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YOUTH VOTER REGISTRATION COSTS & CHALLENGES KENYA

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The voter registration process serves as a litmus test of any democracy's commitment to the core value of participation. It acts as the gateway through which citizens gain access to the ballot and, consequently, a voice in governance. With a median age of only 19 years, the profile of the Kenyan voter is young, mobile, digitally literate and increasingly connected.

Yet, despite this potential, millions of young Kenyans remain unregistered, sidelined from participation in the electoral process.

In recent years, the number of young people registered to vote has been in decline. In the 2022 elections, for example, youth registration dropped by 5.27% compared to 2017, despite the growing youth population, as 18- to 34-year-olds make up 29% of the total population.[1] Voter apathy affects all age groups, but is particularly pronounced among young voters. In the lead-up to the 2022 election, the country's electoral agency added only 2.5 million voters to the register, which is less than half of its target of 6 million. This target group primarily consisted of young people, especially first-time voters who had turned 18 since the country's last census in 2019. This is in contrast to the period between the 2013 and 2017 elections, when the agency added 5.2 million voters.

This case study examines the complex landscape of Kenya's voter registration system, focusing on the legal framework, costs, barriers to registration and lessons learned from youth voter participation initiatives. Central to this analysis are insights gathered from interviews with key electoral stakeholders, including the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), the Office of the Registrar of Political Parties, local grant-making organisations, election observation groups, student associations and national and local youth-serving organisations – all of which have significantly contributed to shaping the registration landscape over the years.

This case study also distils lessons learned from past and ongoing youth voter registration initiatives to highlight successful strategies, innovative approaches and potential pitfalls.

The main factors contributing to low youth voter registration identified in this research are apathy, a lack of required identification documents and mistrust in the election management body. Since voters are identified using both biometrics and national ID cards, integrating civil and voter registration processes could offer a powerful solution to ensure that every young person is captured in the system, first at birth as a citizen, and then automatically at 18 as a registered voter. Whether it is by leveraging mobile technology, fostering stronger community partnerships, or expanding civic education efforts, a comprehensive approach is essential in order to unlock the full power of youth participation in Kenya's democracy.

1 National Council for Population and Development (NCPD), State of Kenya Population Report: 2023 (Nairobi: NCPD, 2023),

Background

The voter registration system in Kenya has evolved significantly since its inception in 1962. The process, now governed by a robust legal framework, is designed to ensure inclusivity, accessibility, accuracy, credibility and sustainability.[2] The following are the main laws governing voter registration:

a. The 2010 Constitution of Kenya provides the overarching legal structure. It establishes the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) and sets out the principles for elections and voter registration,

b. The Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission Act, No. 9 of 2011, defines the role and responsibilities of the IEBC,

c. The Elections Act, No. 24 of 2011 and the Elections (General) Regulations, Law No. 128 of 2012 provide detailed provisions for the conduct of elections, including voter registration,

d. The Registration of Persons Act, revised 2012, links voter eligibility to the possession of national identity cards,

e. The voter registration system in Kenya is not only crucial for the electoral process but also intersects with various laws, including the Political Parties Act, No. 11 of 2010 and the Kenya Citizenship and Immigration Act, No. 12 of 2011.

The primary responsibility for voter registration and maintaining the register lies with the IEBC, Kenya's electoral management body. The IEBC is responsible for ensuring the accuracy of the register and for operations such as updating, continuous registration and periodic mass voter registration exercises.[3] The process involves cooperation with the National Registration Bureau, the Registrar of Births and Deaths and the Department of Immigration. This collaborative data-sharing occurs during the updating of the voter register – the IEBC makes requests to analyse specific data contained in the databases of these agencies. It should be noted that the IEBC's data protection policy ensures that only "need-to-know" data is shared with other agencies, excluding data that is specific to the voter register, such as polling station data and contact information. The IEBC has expressed satisfaction with the level of inter-agency cooperation.[4]

Through continuous voter registration, the IEBC regularly[5] updates the voter register by adding eligible voters, effecting transfers and maintaining accuracy through deletions and corrections. The process is ongoing, with specific exceptions for general elections, by-elections and referendums. For general elections, voter registration ends 60 days before election day. This applies to both general elections and run-off elections. For a by-election, registration is closed from the date of the declaration of the vacancy of the pertinent seat until the date of the by-election. These closures prevent the fraudulent transfer of voters to influence the outcome. In the case of a referendum, registration is not permitted between the date of the publication of the referendum and the date of voting (90 days). In addition to continuous registration, the IEBC conducts enhanced voter registration exercises before significant elections. The aim of these intensive, month-long exercises is to provide as many people as possible with the opportunity to register through extensive public awareness campaigns, the activation of additional registration centres the deployment of additional resources. To enhance youth participation, the IEBC established the Youth Coordinating Committee, a consortium of youth-led and youth-serving organisations that promote peace and good governance. It conducts and coordinates activities, providing young people with constructive opportunities to engage with the electoral process. The IEBC also partners with the University and Colleges Students' Peace Association of Kenya (UCSPAK) to promote the registration of university and college students.

