizens are also less likely to vote, but the differences between urban and rural citizens are less pronounced (Figure 9). This trend is similar to other forms of political participation (e.g. attending community meetings).

¹⁵⁷ Danielle Resnick, "In the Shadow of the City: Africa's Urban Poor in Opposition Strongholds," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 49, no. 1 (2011): 141–66.

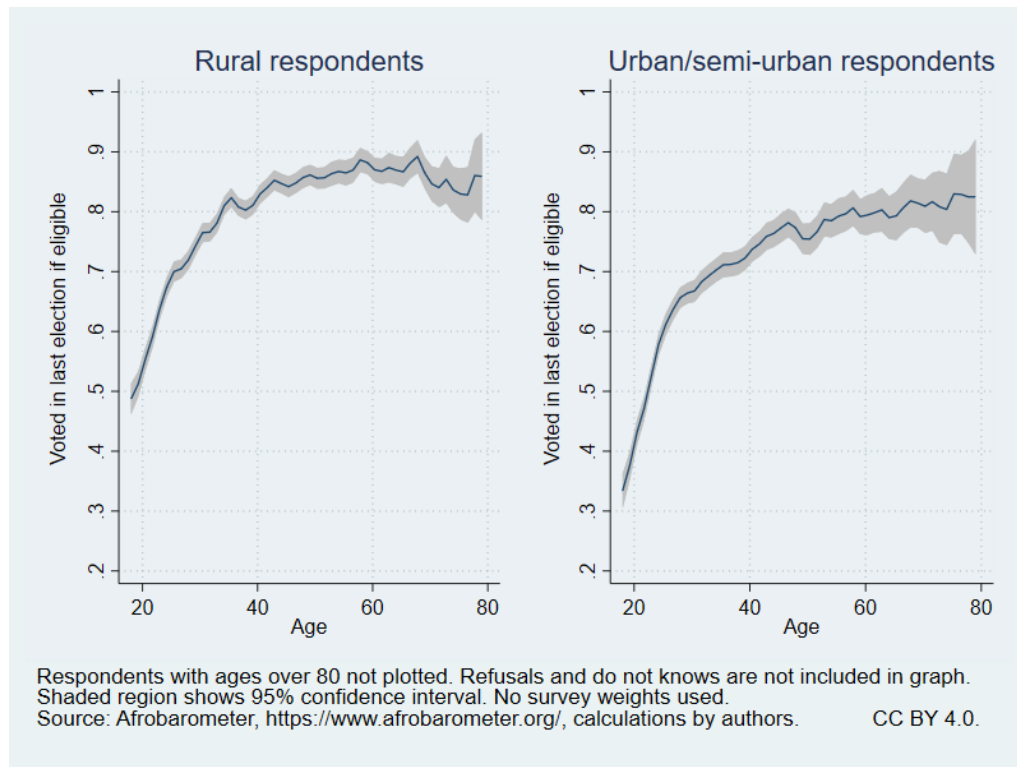


Figure 9: Voting by age among rural and urban citizens, Source: Afrobarometer Round 8 (2019/2020)

Although there is a low level of support for democracy and a lack of willingness to vote among African urban youth, they are more likely to engage in political protests. The third wave of political protests has often been described as a phenomenon of the younger generation and of African cities (Sections 3.2. and 4.2.). Afrobarometer data partly confirms this analysis and demonstrates that African urban youth are more likely to join demonstrations or protests than youth in the countryside and older generations (Figure 10). Interestingly, however, according to Afrobarometer data, the differences are less striking than what our review of the debate in the literature would lead us to expect. Mediatized protests, such as Kenya's recent Gen Z protests, might create the impression that political protests in cities are much more prevalent than they actually are.

