# DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO





## YOUTH VOTER REGISTRATION COSTS & CHALLENGES

## DRC


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# The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) faces distinct demographic and electoral challenges:

Just over half of its population is under 18 years old, and millions reach voting age with each successive electoral cycle. Ensuring that these young people can register to vote, often for the first time, remains a uniquely complex and costly administrative task. The DRC's vast and often inaccessible territories, characterised by insecurity and poor infrastructure, pose particular difficulties for this process, These challenges are intensified by the ongoing conflict in the East, which has led to large-scale displacement. In 2018 and in 2023, major disruptions to voter registration, campaign activities and electoral preparations resulted in the cancellation of elections in three conflict-affected regions.

The 2023 elections took place against a backdrop of widespread concerns about the fairness of the process among many citizens and stakeholders. This scepticism was partly rooted in the poor conduct of previous elections, especially the 2018 presidential vote, and the delayed appointment of the new CENI that had generated structural delays on the new electoral cycle, imposing accelerated timelines for all phases of the process. Additional factors contributing to declining confidence since 2018 included disputes surrounding appointments to the Constitutional Court and the election management body. However, arguments and speculations related to the inflated and costly voter register have remained a fixture since the first post-war voter registration campaign of 2004-2005 and continued to resurface at regular intervals during the electoral campaign.

Voter registration in the DRC is an active process, and it is valid for one electoral cycle only, so citizens must enrol in person during specific registration periods before each national election. Nevertheless, voter registration plays a role that transcends politics as it is the only widely accessible piece of identification for Congolese citizens, beyond passport and civil ID cards that are still a high commodity. Young Congolese, many of whom lack formal identity documents, encounter particular challenges when proving eligibility. Since, birth registration remains low among young people, limiting their access to legal identity and essential public services. Registration depends on community witnesses and local attestations to verify age and nationality. These structural difficulties in establishing eligibility are exploited by local notables willing to boost their electorate illegally and ingenious families willing to provide a formal identification to their children. Consequently, underage registration and inflated youth figures remain persistent issues, with many 14 to 17-year-olds registering before the eligible age to obtain the voter card that functions as their de facto national ID. Fewer and fewer of these registrants turn out to vote, or to re-register for the following electoral cycle, because they already have an identification document. Since not all underage registrants are biometrically detected, it remains impossible to tell how many legitimate first-time voters actually register in each voter registration campaign. As the DRC has not held a census since 1984 and births are registered only in the largest cities, there is no accurate data on the Congolese voting age population and the number of young Congolese eligible to register.

The most recent registration exercise (2022–2023) highlighted both progress and limitations. For the first time, limited digital pre-registration was offered through the PrerAp mobile application, which enthused youth and eased crowd management at the voter registration centres. However, long travel distances, lack of awareness and inadequate communication campaigns continued to disproportionately affect first-time youth registrants, particularly in rural and conflict-affected provinces.

Financially, elections in the DRC remain among the most expensive in Africa – estimated at over €1 billion per cycle, or roughly €23 per registered voter, and high costs have not always translated into equitable youth participation. Voter education campaigns, often underfunded and limited to urban areas, struggle to connect with those who are politically disillusioned or merely too concerned with their daily sustenance. Many young Congolese express interest in the voter card primarily for identification and access to services, not for electoral engagement, underscoring a broader crisis.

The 2023 elections marked the first inclusion of diaspora voters, with registration conducted in Congolese diplomatic missions in five pilot countries (Belgium, France, Canada, the United States and South Africa). Although participation was limited, it established a precedent for greater global engagement of the young diaspora population in future elections.

Overall, the DRC's experience illustrates the challenges of youth voter registration in this region. The combination of demographic pressure, weak identification systems and limited civic education means that millions of young citizens continue to risk exclusion from political participation despite the significant technology applications introduced since 2004. However, permanent biometric solutions and online registration continue to offer the best options for making voter registration less burdensome in the future and for transforming the process from a logistical and costly inevitability into a strong foundation for democratic elections.

## Methodology

This case study is based on a review of the legal and institutional framework, official electoral documents, observation reports, academic literature and other relevant publications. It also draws on the analysis of available electoral data, including voter registration and election results, as well as consultations with key stakeholders, including the CENI, public institutions, civil society organisations, youth organisations, electoral experts and development partners. Findings were triangulated across these sources to identify key trends, challenges and lessons learned regarding youth participation throughout the electoral cycle.

# Background

With 46% of the population under 15, the DRC has the seventh-youngest population in the world.[1] Like other African countries with similarly young populations, registering first-time voters is a massive undertaking.[2] The DRC's population has nearly doubled from 60 million in 2005 to 112 million in 2023, yet only 11% of registered voters possess a birth certificate – the foundation document for civil and voter identification.

Decades of the world's deadliest civil war, which has recently intensified, make reaching citizens in the field particularly difficult. Even in peaceful regions, access remains challenging due to extensive, dense forests, frequent outbreaks of Ebola or Mpox and inadequate road, energy and telecommunications infrastructure.

Despite these significant challenges, the DRC has conducted inclusive, periodic democratic elections in 2006, 2011, 2018 and 2023. The first democratic transfer of power occurred in 2018 – an unprecedented achievement for the Central Africa sub-region.

Elections in the DRC are primarily governed by the Constitution and the Electoral Law (Law no. 06/006 of 9 March 2006). Relevant aspects of the electoral legal framework for this case study include the Organic Law no. 10/013 (2010) as amended in 2013 and in 2021 on the organisation and functioning of the Independent National Electoral Commission and Law no. 04/028 (2004) as amended in 2016 and 2018 on the identification and registration of voters and the related decisions of the electoral management body (EMB).

By law, voter registration is the responsibility of the EMB, the Independent National Electoral Commission (Commission Électorale Nationale Indépendante or CENI), a permanent public body that manages all aspects of elections in the DRC. The CENI organises registration drives, publishes the electoral calendar, opens registration centres and issues voter cards. In addition to voter registration, the CENI is responsible for candidate registration, electoral operations, vote counting and the declaration of provisional results. By law, the CENI operates with administrative and financial independence, with its own budget funded by a government grant. It may also receive external contributions.

Voter registration is active and is formally a legal obligation, but this is not enforced. The procedures are governed by a multitude of laws and regulations, which the International Organisation of the Francophonie (Organisation internationale de la Francophonie - OIF) compiled into user-friendly volumes in 2018.[3] The CENI manages the identification and registration of voters, as well as the establishment, publication and updating of the voter register. Voter registration in the DRC occurs during official registration periods preceding major elections, as determined and announced by the CENI.

The length of the registration period is set by CENI regulations.[4] For the 2022-2023 cycle, voter registration was open for 90 days, from 24 December 2022 to 17 March 2023 and was divided into three operational zones (grouping provinces by geographical area, including five pilots for out-of-country voting) – one month per operational zone.[5] The CENI extended registration in some regions due to malfunctioning registration kits. A total of 22,276 Registration Centres were operational.

If voters are temporarily outside their area of permanent residence, they may be registered at the registration centre of their temporary residence, but must inform the officials at the centre. The temporary voter registration must indicate the voter's place of permanent residence.