The voter registration system incorporates an automated biometric identification system that identifies and removes duplicates from the voter register. Voter registration is not compulsory and eligible citizens have the right to choose whether to register. Diaspora voters are also eligible for registration at centres established by diplomatic missions wherever there are at least 3,000 eligible citizens. Short-term voter address changes are allowed through a "transfer of registration" process. On election day, the biometric voter registration (BVR) system serves as the primary method for voter identification, supplemented by a national identity card or a valid passport.

2 Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), Voter Registration Manual: Source Book (Nairobi: IEBC, 2016), 10

3 Section 8A of the Elections Act 2011 (as amended in 2017) calls for the audit of the register of voters by a "professional, reputable firm" for the purpose of "(a) verifying the accuracy of the Register; (b) recommending mechanisms of enhancing the accuracy of the Register; and updating the register." Accordingly, the IEBC in 2017 and in 2022 engaged auditors (KPMG) for this exercise (see report). The Elections Observation Group (ELOG) also undertook an independent citizen-led audit of the register with the aim of establishing its accuracy, comprehensiveness and timeliness (see report).

4 Key informant interview with IEBC officials.

5 Continuous voter registration and enhanced voter registration are used by the IEBC to target specific groups of eligible voters, mostly young people who have reached voting age.

There is no fee or charge for voter registration itself, but individuals are responsible for their travel costs to registration centres, as well as for the applicable fees for the required documents. In arid and semi-arid areas, as well as many rural parts of Kenya, citizens often have to travel long distances to register. The IEBC is mandated to ensure the broadest possible participation in elections and to assess the requirements for a successful voter registration exercise, which include scope, number of registration centres, duration, logistics, as well as personnel and equipment costs. A budget proposal with detailed financial projections and justifications is prepared based on this assessment. It is presented to the National Treasury and the National Assembly for approval, in accordance with Section 21 of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission Act, No. 9 of 2011. Although this act also establishes an IEBC Fund, this has not been activated.

The oversight and verification of voter registration expenditures in Kenya involves multiple mechanisms and authorities. Firstly, the IEBC employs internal auditors who are responsible for reviewing financial records, receipts and expenditures to ensure compliance with budgetary allocations and financial regulations. Secondly, the Office of the Auditor-General, an independent constitutional office, conducts audits of the IEBC's financial transactions to ensure the appropriate use of public funds, in accordance with Section 23 of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission Act.[6] Thirdly, Kenya's Parliament, in particular the National Assembly, exercises oversight through parliamentary committees such as the Public Accounts Committee, which scrutinises the IEBC's budget and expenditures to ensure transparency and accountability. Lastly, beyond governmental oversight, public and civil society organisations, including Transparency International - Kenya, actively monitor the IEBC's financial activities and raise concerns about any discrepancies or irregularities.

Data on voter registration provided by the IEBC indicates a positive overall trend, with approximately 14.4 million, 19.6 million and 22.1 million Kenyans registered as voters in the general elections of 2013, 2017 and 2022. Data by age group, however, presents a different picture for those aged 18 to 34 years (youth registration): 6.8 million young people were registered in the 2013 general elections, 10 million in 2017, but only 8.6 million in 2022. Data from a 2022 Elections Observation Group (ELOG) survey[7] indicated possible explanations for this downturn in youth voter registration.

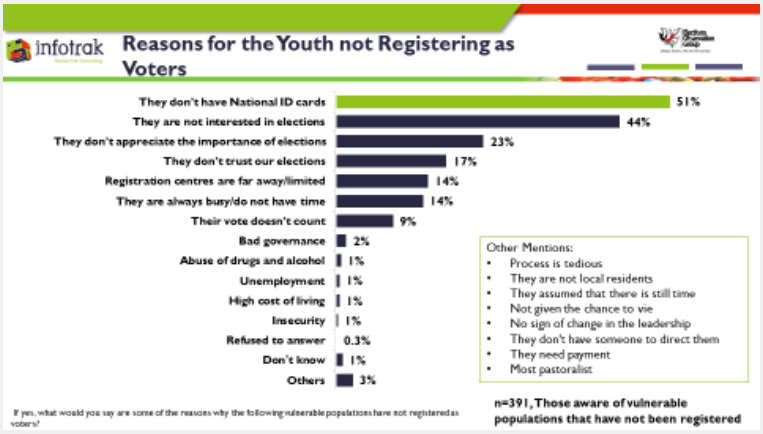


Figure 1. Reasons for youth not registering as voters in Kenya (Source: ELOG 2022 Elections Observation Report)