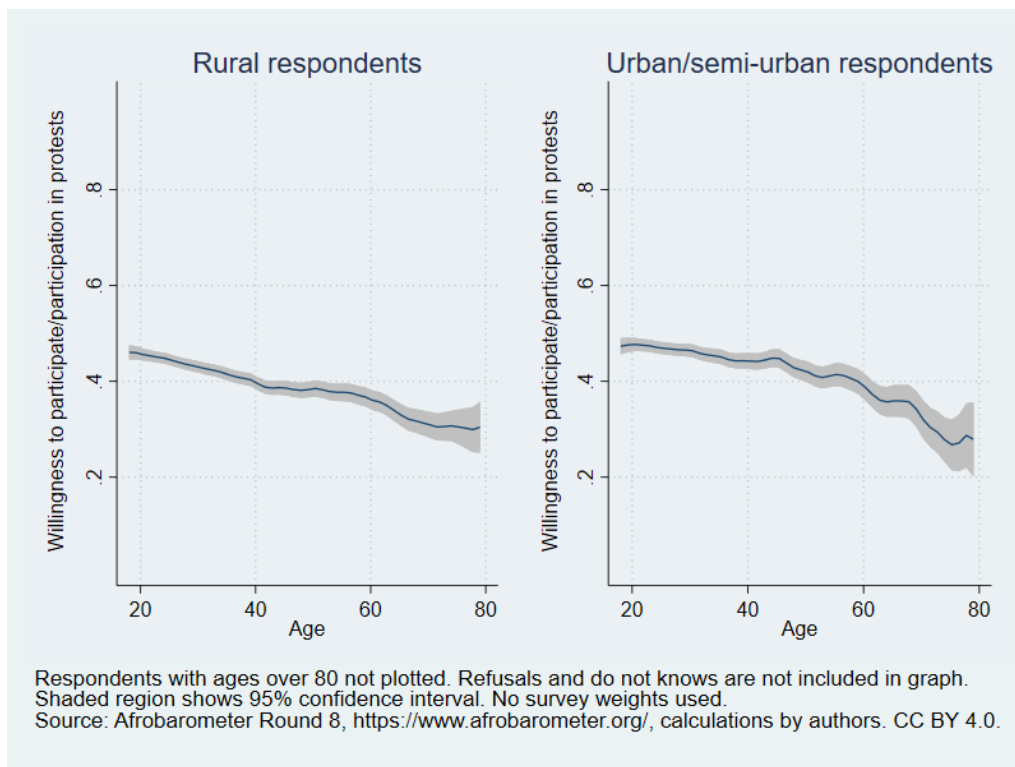


Figure 10: Participation in protests by age and rural/urban areas, Source: Afrobarometer Round 8 (2019/2020)

Access to Social Media: A Game Changer for African Politics?

We have conceived social media as an instrument that can increase access to political information or serve as a tool to facilitate collective action (Section 2). Social media has often been coined as a game changer in African politics (Section 5). However, if we now intersect social media with youth and urbanization, social media usage seems to have more limited consequences for attitudes, participation and collective action than what the findings from secondary literature would lead us to expect.

Thus, support for democracy does not seem to change significantly for urban/rural youth, depending on whether they regularly access social media for political information (Figure 11). African rural youth who regularly rely on social media are slightly less supportive of democracy. For African urban youth, the differences between social media users and those who are not on social media are even more marginal. The picture is somewhat similar when looking at satisfaction with democracy: Social media users are slightly more critical about the status of democracy in their country, but the differences when compared to those not on social media are small. The reliance on social media to access political information is still a relatively recent phenomenon. The limited effect on political attitudes for urban/rural youth could therefore be linked to the fact that attitudes are generally relatively stable and only change over longer periods.