Registration centres must not be located at places of worship, political party facilities, the offices of trade unions or non-governmental organisations, pubs, police stations, military facilities or schools. They should be arranged to ensure easy access, particularly for people with disabilities and other vulnerable persons.[6] Centres open from Tuesday to Sunday, from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., which is convenient for working youth.

1 Avery Koop, "Mapping the World's Youngest and Oldest Countries," Visual Capitalist, February 12, 2021

2 While outside Sub-Saharan Africa population growth is mostly stagnating or falling, the DRC's rate has grown from 3.08% in 2005 to 3.25% in 2023. Over the same period, the DRC's fertility rate has remained nearly stable with 6.58 children per woman in 2005 and 5.90 children per woman in 2023. See: "DR Congo Population," Worldometer, (no date)

3 Law no. 06/006 of 9 March 2006 on the Organization of Presidential, Legislative, Provincial, Urban, Municipal and Local Elections, as amended and supplemented by Law no. 11/003 of 25 June 2011, Law no. 15/001 of 12 February 2015, Law no. 17/013 of 24 December 2017 and Law no. 22/029 of 29 June 2022. Organic Law no. 10/013 of 28 July 2010 on the Organization and Operation of the Independent National Electoral Commission, as amended and supplemented by the Organic Law no. 13/012 of 19 April 2013 and Organic Law no. 21/012 of 3 July 2021. Law no. 004/024 of 12 November 2004 on Congolese Nationality. Law no. 08/016 of 7 October 2008 on the Composition, Organization and Operation of the ETDs and their Relationship with the State and the Provinces. Law no. 10/011 of 18 May 2010 establishing territorial subdivisions within the provinces. Decision no. 026BIS/BUR/CENI/16 of 13 July 2016 on measures to implement Law no. 04/028 of 24 December 2004 on the Identification and Registration of Voters in the Democratic Republic of Congo as amended and supplemented by Law no. 16/007 of 26 June 2016. Decision no. 042/CENI/AP/2022 of 4 November 2022 on measures to implement Law no. 04/028, as amended and supplemented by Law no. 16/007 of 29 June 2016.

4 Law no. 04/028.

5 Plans to identify and register voters in the 66 countries where the DRC has diplomatic representation were scaled back a CENI decision of 20 December 2022 to five pilot countries.

6 Law no. 04/028, art. 23.

7 The CENI normally issues invitations to tender to suppliers for each electoral cycle, with the exception of the following electoral cycles when the CENI used one supplier: 2005-2006 and 2010-2011 (ZETES, a Belgian company), 2016-2017 (GEMALTO, a French company) and 2023 (MIRU, a Korean company).

Due to the country's logistical challenges, voter cards are issued on the spot during registration and are free of charge.[7] Congolese youth, therefore, do not have to return to the election administration centres to collect their voter cards, opening up on the one hand to potential multiple registration attempts, but on the other freeing the registrants from potential political threats at the moment of card collection., In their final election observation mission reports, the citizen observer network of ECC-CENCO ( Église du Christ au Congo-Conférence Épiscopale Nationale du Congo) reported that in some regions of the country, electoral agents abused their power by charging registrants a "fee" for voter cards.

In the event of voter card loss, the CENI issues duplicates. Such claims are only accepted upon receipt of a police report on the loss of the document. In 2023, the CENI issued duplicates for reasons other than loss due to the poor quality of the CENI voter cards produced by thermal printers.

On 30 November 2023, the CENI launched the PrerAp-CENI application for pre-registration through the CENI online database.[8] The PrerAp-CENI data synchronisation failed, and registration centre kits were unable to retrieve the data, possibly due to a hacking incident. The CENI also launched an online portal for verifying registration and checking the assigned polling station using the voter's eleven-digit national number (NN) or by scanning the QR code on the voter card. Provisional electoral lists were not posted systematically, although progress had been made since 2018, when the preliminary lists were only displayed at the antenna level. In this election, the CENI did not publish the final voter list on its website, as required by the Electoral Law, raising concerns about the integrity of the register.

Security for registration activities is provided by the national police, who deploy police officers to maintain order in registration centres. This police presence has generated fear and led to reluctance to register on the part of some citizens, especially young people and those with negative experiences of the police. Politicians encouraged young people through the youth organisations of political parties to apply for positions as temporary CENI agents, which some experts saw as a manipulation of young people for political purposes.

Despite the CENI's substantial efforts, the voter registration rate remains below the pace of rapid population growth. This decline in relative inclusivity is offset by increased voter registration integrity. In 2018, over 16% of registration entries lacked fingerprints. That category was entirely eliminated in 2023, which partly explains the shortfall in absolute registration figures.

Having pioneered Africa's first biometric voter register (BVR) in 2004, the DRC's 2018 general elections introduced electronic voting machines (EVMs) Congolese's voter registration cards nevertheless continue to serve as the default national ID in large parts of the country. This has effectively motivated young people to register, but not necessarily to vote.

Under-age minors who register as 18-year-olds to obtain the voter card use this "anticipated" birth date when they re-register to vote in future cycles. This practice artificially inflates their cohort every fifth birth year, while decreasing the number in the four years between cohorts. This phenomenon makes it more difficult to accurately measure the number of legitimately registered first-time voters. Nearly a million pre-teens were biometrically identified and removed in both 2018 and again in 2023.

## Voter participation and demographics in DRC

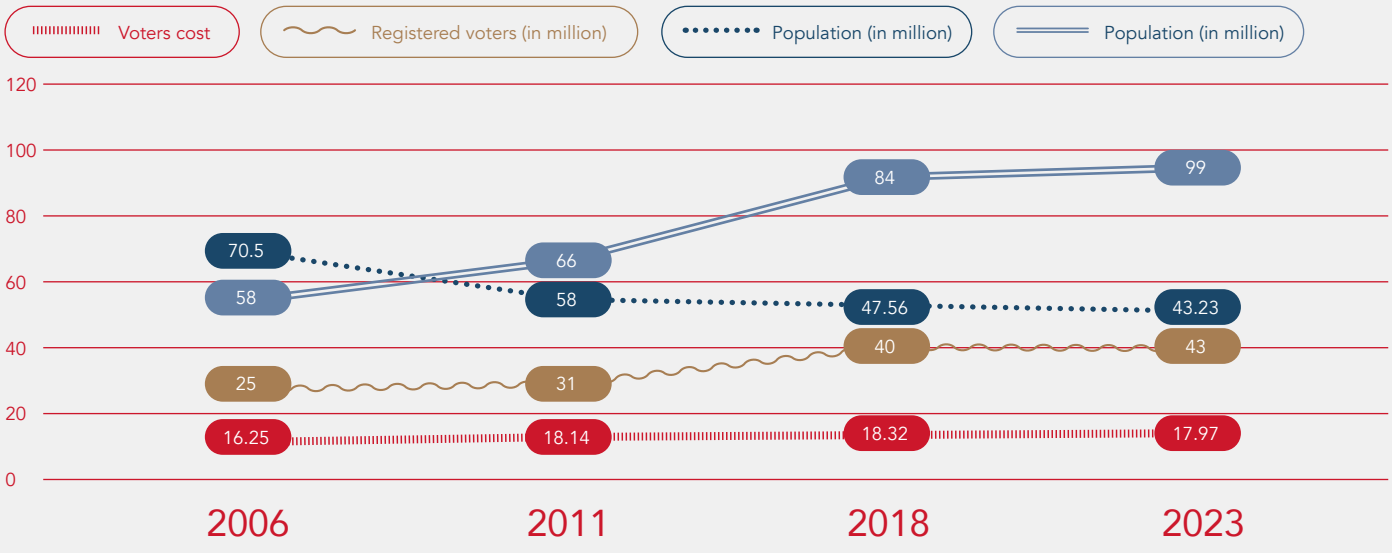



Figure 1: Electoral participation trends in the DRC from 2006 to 2023 (Sources: data from CENI sources 2006-2023, EU EOM reports, The Carter Centre and the CENI annual report 2023-2024)