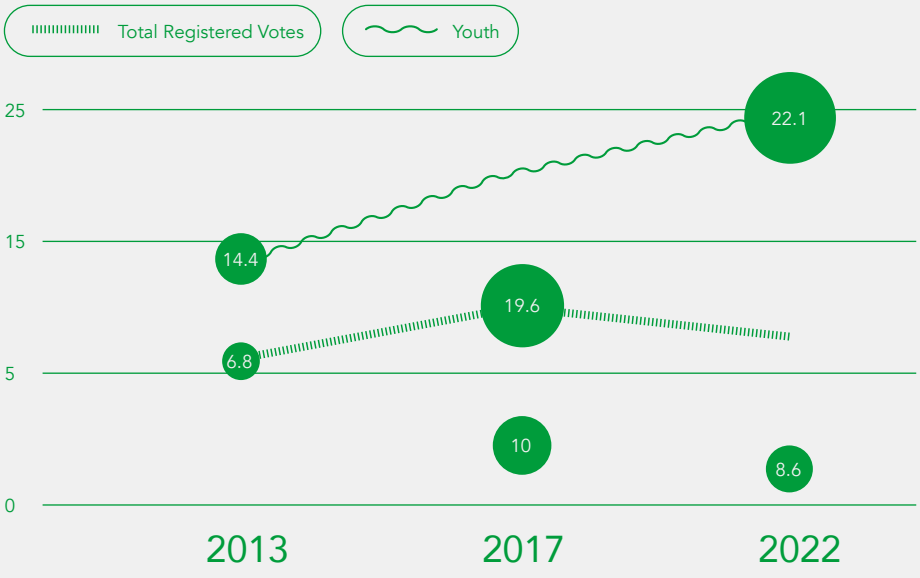


Figure 2. Data breakdown by age (Source: ELOG 2022 Observation Report)

6 Office of the Auditor-General, Report of the Auditor-General on the National Government Ministries, Departments and Agencies for the year 2022/2023, (Nairobi, Office of the Auditor-General, 2024), 626

7 Elections Observation Group (ELOG), The Unaccounted Voice: A Report on Public Attitudes on Inclusion of Special Interest Groups in Electoral Processes (Nairobi: ELOG, 2022), 24

Electoral officials interviewed ascribed the 2013-2017 increase in youth registration to targeted voter registration campaigns. The interviewees stressed the importance of the IEBC's strategic partnerships with youth-led organisations, including those at universities and colleges, in successful awareness-raising efforts, together with the door-to-door mobilisation by political leaders and parties.

It was also noted that the sharpest percentage increase from 2013 to 2017 was in the 26- to 35-year age group, which doubled from 15% in 2013 to 33.4% in 2017. The proportion of registered voters in the 18- to 25-year age group did not, however, change significantly in relation to the total registered voters: 17% in 2013 and 17.14% in 2017. No clear evidence has emerged to explain this marked difference between the two age groups, but it highlights the need to specifically target this younger, digitally savvy group in future awareness-raising.

Election Year	Total Number of Registered Voters	Male	Female	Youth	Prisoners	Diaspora Voters
2013	14,388,781	51%	49%	46%[8]		2,637[9]
2017	19,611,423	53%	47%	51%	5,528[10]	4,224
2022	22,102,532	50.88%	49.12%	39.84%	7,483	10,443

Figure 3. Registered voters (Source: Post-election evaluation reports 2013, 2017, 2022: IEBC)



8 Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), Post-Election Evaluation Report on the March 4th 2013 General Elections (Nairobi: IEBC, 2014), 90.

9 Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), Data Report of 2017 Elections (Nairobi: IEBC, 2020), 89.

10 European Union Election Observation Mission, Final Report Republic of Kenya General Elections 2017 (Nairobi: EU-EOM-Kenya, 2017); Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), The Post Election Evaluation Report for August 8, 2017 General Election and October 26, 2017 Fresh Presidential Election (Nairobi: IEBC, 2018), 89.

Case Study

Meet Felix – he has just turned 18 and is looking forward to voting in his very first election. Like many young Kenyans, he is keen to make his voice heard. But before he can register to vote, there are a few important steps he has to take.