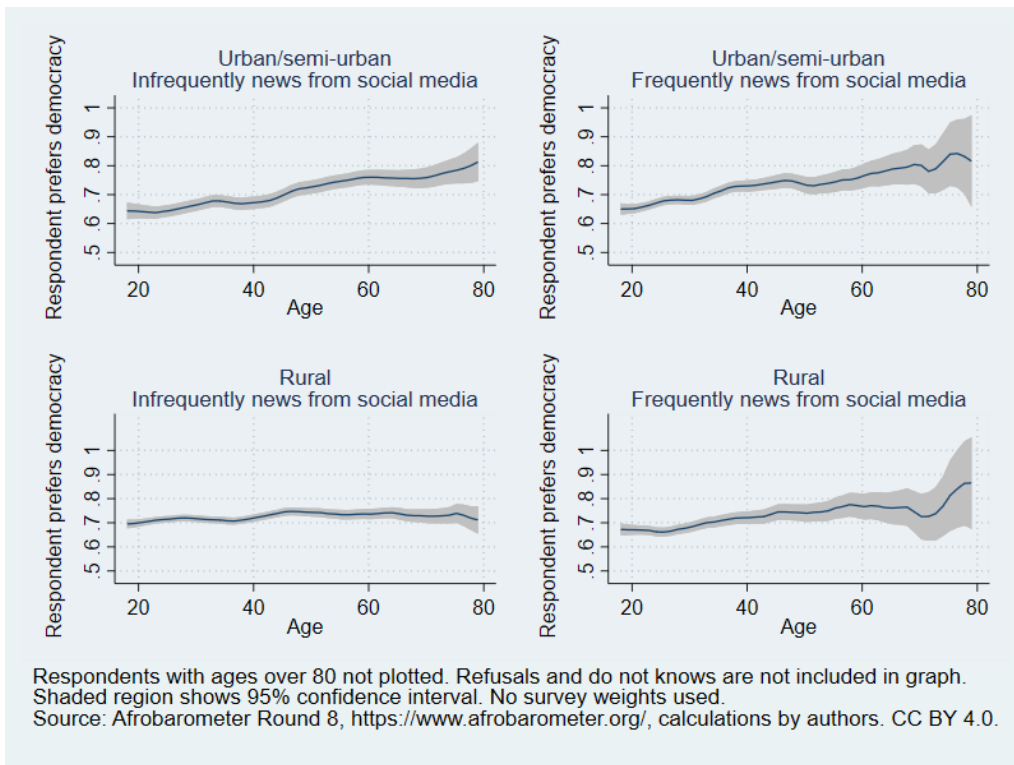


Figure 11: Support for democracy by age, rural/urban areas and social media usage, Source: Afrobarometer Round 8 (2019/2020)

In contrast to the feeble relation between social media and political attitudes, social media usage is correlated with participation in formal democratic institutions. African citizens' willingness to vote during elections is not only shaped by a generational and urban/rural divide. Young citizens – particularly those in urban areas – who regularly access social media are considerably less likely to vote than those fellow citizens who are not on social media (Figure 12). At first sight, descriptive Afrobarometer data thus seems to point to the negative effects of social media, contributing instead to disengagement from formal democratic politics.

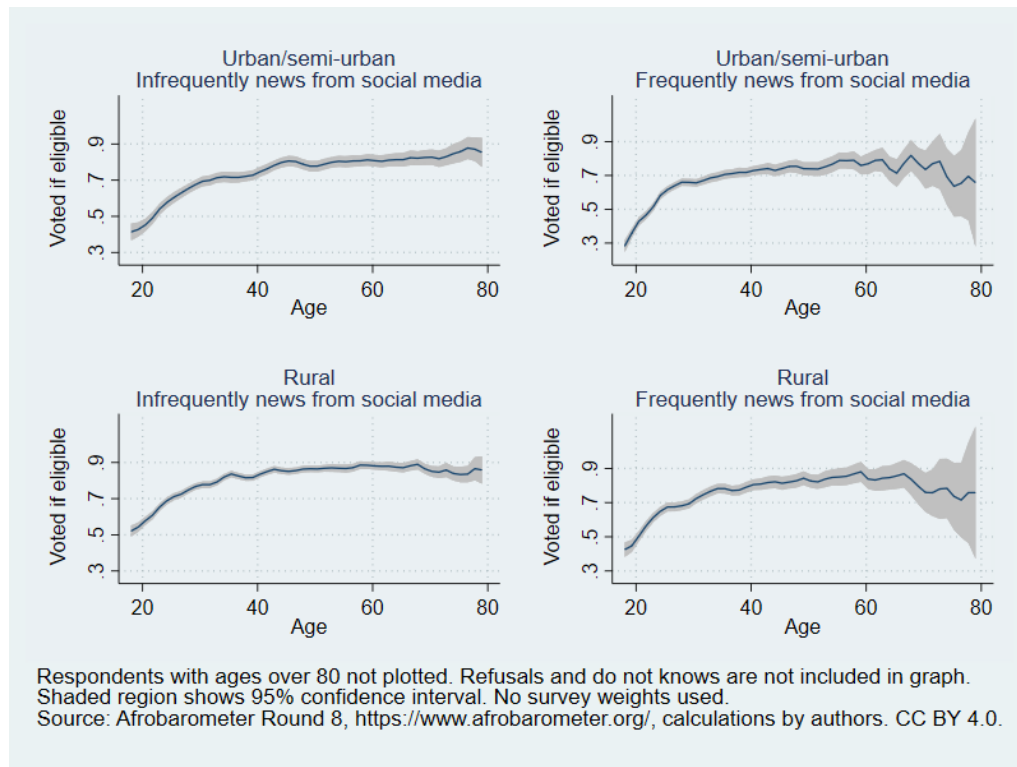


Figure 12: Voting by age, urban/rural areas and social media usage, Source: Afrobarometer Round 8 (2019/2020).