8 "PrerAp CENI." App Store Preview

However, biometrics appear to have failed to capture a significant number of older teenage early registrants, which greatly inflates the number of 18-year-olds on the register, especially in rural areas where the birth rate is notably high and births often go unregistered. Because voter cards are issued on the spot, minors who are later biometrically detected and cleansed from the register retain their cards and have little incentive to re-register to vote after turning 18. Once they have received their voter ID card, such young people tend to disengage from the electoral process.

Voter turnout in the DRC, while not the lowest in the region, compares unfavourably with Sub-Saharan countries, such as Senegal, where registration and turnout rates have kept pace with equally rapid population growth. For 2023's general elections, in the DRC, there are 24 million registered voters who do not vote, as well as nearly as many voting-age citizens who do not register.

While the DRC is far more transparent than some of its Central African neighbours when it comes to disclosing voter registration statistics, this case study has been constrained by several factors:

a. The DRC has not conducted a nationwide population census since 1984, which deprives demographers of reliable population baseline data to measure relative (rather than absolute) youth participation in electoral processes. The status of the census launched by the Congolese government in 2023 remains uncertain at the time of writing.[9]

b. In 2006, the National Statistics Institute (INS) estimated the number of voters aged 16 and over at around 25,619,000, based on demographic projections. Population projections are highly problematic in the DRC, due to the ongoing war and the resulting population displacement.[10]

c. Although the DRC conducted a demographic audit of its voter register in 2018, the external audit in 2023 primarily published statistics related to data integrity, and its final report contained only limited voter demographics. Consequently, the current findings depend on data from 2018.

d. The DRC uses modern electronic voting machines in polling stations, but does not yet utilise electronic pollbooks, which makes it nearly impossible to geographically disaggregate voter turnout by age.

International IDEA has compiled comparative data that correlates the actual election turnout with the total voting-age population. Although estimating or extrapolating the total voting-age population has proven to be imprecise in the Sub-Saharan context, the IDEA data still enables comparison of the DRC's absolute turnout rates with those of its sub-regional and regional peers, including trends over several electoral cycles.

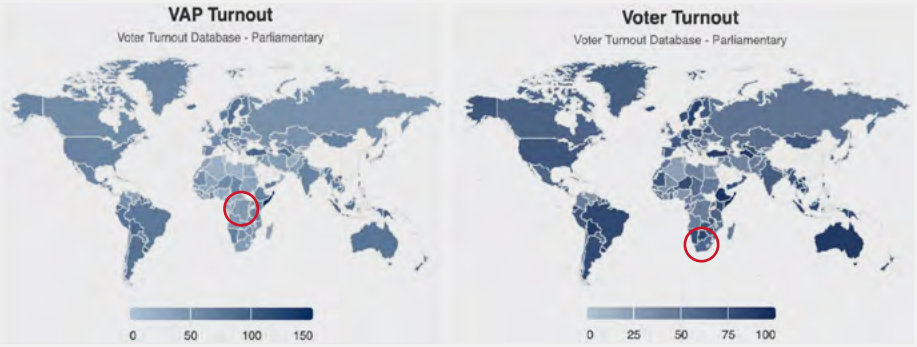



Figure 2: Turnout maps: absolute (left) and relative to registered voters (right)
Source: International IDEA

The map indicates that, although the absolute turnout in the DRC is below global averages, the relative turnout compared to registered voters aligns with regional and sub-regional averages. The DRC's absolute turnout rate also surpasses that of some of its North African and Central African counterparts, suggesting a certain democratic participation. CENI however, has not yet implemented electronic pollbooks on election day that would make disaggregation very simple, and final voter turnout data are currently not disaggregated by age, gender or disability.

| Electoral process | Registered voters | Votes cast | Turnout % |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2006 | 25,420,199 | 16,255,630 | 70,5% |
| 2011 | 31,839,942 | 18,143,104 | 58% |
| 2018 | 40,287,387 | 18,329,318 | 47,56% |
| 2023 | 43,955,181 | 17,976,551 | 43,23% |

Figure 3: Participation rate 2006-2023 (Source: EU electoral observation mission reports (2006, 2011), The Carter Center report (2018) and the CENI annual report (2023-2024)

9 "Recensement Général de la Population et de l'Habitat, UNFPA réaffirme son appui au Gouvernement Congolais", UNFPA in the Democratic Republic of Congo, September 30, 2024

10 Pamphile Mabiala, Les élections dans l'histoire politique de la République Démocratique du Congo (1957-2011) (Kinshasa: Konrad Adenauer, 2013), 62-63.

# Voter Registration Costs

According to the Ebuteli Institute[11], the total cost of the 2023 electoral cycle in DRC was around one billion euros.[12] This amount is primarily due to the unmatched logistical challenges involved in organizing elections in a country characterized by a gigantic territory, a large population, and limited transportation infrastructure and a number of unresolved political issues at its several border areas Based on the number of registered voters, the average cost is estimated at approximately 23 euros per voter.

The report also highlights that the DRC sought to reduce costs by holding several elections simultaneously (presidential, legislative, provincial and municipal where possible), thereby achieving economies of scale. However, there is no disaggregated budget available to allow a proper analysis of voter registration costs. Overall, the CENI's election funding for the 2023 cycle came almost entirely from the state budget.[13] The CENI draws up its budget in accordance with the finance law, and it is then submitted to the government for inclusion in the State budget. The electoral budget comprises payroll, operating costs and investment expenses, covering activities such as voter identification, registration and the publication of voter lists. The management of the CENI's finances and assets is governed by the rules overseeing public finance and state assets. After any electoral or referendum process, an external audit is carried out by the Court of Auditors within 30 days of presenting the CENI's general report to the National Assembly. The Court of Auditors' report is then submitted to parliament, with copies sent to the President of the Republic and the government. Additionally, parliament performs its constitutional duty by overseeing public institutions and services' expenditure, including CENIs. According to the CREFDL (Centre de Recherche en Finances Publiques et Développement Local) report titled ''Rapport final du controle citoyen de l'utilisation des fonds allouees aux elections en RDC; credibilité budgetaire et transparence des marchees publics", of December 2023, the funds allocated to electoral operations account for 71.28% of the CENI's budget appropriations. The total cost of the electoral operations for all electoral cycles since the peace accords, according to this report, is as follows:

- US$546,200,000 for the 2005-2006 cycle covered the organisation of the five elections (presidential, legislative, provincial, senatorial and governorate),
- US$696,512,189 for the 2007-2012 cycle,
- US$2,706,980,123.98 for the 2013-2019 cycle,
- US$1,120,136,977 for the 2021-2023 cycle covered the organisation of the five elections (presidential, legislative, provincial, senatorial and gubernatorial).[14]



11 See here

12 See here

13 Organic Law no. 10/013 of 28 July 2010 on the Organisation and Operation of the Independent National Electoral Commission, as amended and supplemented by Organic Law no. 13/012 of 19 April 2013 and Organic Law no. 21/012 of 3 July 2021.