First things first: Felix needs to prove that:

- He's old enough to vote,
- He's a Kenyan citizen,
- And he lives in the area where he wants to register.

To do this, he has to collect the required documents. He brings along his birth certificate, his religious and school leaving certificates and a letter from the chief administrative officer confirming that he lives in his local area. Since both his parents are alive, he also needs to present copies of their ID cards to confirm his citizenship. If his parents were deceased, he would have needed their death certificates instead.

With everything in hand, Felix heads to the Huduma Centre, a government one-stop-shop that handles services like issuing IDs. He hands over his documents, and receives a 'waiting card' , which proves he has applied for a national ID — but it is not over just yet.

Felix is told to come back in 10 working days to collect his official national ID card.

Once he finally has that all-important ID in his hands, Felix takes the next big step: he visits the IEBC constituency office to officially register as a voter.

Now, he's ready. Felix is not just an 18-year-old – he is an engaged citizen, ready to vote and shape the future of his country.



Figure 4: IEBC Voter Registration Process (Source: IEBC)

Voter Registration Costs

Kenyan elections are some of the most expensive in the world.[11] For example, the total approved estimates for the 2022 General Election were Ksh 46,922,889,376 (€332,464,000), comprising Ksh 24,405,157,364 (€172,994,000) in the 2021/22 financial year and Ksh 22,527,211,012 (€159,470,000) in the 2022/23 financial year. The total expenditure was Ksh 36,432,443,153 (€258,267,000), which comprised Ksh 20,762,051,224 (€147,108,000) in 2021/22 and Ksh 15,670,391,929 (€111,159,000) in the 2022/23 financial year.

While the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission Act specifies that the IEBC may receive grants, donations or other endowments, from late 2020, government institutions, such as the IEBC, were not permitted to receive donor funding. In January 2022, however, a policy change occurred, and the government made an official appeal to the international community for technical assistance in electoral preparedness. The donor community, understandably, found it challenging to respond to such a late request. As a result, international community representatives noted that support for the IEBC was largely limited to activities that could be implemented in the months immediately prior to the elections. The net effect was that critical activities that normally take place earlier in the electoral cycle such as voter education, audit of the voter register, training poll officials and strategic communications were delayed and, consequently, less effective.

In the case of the 2017 general election, financing from the state budget spanned three financial years: 2015/16, 2016/2017 and 2017/2018. The funds were secured through the government's Medium-Term Expenditure Framework budgeting process, guided by the Strategic Plan 2015-2020 and the Election Operations Plan 2015-2017. The IEBC received an allocation of KES 53,530,000 (€363,679,598)[12] for the 2017 general election, a significant increase compared to 2013. This increase was primarily due to a rise in the number of polling stations, from 31,981 in 2013 to 40,833 in 2017.

Looking back at the 2013 elections, the Commission's initial budget of Ksh 24.7 billion (€167,810,313) was later reduced to Ksh 24.3 billion (€174,807,121) by the National Treasury. The actual expenditure for operations, voter registration, voter education, administration and planning activities reached Ksh 28 billion (€207,561,156), leaving the IEBC with a deficit of Ksh 4 billion (€28,773,724). International donors contributed Ksh2.6 billion (€18,696,550), which was utilised for hiring logistic staff, training security personnel, promoting women's empowerment and developing an early warning system for conflict resolution.

For the 2013 general elections, the overall expenditure[13] for voter registration amounted to Ksh 4,096,875,000 (€29,687,500), excluding capital expenses related to the procurement of biometric voter registration (BVR) kits. As a result, the unit cost for registering a voter was Ksh 283 (€2.05). The registration of 2,637 Kenyans living abroad incurred significantly higher costs: Ksh 12,937,500 (€93,750).

In 2022, IEBC was allocated a total of KSh. 44,852,431,776 (€325,017,621). This comprised KSh 23,165,591,776 (€167,866,607) in FY 2021/22 and KSh 21,686,840,000 (€157,151,014) in the 2022/23 financial year, funded through the exchequer. The total actual expenditure amounted to Ksh. 34,541,701,548, which comprised Ksh 19,682,558,582 (€ 142,627,236) in the 2021/22 financial year and Ksh 14,859,142,966 (€ 107,674,940) in the 2022/23 financial year. The allocation for mass voter registration was Ksh 2,359,158,917 (€17,095,34) for verification of the voter register Ksh 1,334,923,528 (€9,673,358) and for diaspora voter registration Ksh 255,820,000 (€1,853,768) with actual expenditures of Ksh 2,359,158,917 (€17,095,354), Ksh 1,244,974,355 (€9,021,553) and Ksh 236,037,000 (€1,710,413) respectively.