Interestingly, the correlation between social media and the willingness to protest is not very strong (Figure 13). Young urban citizens who regularly access social media for political information are only slightly more likely to join a demonstration than young urban dwellers who do not rely on social media. These very small differences are surprising in light of recent research that highlights the relevance of social media in political protests. Bosch and colleagues,¹⁵⁸ for instance, argue that individuals in urban areas with more education and access to social services and the internet are more likely to participate in collective action. In a nutshell, the argument that social media usage fosters political protests¹⁵⁹ is, at first sight, not supported by Afrobarometer data.

¹⁵⁸ Tanja Bosch, Mare Admire and Meli Ncube, "Facebook and Politics in Africa: Zimbabwe and Kenya," *Media, Culture and Society* 42, no. 3 (2020): 349–64.

¹⁵⁹ Fergusson and Molina, "Facebook Causes Protests."

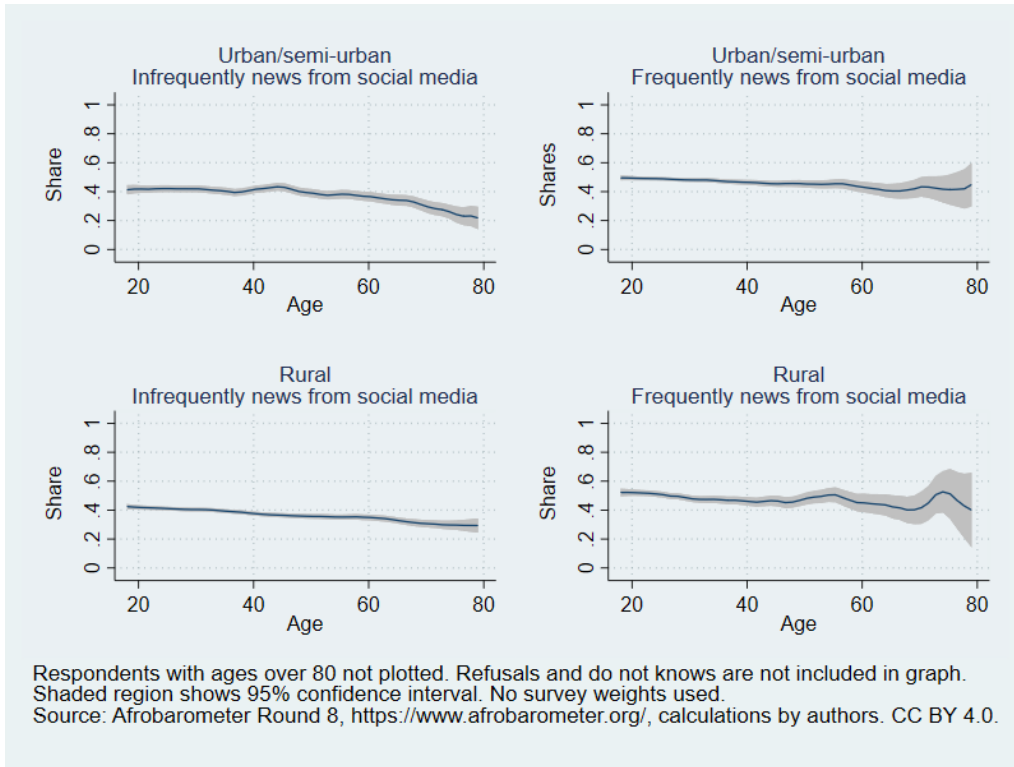


Figure 13: Participation in protests by age, rural/urban areas and social media usage, Source: Afrobarometer Round 8 (2019/2020)

Conclusion

How do the megatrends individually and jointly affect politics in Africa? Do the youth bulge, urbanization and social media usage facilitate short-term political transitions? Do they contribute to long-term democratization or enhance autocratization? Our literature review and analysis of Afrobarometer data points to the complex ways in which the megatrends affect politics.