14 CENCO and ECC. Final report of the Electoral Observation Mission for the 2019-2023 Electoral Cycle. Kinshasa, CENCO-ECC, 2024, p.28

Case study

Clémente, 18, set out to register to vote in Kinshasa in January 2023, using the PrerAp pre-registration application set up by the new electoral administration. After several attempts, she managed to pre-register, but the application was slow, incompatible with some mobile phones and the address of her registration centre was incorrectly indicated on the form she received in the application. When she got to the centre, she discovered that her pre-registration was useless. The president of the registration centre explained to her that technical problems had rendered her online registration unusable. She would have to start from scratch and register in person with all the required documents. After spending the whole morning in the queue, she had to leave to go to her afternoon classes. She decided to return on the last day of the registration period. This time, she managed to register, and she was given her voter card after presenting her student card as proof of identity. Clémente noticed mistakes on her card, but the prospect of another long procedure and having to spend another €5 on transport was too daunting. She chose not to contest the error and hoped that there would be no problems. She decided to leave the correction for another time.

Jonathan, 26, lives in Ikela, In Tshuapa province. In 2023, he heard on the radio that voter registration operations were underway. He went back to the registration centre where he had registered the last time, but it was no longer where it had been in 2017. Not having been informed of this change in advance, he had to walk approximately 25km to reach another centre. As a young fisherman, this meant losing a day's income. When he finally got there, he could see that there were problems at the centre: frequent power generator cuts, problems with the equipment and inexperienced staff. He had lost his 2017 voter card some time back, there was no record of his registration and he had no other form of identification. Jonathan had two options: make the 200km journey to the civil registry office to get a birth certificate (which most Congolese do not have) or find witnesses already registered in the same voter registration centre who could attest to his identity. There was really only one option for Jonathan, as he had neither the €130 for the trip nor did he want to take a risky river journey, so he set about finding witnesses. Fortunately, three voters who were also fishermen recognised him and were able to attest to his identity.



However, once registered, he was unable to receive his electoral card immediately, due to the absence of the electoral officers responsible. After spending the night there, he collected his card the next morning. Jonathan's experience illustrates the challenges of voter registration in rural areas where geographical isolation and long distances are compounded by poor infrastructure and the lack of reliable information.

# Barriers to Youth Voter Registration

The 2016-2017 electoral reform allowed Congolese citizens turning 18 by the day of the elections to register – a welcome development that broadened the inclusion of first-time voters. The law on the identification and registration of voters (Law no. 04/028 of 24 December 2004) maintained certain restrictions ,, notably "persons deprived of their civil and political rights by irrevocable judicial decision and members of the Congolese Armed Forces and the Congolese National Police." Persons suffering from medically certified total mental incapacity are also denied the right to vote.[15]

United Nations (UN) treaty bodies oppose the blanket disenfranchisement of prisoners, especially beyond the terms of their sentence.[16] Wholesale disenfranchisement of prisoners, many of whom are young, can also unintentionally disenfranchise those in pretrial detention. In fact, the Consortium Panafricain pour la Paix has recommended that measures be taken to enable Congolese in pretrial detention to vote.[17] Two other exclusions, which conflict with UN jurisprudence, also disproportionately affect young people: Relevant UN treaty bodies permit restrictions on members of the armed forces from standing as candidates[18] and from membership in political parties;[19] however, the blanket denial of the right to vote to members of the armed forces is problematic. Accordingly, most African countries have reinstated their right to vote, a measure which has increased youth participation.[20] As currently framed, these restrictions  from the franchise in the DRC are inconsistent with UN jurisprudence.

Regarding the passive franchise, the law establishes a minimum age of 30 years for presidential and senatorial candidates and at least 25 years for all other elections, based on the closing date for candidate registration. Candidate lists displayed at polling stations do not include age information, while the CENI's candidate lists shared with political parties do contain age details. As a result, young voters lack sufficient information to make informed decisions based on a candidate's age.

To keep up with population growth, the CENI has more than doubled the number of registration centres from 9,105 in 2006 to 22,276 in 2023.[21] In 2023, the DRC partially enfranchised its diaspora for the first time, registering over 13,000 expatriates, including many young people.[22] The CENI has also piloted online "pre-registration" to shorten wait times during biometric field capture and has made it possible for voters to check their registration and voting address online using the QR codes on their voter cards. With internet penetration at just 27%, the DRC lags behind the continental average of 37%.[23] These low levels of internet usage limit the efficacy of online options for youth engagement.

The current system, which requires a new voter register to be compiled for every electoral cycle, forces voters to capture their biometric data anew each time. This places a significant burden on socio-economically disadvantaged or geographically isolated citizens, many of whom are young people. This means that the obstacles to youth registration present themselves in every electoral cycle. Common challenges include long distances to registration centres, especially in remote areas, difficulty of access, long queues at the centres, lack of information about the location of registration centres as well as voter illiteracy and technological and language barriers. Voters also have to deal with bribery associated with registration on the part of some electoral agents and police officers responsible for security centres.

The registration of first-time voters presents particular challenges, as only a minority of Congolese possess birth certificates or a national ID card, and the voter card, which is widely used as proof of citizenship, is only issued to registered voters. Many Congolese present other documents to attest their identity, such as certificates of nationality, declaratory court judgments in

15 Law no. 06/006 of 09 March 2006 on the Organization of Presidential, Legislative, Provincial, Urban, Municipal and Local Elections, as amended and supplemented by Law no. 11/003 of 25 June 2011, Law no. 15/001 of 12 February 2015, Law no. 17/013 of 24 December 2017 and Law no. 22/029 of 29 June 2022, Art.7. Note that, "discriminating against persons with mental intellectual or psychosocial disabilities by denying them the right to vote on bases that are disproportionate or that have no reasonable and objective relationship to their ability to vote." See CCPR/C/BLZ/CO/1, Belize, (2013), 24.

16 United Nations Human Rights Committee. Concluding Observations of the Human Rights Committee: United States of America. CCPR/C/USA/CO/3 (2006), para 35.

17 CENI, Annual Report 2023, 145.

18 United Nations Human Rights Committee. General Comment No. 25: The Right to Participate in Public Affairs, Voting Rights and the Right of Equal Access to Public Service (Art. 25). CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.7 (1996), 16.