The data indicates overall IEBC absorption was fair but reduced considerably following the elections, with around 77% (Sh34.54bn) of the Sh44.85bn allocated over the two financial years being disbursed.The overall absorption rate of the IEBC's budget is illustrated below:

a. Total utilization rose by approximately 85% in financial year 2021/2022 (election year) to nearly 68% in 2022/2023 financial year (post election year). This would imply a 100 percent execution of the released funds, with expenditure decreasing substantially after elections-indicating post election activities being delayed and an Exchequer disbursement shortfall, rather than the decreased demand around post-electoral activities

11 Dennis Musau, "Kenya's August Elections among the World's Most Expensive," Citizen Digital, July 26, 2022.

12 Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), The Post-Election Evaluation Report for the August 8, 2017 General Election and October 26 , 2017 Fresh Presidential Election (Nairobi: IEBC, 2018)

13 The Ksh 4.097 billion spent on voter registration covered the operational costs of conducting the nationwide biometric voter registration exercise, excluding the one-time capital cost of procuring Biometric Voter Registration (BVR) kits. These operational costs included recruiting and training registration staff, transporting personnel and equipment, voter education and public awareness campaigns, ICT support and data processing, printing voter registers and registration materials, security, administrative expenses, and supervision of the registration exercise. By excluding the procurement of BVR kits and other biometric hardware, the figure reflects the recurring costs of implementing voter registration rather than the initial investment in the technology itself.

b. Mass Voter Registration (MVR), Voter Register Verification and diaspora voter registration however show full absorption (100 percent 93 percent and92 percent respectively

The data also implies that IEBC had front loaded expenditure against voters registration at expense of post elections activities that resulted in underspendin in 2022/2023.

ACTIVITY	APPROVED BUDGET			ACTUAL EXPENDITURE		
	FY 2021/22	FY 2022/23	TOTAL	FY 2021/22	FY 2022/23	TOTAL
Mass Voter Registration	2,564,158,917	-	2,564,158,917	2,359,158,917		2,359,158,917
Register of Voters Verification	1,334,923,528	-	1,334,923,528	1,244,974,355		1,244,974,355
Transport	557,961,759	3,124,059,321	3,682,021,080	551,412,683	2,748,248,345	3,299,661,028
Nomination and Candidate Registration	347,471,000	77,150,000	424,621,000	302,471,000	47,150,000	349,621,000
Tallying Center Activities- County & Constituency	107,821,000	69,540,000	177,361,000	107,821,000	69,540,000	177,361,000
National Tallying & Election Center	108,360,000	219,760,000	328,120,000	88,360,000	219,760,000	308,120,000
Wages		6,075,200,000	6,075,200,000		5,401,005,303	5,401,005,303
Diaspora Voter Registration	255,820,000	-	255,820,000	236,037,000		236,037,000
Planning Meetings	102,270,000	-	102,270,000	102,270,000		102,270,000
Training of Poling Officials	94,517,000	2,415,502,530	2,510,019,530	94,517,000	2,351,310,868	2,445,827,868
Training Materials	196,997,380	-	196,997,380	156,997,380		156,997,380
Voter Education, Partnership and Coordination	1,242,076,800	457,079,000	1,699,155,800	1,120,978,309	307,079,000	1,428,057,309
General Election Materials	6,322,125,230	896,928,255	7,219,053,485	4,543,774,729	249,156,148	4,792,930,877
Diaspora Polling Activities		70,735,000	70,735,000		50,817,775	50,817,775
Legal and Compliance	201,180,521	1,031,685,382	1,232,865,903	201,180,521	516,747,181	717,927,702
ICT	4,555,599,568	1,148,530,000	5,704,129,568	4,530,678,921	819,173,417	5,349,852,338
Boundary Delimitation	69,132,000		69,132,000	59,132,000		59,132,000
Other Election Related Expenditures	580,385,297	1,678,993,950	2,259,379,247	414,750,897	1,315,023,500	1,729,774,397
Commission Normal Activities	4,524,791,776	4,421,676,562	8,946,468,338	3,568,043,870	764,131,429	4,332,175,299
TOTAL	23,165,591,776	21,686,840,000	44,852,431,776	19,682,558,582	14,859,142,966	34,541,701,548

Figure 5. IEBC Election expenditure (Source: National Treasury)[14]