Age matters for political attitudes and behaviour, and the findings for Africa are not too different from those for other world regions. Studies about the role of age on political attitudes and participation show that African youth, on average, are less supportive of democratic politics as experienced in the political realities in their countries and, thus, are more reluctant to participate in voting or joining political parties than older generations. At the same time, African youth have been at the forefront of political protests in Africa. While more country-level research is required to better understand the factors that shape the political attitudes and behaviour of African youth, the fact that they are more willing to protest and less willing to vote might point to their disappointment with the quality of formal democratic institutions.

Studies on the role of urbanization are less straightforward. Urbanization has not been a key variable in studies on political attitudes and participation. Findings from comparative politics and anthropological research, as well as Afrobarometer data on the relation between urbanization and African politics, point to the very different ways in which urbanization might affect politics. On average, urbanites do not seem to be more supportive of democracy than rural citizens, and they do not engage more with formal democratic institutions. However, they seem to be more supportive of the opposition, and they engage more in political protests. Challenges in analysing the role of urbanization in African politics also stem from the great diversity of urban areas, which can be megacities or intermediary cities and which at the same time host Africa's rather well-educated middle class, the richest segments of society as well as a large groups of urban poor.

Research on social media identifies it as a key instrument of political protests. Social media facilitates access to information and allows marginalized groups to organize collective action and voice concerns. At the same time, disinformation and fake news weaken support for democracy, and African governments can use digital technologies to manipulate elections in their favour.

When looking at the interlinkages between the three megatrends, we identify two particularly interesting patterns. We find that there is a low level of support for democracy and a lack of willingness to vote among the urban youth, who seem to be particularly dissatisfied with and disengaged from formal democratic processes, as experienced in their cities and countries. In addition, intersecting Afrobarometer data on social media with urbanization and age suggests that the role of social media for political attitudes and political protests is much more limited than what might be expected based on current debates in the literature.

Future research could pursue several avenues. First, our analysis suggests that more knowledge is needed about the role of youth in African politics; given their sheer numbers, African youth, especially urban youth, might be a key factor for political reforms across the continent in the coming years. A better understanding of the factors that shape African (urban) youth's political attitudes and willingness to vote is thus not only interesting from a research perspective, but also has concrete repercussions for African (or European) policy-makers. If their scepticism vis-à-vis democracy and reluctance to vote reflected the fact

that, in many contexts, African (urban) youth experience democratic politics as flawed and as not delivering tangible socio-economic benefits, policymakers would not only need to engage in political education, but also to invest much more in promoting the quality of democratic institutions.


In addition, more research on the role of young urban citizens – particularly young women, feminist groups and women’s networks – in political protests would help in coming to a better understanding of recent political transitions. Previous research and anecdotal empirical evidence suggest that young urban citizens have been at the forefront of political protests in Africa and rely on social media. At the same time, Afrobarometer data suggests that young urban citizens who regularly access social media are not more likely to protest than their rural peers. As urban youth are quite heterogeneous and significant cross-country differences seem to exist, more fine-grained analyses comparing different countries and cities are needed to assess under what conditions African youth decide to engage in political protests (or not).

For this paper, we deliberately took a broad perspective and proposed a conceptual framework that intersects three megatrends with political attitudes and participation. Future research could take this forward by highlighting county context conditions more extensively. For instance, comparative country case study research would allow for identifying the context conditions under which urbanization, the youth bulge and access to social media shape political attitudes and behaviour in one way or another.

Finally, future research will need to investigate the longer-term effects of the megatrends on democratization and autocratization processes in Africa. Our paper has pursued a modest approach in providing a comprehensive literature review and analysis of Afrobarometer data, focussing on how the megatrends affect African citizens’ political attitudes and participation. Citizens’ support for democracy is an important condition for the long-term stability and consolidation of democracies. However, little research exists on the relationship between political attitudes, participation and democracy with a regional focus on Africa, and this research has not taken into account the megatrends.

In terms of policy implications, our analysis demonstrates that the political consequences of the megatrends need to be addressed much more prominently in German and European cooperation with African countries. On the one hand, German and European strategies to support democratic reforms in African countries will need to consider the fundamental structural changes shaping African societies. German and European cooperation with African partners, particularly on urbanization or demographic change, is still mostly geared towards managing the socio-economic effects. Urbanization and/or the youth bulge rarely appear in German or European strategies and instruments to support democratic reforms. This needs to change. Moreover, our analysis points to the importance of taking an integrated perspective with regard to cooperating with African countries on the megatrends instead of viewing individual megatrends as isolated phenomena.

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