19 Article 22 of the ICCPR.

20 For instance Senegal in 2006

21 CENI, "Rapport Final de l'Audit Externe du Fichier Electoral de la CENI, Mai 2023" (Kinshasa : CENI, 2023), 56

22 For now in Belgium, France, South Africa, Canada and the USA.

23 "Africa's Internet Use Doubles in Decades Despite High Costs," Ecofin Agency, February 27, 2024,

lieu of birth certificates, certificates of nationality, voter cards issued by the CENI for previous elections, valid driver's licences, valid student ID cards, orders from the President of the Republic conferring nationality by naturalisation or Congolese pension booklets.[24]

In the absence of the above documents, identity and citizenship may be established through witnesses. In 2019, the number of witnesses required was reduced from five to three, with the addition of a countersignature by the district or village chief as an extra requirement. The names of witnesses and chiefs are recorded on the voter register. This reform has facilitated inclusiveness.

In 2018, registrants identified themselves by the following means: voter cards from previous elections (53.3%), pupil, student and pension cards (26.0%), birth certificates and similar documents (11.8%), proof of nationality and similar documents (2.9%) and passports and driver's licences (1.1%). Of the 4.8% of voters who registered without documents, nearly all used witnesses; however, 66,231 voters remained registered without ID or witnesses, representing 0.1% of registered voters. Since first-time voters do not have voter cards from previous cycles, most young people are registered either using student IDs or through witnesses and village/district chiefs, which may involve paying for witnesses' travel costs – a significant disincentive for youth registration. The CENI's 2023 final audit report did not specify the means of identification used for registration.

Legislative amendments in 2011 and 2017 made it possible for Congolese living abroad to exercise their constitutional right to vote for the first time in 2023. Diaspora voting was, however, limited to five pilot countries (Belgium, France, Canada, the USA and South Africa) and is restricted to presidential (but not parliamentary) elections. Registrants are required to present a valid passport or consular card, along with proof of legal residence in the host country. The majority of Congolese expats are young males, many of whom lack residence permits and were, therefore, disenfranchised. Distance to registration centres was also a significant barrier, as the registration centres were limited to the capital cities of each pilot country. The operations in the five pilot countries faced organisational challenges, and there was very limited observation by civil society organisations. Overall registration levels were disappointing, with a turnout of less than half of registered diaspora voters on election day.

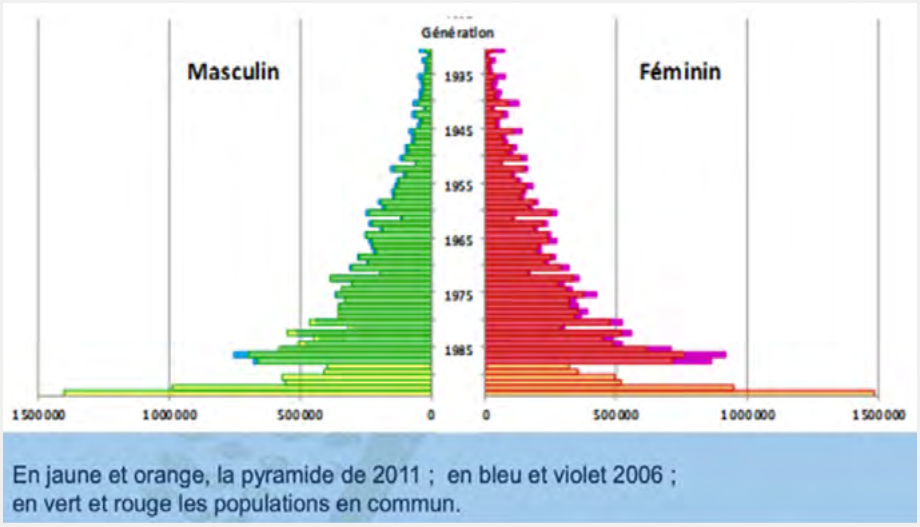



Figure 4: Age pyramid overlay of the 2006 and 2011 voter registers (Source: OIF Audit Report 2018)

The DRC has a long history of registering minors and now employs expensive biometric tools to identify and remove underage voters from the provisional register before finalising voter lists. Underage registration is relevant to this study because it artificially inflates the number of presumed legitimate first-time voters in the database. This distortion was significantly greater during the 2006 and 2011 cycles (cf. figure 4), before the CENI biometric cleansing removed most minors from the register.[25] Since their removal from voter lists, they cannot vote, and their initial registration no longer impacts election participation and outcomes, at least to the extent that biometrics has detected and removed them. The CENI's Neurotech facial analytics software, however, performs much better on spotting children than teenagers approaching voting age.

24 Law no. 04/028, art. 10.

25 In 2018, the CENI imposed 1,434 sanctions and, on 6 April, forwarded to the Public Prosecutor a list of the 15,669 registration centres that had admittedly enrolled minors according to the OIF Final Report on the 2018 audit. For the full report, see here.

In 2022, as part of the process of cleaning up the national database, the CENI, using a system of tracing registration centres, removed 976,506 minors, compared with 902,290 in 2018. The registration of minors varies significantly by geography and is mostly concentrated in two provinces: in Sankuru, minors struck off the voter lists represented 16% of voters and in Tshuapa, 12%. In 2022, CENI set up a system for tracing the files of registration centres, which received all the data collected in the so-called minors' file. This phenomenon can contribute to first-time voter registration dips (under- and up-to-18-year-olds are heavily overregistered, while 19-24-year-olds and then 26-29-year-olds are heavily underregistered).

While most countries experience slight disparities in age demographics between urban and rural areas, the DRC displays extreme discrepancies in plausible age distributions between urban areas, such as Kinshasa (green frame) and rural areas.

The 2018 voter demographics for provinces such as Lomami and Kasai Central seemed implausible and would require further investigation. There are several unconfirmed reports that suggest the presence of minors in the voter register who went largely undetected by biometrics and most likely identified themselves as 18-year-olds with the assistance of witnesses. What is puzzling is the significantly lower relative registration rates of adults aged 18 and above in rural areas compared to urban areas. Limited access to registration centres and factors like lower life expectancy, literacy and mobility among rural Congolese may contribute, but they cannot entirely explain these stark disparities. Evidence from rural areas indicates that it is not first-time voters who are underregistered, but relatively mature adults. Most democracies, both developing and consolidated, experience under-registration of first-time voters.[26]

The 2018 OIF mission explained that it is necessary to mention a traditional over-representation in the DRC of 18- and 19-year-olds, given the difficulty in identifying and subsequently removing young people who do not reach the legal age by the CENI. It should, however, be noted that one of the age pyramids published by the CENI's 2023 external voter register audit confirms the strong nationwide registration share of 18-27-year-olds (see below the 2018 nationwide age pyramid with adult under-registration in yellow on the left and 2023 nationwide age pyramid by 8-year age brackets, concealing individual registration disparities within those brackets, on the right).