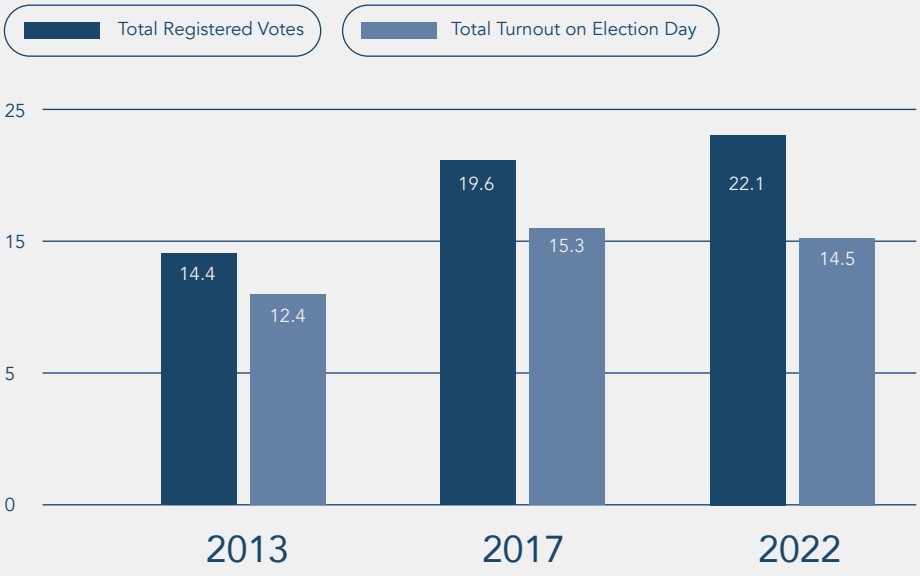


Figure 6. Total registered voters and voters in general elections (Source: Post-election evaluation reports 2013, 2017, 2022, IEBC)

The analysis reveals that the IEBC has not been able to finance its operations fully and continues to operate at a deficit. The net effect of underfunding and delays in the disbursement of funds is that critical activities, particularly voter education and other planned pre-electoral activities, are either not carried out or are carried out with significant delays, resulting in limited effectiveness.

Although significant investments have been made in voter registration and the number of registered voters is increasing, this growth is not reflected in actual voting, as shown in Figure 5 above.

According to the graph above, 22,120,458 voters were registered in 2022, marking an increase of 2,509,035 from the 2017 register of 19,611,423 voters. Of these, 8,812,790 (approximately 39.8%) were young people aged between 18 and 34 years.[15] The voter turnout on election day was 64.77%, a decline from the 78% turnout observed in the 2017 General Election. This decrease was attributed to factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, economic constraints, insecurity, drought, fear of election-related violence and a polarised political environment.

14 National Treasury, Post-election Economic and Fiscal Report (Nairobi, National Treasury, 2022), 26.

15 Nijau Gitu, "GITU: Youth lethargy in elections revealed in voters register," The Star, June 29, 2022.

Barriers to Youth Voter Registration

Socio-cultural

The active participation of young people in the electoral process is crucial for fostering a vibrant, representative and sustainable democracy. However, significant barriers to youth voter registration remain. The main socio-cultural barriers relate to the style and modalities of communication. According to the 2019 census, 75% of the population of 47.6 million is under the age of 35, with youth (18-34 years) accounting for 29% of the total population. Data published in relation to advertising on the top social media platforms indicates that there were 10.15 million Kenyan users aged 18 and above at the start of 2023, which was equivalent to 33.6% of the then total population aged 18 and above. Given that most first-time voters fall within the 18- to 22-year-old age group, the IEBC's reliance on traditional platforms such as public forums, TV and radio for voter education in the 2022 elections failed to resonate with tech-savvy youth. According to UCSPAK, this demographic perceived the communication and awareness-raising strategies of the IEBC as outdated and unappealing.

An effort was made to leverage social media platforms for mobilisation and voter education drives in 2022; however, the approach lacked a well-structured plan and there were delays in developing voter education materials specifically tailored for social media.

In certain regions, during the 2022 electoral cycle, there were instances where IEBC officials reportedly hesitated to accept support from youth groups, leading to internal resistance from the youth-led movements and initiatives.

Of particular concern is the increase in coordinated fake news and misinformation campaigns against the IEBC on social media platforms. Manipulated images, misinformation posts and artificially amplified hashtags are used to question the independence and credibility of the electoral administration, with the IEBC frequently portrayed as a puppet of various political factions. This undermines trust in the electoral management body and discourages eligible voters from taking part in elections and young people from registering as voters.

There are also specific cultural barriers associated with the requirement for physical voter presence during biometric procedures, including face recognition. This poses a problem for some young women in certain areas, such as the North-East, where women are expected to cover their faces.

Economic

While there are no direct economic barriers to voter registration, which is free of charge, obtaining a National Identification Card (ID) incurs a cost. In a recent survey, the majority (51%) of young people who did not register cited the lack of a valid ID card as the reason for not registering.[21] To date, Kenyan citizens have only been charged Ksh 100 (€0.71) for replacing an ID, and there has been no fee for a first-time ID application. The government has proposed new fees of Ksh 300 (€2.15) for new applicants and Ksh 1,000 (€7.18) for replacements; however, due to a court injunction, these new fees have not yet come into effect. Given the increasing cost of living, young people may choose not to register or replace their IDs if these new fees are implemented.

The need to travel to voter registration centres imposes an additional financial burden. This distance-related cost is a significant barrier for Kenyans with limited financial means or those who face lengthy travel times. This results in disparities in accessibility.

In focus group discussions, youth-serving organisations expressed dissatisfaction with the inadequate or restricted funding for their voter registration education initiatives. The available resources predominantly favoured mainstream organisations that did not specifically prioritise youth participation and were mainly focused on electoral reforms or mentorship programmes for candidates, leaving limited financial resources for initiatives specifically aimed at educating and engaging young voters.

16 National Council for Population and Development, The State of Kenya Population 2020 (Nairobi: National Council for Population and Development, 2020).

17 Sharon Njeru, "Entangling the 'Web' of Social Media among the Youth," Citizen Digital, July 26, 2022.

18 According to a Huawei report released in June 2018, Kenya ranked top in sub-Saharan Africa in internet connectivity and investment enabling technology

19 Key informant interview with USCPAK.

20 Eliud Kibii, "IEBC's Post-election Report Silent on Youth," The Star, March 5, 2023. In this article, a number or youth-led organisations blame the IEBC for refusing to involve them in planning and executing voter registration. During the key informant interviews, however, the IEBC officials indicated young people were involved through the Youth Coordinating Council and other partnerships with youth organisations.

21 ELOG, The Unaccounted Voice, 24.

Further, some financial barriers to registration have already been mentioned, particularly the challenge of ensuring the timely availability of funds for youth-critical activities such as voter education and registration campaigns during the pre-election stages of the electoral cycle. Two additional financial barriers need to be addressed.

a. First and foremost, there is a lack of adequate funding for the IEBC. Throughout the previous electoral cycle and until less than a year before the 2022 elections, parliament allocated only funds for day-to-day operations. Minimal resources were designated for programmes such as continuous voter registration and voter education, both of which are core constitutional responsibilities. This explains the consistently low voter registration figures, which typically register an increase only during the intensified mass voter registration campaigns. In contrast to previous elections, where substantial funding from development partners supported voter registration efforts, in 2022, donors prioritised electoral reform instead.

b. Second, the impact of the high cost of living on youth voter registration is significant. The costs associated with registration, including obtaining or replacing the required documents (such as ID or passport) and travel costs, weigh heavily on those young people who are struggling to make ends meet.

Legal and administrative

In terms of legal and administrative barriers, young people interviewed for this research perceive the voter registration process as "complex".[22] In its report, "Unaccounted Voice" (2022), ELOG noted that 35% of young people aged 30 to 35 cited this complexity as a barrier to their participation.[23] As noted in the section above, 51% of young people surveyed by ELOG stated that they did not register due to the lack of an ID card.[24] Not only are many citizens not in possession of this document, but the time required for processing and issuance also prevents many young people from taking advantage of voter registration drives in their local areas. Options for streamlining the ID issuance process should be examined, as this appears to be the most burdensome aspect of the process for young voters.

Furthermore, a substantial number of IDs remain uncollected, as highlighted in a recent report by the Huduma Centre, stating that there were over 135,071 unclaimed ID cards across the country.[25] Since most new applicants for ID cards are young people, it is reasonable to assume that this age cohort accounts for most of these.

Youth disengagement from the voter registration process also results from the lack of comprehensive information dissemination, primarily due to financial constraints. According to the IEBC, the disbursement of voter education funds is not aligned with the electoral cycle. The funds are made available too close to the election period itself to allow for effective and timely voter education, including voter registration, nominations, election campaigns and the explanation of legal reforms. The pre-election period is critical not only for civic and voter education but also for the development and review of election materials. Last-minute changes to the electoral legal framework are also problematic, as they leave insufficient time to adapt voter education materials.[26] For first-time voters, in particular, voter education is critically important. Timely disbursement of funds and the avoidance of last-minute changes to the legal framework are preconditions for effective voter education and youth registration campaigns.