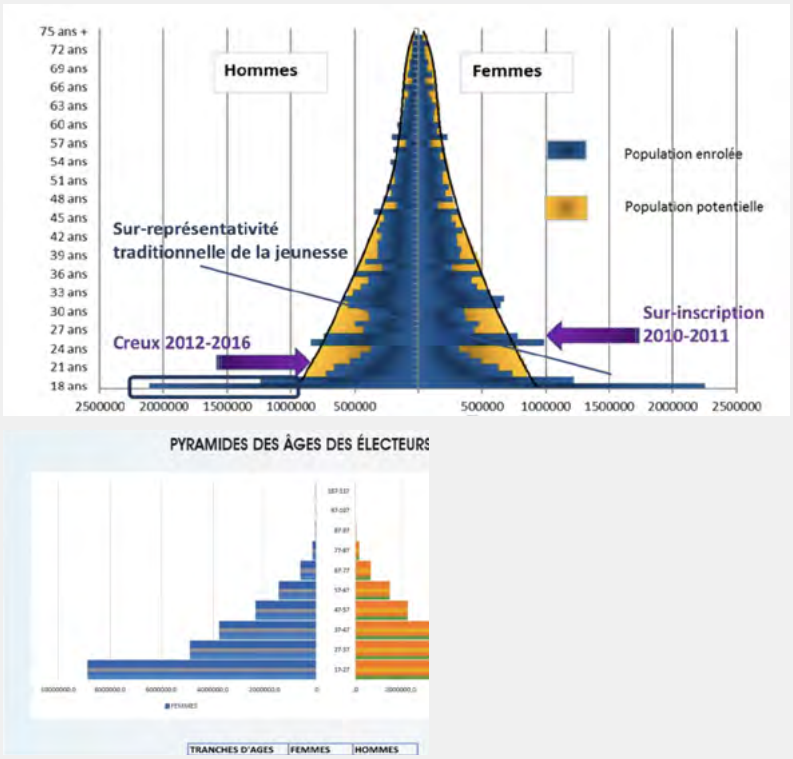



Figure 5: National age pyramid 2023 as shown in CEI Report (Source: CENI Report 2023)

The best explanation for this unusual phenomenon is that 18-year-olds, or those identifying as such, are over-registered in the DRC because the cohort registered as 18-year-olds includes a significant number of individuals from the 15-18 year old groups. It is believed that the motivation for early registration of this age group was to acquire voter cards, which serve as ID to obtain mobile phone SIM cards and other essentials. Young people who register solely to get the voter card typically do not return to reregister to vote in subsequent electoral cycles, unless they lose their original voter card.

There are two main consequences of this phenomenon. The number of young voter cardholders who do not appear on the voter register has increased over recent cycles. Additionally, minors who register as 18-year-olds often carry this "precipitated" birth date when they reregister to vote in subsequent cycles, causing their cohort to be inflated every fifth birth year while reducing the size of the four intermediate cohorts. This phenomenon makes it more difficult to accurately count legitimately registered first-time voters.

26 Afrobarometer recently found that, "Almost two-thirds (64%) of youth prefer democracy over any other kind of government. They join their elders in rejecting dictatorship (80%) and military rule (65%) but are more likely to accept military takeovers if "elected leaders abuse power for their own ends" (56%). Young Africans are dissatisfied with the way their democracy is working (60%), but they are significantly less likely than older cohorts to engage in change-making activities such as voting and joining others to raise an issue." See:"African insights 2024: Democracy at risk – the people's perspective," AfroBarometer, (no date).

# Youth Voter Registration Initiatives

The Second Deputy-Chair of the CENI is responsible for overseeing civic and electoral education.[27] In 2023, the CENI issued announcements in both French and national languages, along with other communication tools aimed at young people. The CENI's 2023 annual report states that, as part of its efforts to inform the population about the electoral process, it used the following communication channels: Website: https://www.ceni.cd, which attracts around 10,000 visitors daily; X account, formerly Twitter: @cenirdc, with 350,000 followers; Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/ceniCD, with 150,000 subscribers; Instagram page; Tiktok account: @ceni.rd.congo and various WhatsApp groups. The CENI also organised consultation meetings with various stakeholders, such as young people, women, political actors, vulnerable groups, indigenous people and journalists. It designed and distributed numerous press releases and took part in several broadcasts on the electoral process.[28] The CENI also invested in more traditional voter information materials, which were more focused on voter turnout on election day than on the voter registration phase.[29]

When the current CENI leadership took office, a youth adviser was appointed, but outreach has not lived up to expectations. In 2023, the CENI reiterated its commitment to youth and women.[30] Several Congolese civil society organisations were accredited to accompany the CENI on election observation missions for the 20 December 2023 combined polls, including the National Youth Council and the Youth Parliament.[31] The CENI has also conducted youth-focused awareness-raising campaigns on various social media platforms.[32] The Ministry of Youth organised small-circle activities to encourage young people to register and vote, but these initiatives have not had a significant impact, partly due to issues of scale and the inappropriate format; for example, the selection of participants was done informally, expectations were not clearly stated, and the meetings minutes were not shared, with all participants a lack of clarity in the organization and high degree of politicisation.

In 2006, the CENI launched a comprehensive programme with national civil society organisations (CSOs), but since 2011, CENI funding for CSOs has decreased or been redirected. Grants have become increasingly selective and are sometimes influenced by political considerations. Many Congolese CSOs do not tailor activities to youth, but some are active in youth, civic and electoral education. The most prominent are the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI), the National Youth Council and the youth-focused information forum Habari RDC.

Only three election observation mission reports from local groups mentioned the youth participation rate: the Alliance of Citizen-Based Electoral Observation Missions (SYMOCEL), REGARD CITOYEN and the EOM organised by the churches (CENCO-ECC). The National Youth Council, which is affiliated with the Ministry of Youth and New Citizenship, receives public funding.

The CENI held thematic consultations with stakeholders, such as religious denominations, political parties and groupings, women, indigenous people communities and people with disabilities.[33] There was much criticism that these meetings were more information sessions than genuine consultations aimed at improving the CENI field operations. The Congo Student Coordination also receives subsidies, but not for the civic and electoral education of its members.

27 Organic Law no. 10/013 of 28 July 2010 on the Organization and Operation of the Independent National Electoral Commission, as amended and supplemented by the Organic Law no. 13/012 of 19 April 2013 and Organic Law no. 21/012 of 3 July 2021, article 25.

28 CENI Annual Report 2023, 212.

29 CENI Annual Report 2023, 13: "These are : (i) 500,000 leaflets on the elections of the President of the Republic, National Deputies, Provincial Deputies and Communal Councillors; (ii) 500,000 leaflets on electoral offences and criminal penalties; (iii) 100,000 posters on the types of direct and indirect elections; (iv) 100,000 'I'm going to the polling (iv) 100,000 'I'm going to the polling station with my voter's card' posters; (v) 100,000 'I'm voting where I've (vi) 100,000 'I'm involved in the running of my country, I vote' posters; (vii) 100,000 'I vote easily with the Electronic Voting Device (EVD)' posters (viii) 100,000 'Violence is not a solution' posters; (ix) 100,000 'Let's use peaceful means to vote' posters. Let's use peaceful means for any challenge'; (x) 11,000 banners on the 4 polls on 20 December 2023; (xi) 11,000 banners 'Calling on voters to consult the posted (xii) 100,000 loincloths; (xiii) 100,000 T-shirts (xiv) 100,000 kepis; (xv) 100,000 waistcoats."

30 CENI Annual Report 2023, 138.

31 CENI Annual Report 2023, 142.

32 CENI Annual Report 2023, 218 , "The CENI identified a number of challenges to carrying out awareness-raising, civic and electoral education, including dissemination of messages adapted to the different social strata of the population and the participation of (..) young people. The CENI has formulated recommendations to further boost youth participation in electoral processes, for by to hiring younger staff for its IT department."

33 The Guide to the Procedure for Identifying and Registering Voters in the DRC and Implementing Measure for Law no. 04/028 of 24 December 2004 on the Identification and Registration of Voters in the DRC, as amended and supplemented by Law no. 16/007 of 29 June 2016 and Law no. 18-007 of 27 June 2018.

Generally, Congolese youth find it difficult to take part in observation activities because of the costs. Two exceptions are Habari RDC, which conducted a Young People and Elections programme, and the Elykia Institute, which conducted an electoral integrity programme and trained some young people in electoral law (in particular, electoral disputes and election observation). Additionally, the International Republican Institute (IRI), through its IRI Bilenge programme, also contributed.

Few celebrities or private sector actors have shown an interest in electoral issues. They are considered" too political". With the economy largely dominated by the informal sector, few private sector actors are interested in democracy and development issues, although some seek to curry political favours through financial support for political parties or specific candidates. In contrast, young people have developed engagement patterns such as electoral cafés, meetings and round tables to reflect on their role in building a democratic state. Youth have shared the CENI's voter registration campaign via social networks. For example, youth organisations, including the National Youth Council (CNJ-RDC), contributed to mobilising young people through awareness-raising activities and exchanges in Kinshasa. Young leaders and digital content creators also helped amplify electoral messages through social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and TikTok.

They have also created programmes to combat misinformation and fake news. With the support of IRI, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA), civil society included for the first time three young people (including one woman) in the 2021-2022 consultations initiated by the Political, Administrative and Legal Committee of the National Assembly. IFES helped young people participate in the electoral reform process launched in 2021 to reform the Organic Law of the CENI and in 2022 to reform the Electoral Law.[34] These initiatives have sparked new attention and interest among young people regarding electoral issues and participation.

Civil society organisations have approached schools and universities to raise awareness among students of voting age. However, these efforts are limited by internal school policies. State schools teach civics and ethics, but the curriculum is incomplete and not regularly updated. The allocated lesson time is insufficient. The Elykia Institute, as part of its advocacy, has prepared a draft proposal for a new civic and voter education curriculum, which has been shared with various partners. However, so far, nothing concrete has materialised.

Not all stakeholders have played their part fully. Political parties, for example, for whom registration operations should be equally crucial, merely use young people as party agents. Political party candidates are not infrequently accused to exploit youth to commit political violence. Young people interviewed for this research recommended that civil society organise training sessions for the youth , as they have little confidence in the leaders of these groups. Civil society lobbied parliament during the last electoral reforms to disqualify candidates who use state resources for their campaigns, in order to level the playing field for new young entrant candidates.



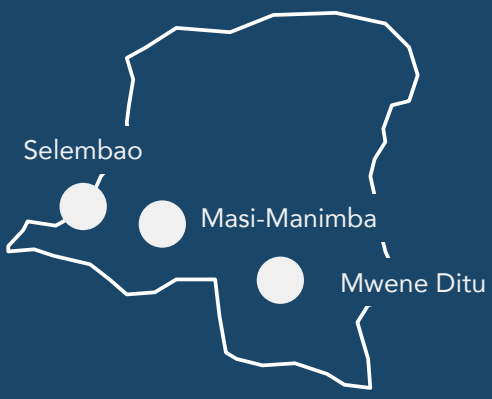
34 At the same time, IFES supported young people in participating in major meetings with donors, particularly USAID, the U.S. Embassy, Norway, and Canada. It also organized a group of 15 young people whom they trained throughout the process. IRI, for its part, had established a youth team called IRI Bilenge. These activities and the resulting interest inspired some young people to continue their training in order to acquire knowledge and take part in technical discussions on electoral participation. Others set up electoral outreach groups within their respective organizations.

## The experience of three young first-time candidates in the 2023 elections

Georges, a candidate for the provincial election in the Masi-Manimba electoral district, organised transportation for groups of young people and women to registration centres, a practice that is borderline legal as open to manipulation and potential vote-buying: however he was convinced  it could help voters understand more his commitment and seriousness . In the process, he faced several obstacles, such as a widespread lack of awareness and information on the registration centre locations, especially in rural areas; long distances to registration centres; issues with poor-quality equipment which significantly slowed operations at the centres; inadequately trained staff, many of whom were overwhelmed, resulting in delays and confusion; and, finally, a lack of interest on the part of some young people who had lost confidence in the electoral process.

Tshitshi a candidate in the provincial election for the Mwene Ditu electoral district, had never voted before. He found it challenging to compete, particularly in raising public awareness around his candidacy, asmany voters manifested to him their disillusionment with past elections and with elections in general. Tshibanda was from an area where the only available transport was by motorbike, but fares were high. On several occasions, he and his team were attacked by supporters of incumbent candidates. He discovered that, in the field, everything depends on money.

Dorcas, candidate for municipal elections in Kinshasa, had initially prepared to run for the provincial elections. She had fulfilled all the eligibility requirements and duly submitted the documents requested by her political grouping. However, at the last minute, her candidacy was switched, and her name appeared on the list of candidates for the municipal council instead. She was informed that, as a young woman, she should first gain political experience and build her visibility at the neighbourhood level within Selembao municipality before aspiring to higher office. As a young female candidate, she had to overcome persistent gender and age stereotypes, with some people questioning her leadership abilities and considering politics to be a space better suited to older and more experienced candidates. These challenges made it more difficult for her to mobilise her community and encourage citizens to participate in the electoral process.



# Lessons Learned

Without up-to-date census data, there is no reliable demographic baseline to assess whether the voter register accurately reflects the composition of the electorate, including young people who become eligible to vote for the first time. This is especially complex for a country like DRC with the unique features highlighted in this study.

This makes it difficult to verify whether youth are adequately represented in the voter register and whether all eligible young citizens have been effectively reached during voter registration. In the absence of a new census, meaningful demographic audits would need to involve verification. But as long as the voter register remains single-use, field audits are not considered worthwhile. The audit of the 2018 voter register conducted by the International Francophone Organisation (OIF) was thorough; the 2023 audit, however, reported only on technical aspects and did not conduct demographic screening of the integrity of the voter register. The voting age was only examined at the national level.[35]

In 2022 the Prime Minister issued a series of decrees[36] designed to synergise the voter register, the civil status register and the general population census. The plan was to pool human, technical, logistical and material resources dedicated to technology, operational mapping and field staff. The CENI and the National Office for Population Identification (Office national de l'identification de la population - ONIP) were to simultaneously identify and register the electorate. This move was seen as an attempt to postpone the elections scheduled for December 2023 and was criticised by stakeholders in the electoral process.

As a result, voter registration in 2023 was carried out by CENI without sharing data with the civil register (ONIP) and the statistics bureau (INS). After voter registration was finished, a copy of the voter register was provided by the CENI to the government through the Ministry of the Interior for data processing. The original aim was to collect, alongside the data needed for the voter register, population registration data on behalf of the ONIP to develop a national identification system.

Over successive electoral cycles, the CENI has strengthened the technical integrity of the voter register, including through the introduction of online pre-registration. Building on these improvements, future reforms could reduce the burden on young voters by allowing those with complete biometric records to update their registration online instead of repeating the entire biometric enrolment process. At the same time, maintaining an updated register through the removal of deceased or emigrated voters would improve the accuracy of the voter roll while making it easier to identify and register newly eligible young voters. If the current register is reused for the next electoral cycle, combining a demographic audit with the completion of the planned national census would provide a stronger basis for assessing whether the voter register is representative, inclusive and responsive to the continued growth of the youth electorate.



35 CENI, "Rapport Final de l'Audit Externe du Fichier Electoral de la CENI, Mai 2023" (Kinshasa : CENI, 2023),

36 Decree no. 22/09 of 2 March 2022.

# Recommendations

## Legal reforms

- Conduct an independent review and revision of the electoral legal framework.
- In the context of this reform, consideration should be given to introducing a youth quota for candidates.
- Additionally, in the context of reforming the legal framework, introduce measures to enhance the independence of the CENI and to ensure full transparency of its operations.
- Consider making voter registration a permanent and not an "ad hoc" process, and prepare a plan for integration with the civil registration process.

## To DRC institutions

- Raise public awareness of the need to register all births in a timely manner.
- Conduct a population census to enable the compilation of a national civil register.
- Strengthen the capacities of decentralised territorial entities and deconcentrated entities to ensure the efficient issue of civil status documents at the local level.
- Encourage the production of a wider and longer national civic and electoral education programme that defines awareness-raising tools and involves the ministries responsible for education (the Ministry of Primary, Secondary and Technical Education and the Ministry of Higher and University Education)

To the CENI

- Consider preserving biometric voter registration data across multiple cycles to enable online re-registration.
- Provide for an electronically downloadable voter card exclusively linked to individual biometric security features.
- Improve access to registration centres for young people with disabilities.
- Ensure that electoral agents (young people) are trained in the various stages of the process, with particular emphasis on registration procedures and the management of registration centres.
- Publish voter registration and voter turnout statistics disaggregated by age, sex and disability to strengthen evidence-based electoral planning and monitoring, particularly regarding youth participation.
- Establish a dedicated unit within the CENI advisor for Youth engagement and participation.

## To civil society and international partners

- Encouraging and supporting youth-led initiatives focus on age groups that are under-registered as per the data in the study
- Develop a comprehensive intervention map and implement an aid and subsidy policy targeted at young Congolese.

## To all stakeholders

- Strengthen the culture of democracy and dialogue.
- Conduct youth surveys to understand abstention better.
- Organise mass mobilisation to improve the quality of the young electorate.
- Provide local awareness-raising to combat the manipulation of young people, especially in schools and student circles, and to improve the quality of the youth electorate.

## To political parties

- Help young candidates improve generational representation by providing them with training.

# Annex

## UNDP 2004-2006 Assistance Budget[37]

| Objectif | Besoins financiers pour le programme de 2 ans ($US) | Besoins financiers pour la première année ($US) |
|---|---|---|
| **Equipement et fonctionnement de la CEI** | **30 000 000** | **18 000 000** |
| **Recensement des électeurs** | **101 000 000** | **101 000 000** |
| Matériel d'inscription (inclus transports) | 40 000 000 | 40 000 000 |
| Transport matériel et personnel | 10 000 000 | 10 000 000 |
| Stockage du matériel | 1 000 000 | 1 000 000 |
| Formation, sensibilisation, éducation | 9 500 000 | 9 500 000 |
| Coût du personnel | 28 500 000 | 28 500 000 |
| Production des listes | 3 000 000 | 3 000 000 |
| Imprévu 10% | 9 000 000 | 9 000 000 |
| **Organisation du référundum** | **37 500 000** | |
| Liste | 3 000 000 | |
| Matériel | 5 500 000 | |
| Transport matériel et personnel | 9 000 000 | |
| Formation, sensibilisation, éducation | 13 500 000 | |
| Stockage du matériel | 1 000 000 | |
| Coût du personnel | 2 000 000 | |
| Imprévu 10% | 3 500 000 | |
| **Organisation de scrutins électoraux** | **112 500 000** | |
| Liste | 12 000 000 | |
| Matériel | 16 500 000 | |
| Transport matériel et personnel | 22 000 000 | |
| Formation, sensibilisation, éducation | 2 500 000 | |
| Stockage du matériel | 42 000 000 | |
| Coût du personnel | 9 000 000 | |
| Imprévu 10% | 8 500 000 | |
| **TOTAL ELECTIONS** | **281 000 000** | **119 000 000** |

| Digital registration | |
|---|---|
| **1 Notebook** | USD 1100 |
| **1 Office 2003** | USD 170 |
| **50 CD Media** | USD 10 |
| **1 Digital Camera** | USD 25 |
| **1 Printer** | USD 500 |
| **1 Fingerprint scanner** | USD 450 |
| **3000 cards** | USD 500 |
| **1 Battery** | USD 450 |
| **1 Generator** | USD 65 |
| **1 Software** | USD 425 |
| **1 Suitcase** | USD 160 |
| **Total price per kit** | USD 3855 |
| **Price per voter** | USD 1.26-1.52 |
| **DRC –total cost per voter appr.** | USD 4.20 |

38

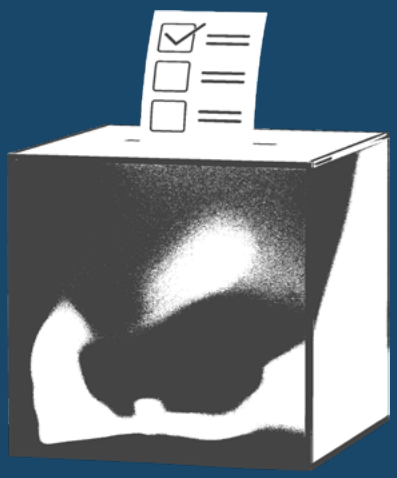
37 Flavien Misoni, "Presentation on Identification et Enrolement des Electeurs en RDC," EC-UNDP Joint Task Force on Electoral Assistance, October 24, 2007

38 "Joint Training on Effective Electoral Assistance DAY 5, European Commission United Nations Development Programme International IDEA," EC-UNDP Joint Task Force on Electoral Assistance, October 2007

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This case study was conducted by Yiaga Africa is a non-profit civic hub of changemakers committed to building a people-driven, democratic, and developed Africa. Established in 2007 as a student-led initiative at the University of Jos, Nigeria, Yiaga Africa has emerged as one of Africa's leading civic organizations advancing democratic governance, human rights, and active citizenship. Through innovative programming and evidence-driven advocacy, we empower citizens to demand accountability, influence public policy, and actively shape their societies.

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# YOUTH VOTER REGISTRATION COSTS & CHALLENGES

## DRC

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Under the project WYDE Civic Engagement