From the focus group discussions with youth-serving organisations, it was noted that, due to limited voter education on the transfer of voter registration to their places of temporary residence, some young people, especially students, found it challenging and expensive to travel back home to register.

Two major problems were identified regarding registration centres. The first issue is that biometric voter registration (BVR) kits were deployed in educational institutions, such as universities, without proper official notification. This made it difficult to track the movement of the kits and mobile registration booths from one location to another. As a result, students did not receive timely information about the registration process, often learning about the registration drive only after the voter registration booths had been relocated. The second problem is distance. A significant proportion of young people (14%) cited[27] distance as the reason why they did not register as voters. The problem was particularly acute in arid and semi-arid areas, where registration involved lengthy and time-consuming travel. Distance constituted a significant barrier for youth living with disabilities, with 55% of this group citing distance as the reason they did not register.[28]

24 ELOG, The Unaccounted Voice, 24. This affects the youth mostly because the national ID is acquired only at 18 years, but most young people do without IDs altogether.

25 Huduma Kenya, "136,000 IDs uncollected in Huduma centers," Huduma News, August 22,2022.

26 Kenya has a recurring pattern of last-minute electoral law changes that interferes with planning and execution. In 2013, Parliament suspended the new Campaign Financing Act until after the election, so spending went unregulated, while newly introduced biometric and electronic transmission systems failed on polling day, forcing a manual tally that later fueled the presidential petition. In 2017, Parliament first passed changes allowing manual counting just months before the August vote (criticized as a rigging backdoor), then after the Supreme Court annulled that result, rushed through a further amendment before the October re-run making it harder for courts to annul elections and allowing IEBC leadership changes mid-crisis, contributing to an opposition boycott, a commissioner's resignation, and turnout collapsing to under 39%. In 2022, IEBC's 2021 gazettement of a Sh4.4 billion presidential spending cap was revoked weeks later after Parliament rejected the underlying regulations on a technicality, leaving the entire election with no enforceable spending limit at all. In each case, a critical piece of the framework-campaign finance rules, results-transmission methods, or judicial review standard, was suspended, rushed, or struck down in the final stretch, creating the specific gap that shaped post-election disputes, a dynamic now echoing in the 2026 scramble to finalize campaign financing regulations ahead of 2027.

27 ELOG, The Unaccounted Voice, 24.

28 ELOG, The Unaccounted Voice, 24-25.

Youth Voter Registration Initiatives

This section provides an analysis of the efficacy of historical and ongoing initiatives, measures and approaches aimed at overcoming conventional obstacles and enhancing youth voter registration. This includes an examination of civic and voter education campaigns, as well as informal initiatives such as those led by youth or utilising low-cost technology applications that have generated incentives or breakthroughs in specific contexts. To enhance youth registration, the IEBC and other relevant actors have implemented the initiatives presented below.

The IEBC consistently communicates and engages with relevant state and non-state electoral actors to enhance voter registration, including with development partners. Engagements with the media and civil society organisations, such as ELOG, support the involvement of eligible citizens, especially young people. Particularly important in this context is the IEBC Youth Coordinating Committee, which brings together youth-led and youth-serving organisations to promote youth engagement in elections. This committee has played a pivotal role in mobilising young people, conducting voter education initiatives and actively participating in the creation and distribution of voter information, education and communication materials tailored specifically for this demographic. Unfortunately, the committee did not receive adequate funding for the last two elections, which limited its effectiveness and the realisation of its objectives.

In 2022, guided by the voter education Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) developed in 2021, the IEBC collaborated with national, local and community TV, radio and print media platforms to provide voter education across the country and to the diaspora. This engagement with the media industry enhanced the dissemination of voter education messages. The IEBC trained 47 voter education champions who spearheaded the development of voter education messages and the implementation of voter education strategies in the counties. Furthermore, innovative approaches like peer education, drama and the use of local languages have improved outreach, particularly in marginalised communities.[29]



Figure 7. An example of a voter registration campaign by the IEBC Youth Coordinating Committee and IFES for the 2022 elections

The IEBC conducted robust voter education and information programmes for special interest groups[30] to enhance their participation through advocacy forums in the counties, customised audio-visual clips, the engagement of sign language interpreters in all forums, the training of sign language interpreters and the deployment of the Assist ALL mobile app[31] to reach out

29 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Kenya, Enhancing Voter Education in Kenya: Approaches and Experiences (2017).

30 Special interest groups comprise women, persons with disabilities, youth, ethnic and other minorities and marginalized communities.

31 The AssistALL app is a platform where people can find sign language interpreters to facilitate communication between the deaf and the hearing. This free sign language interpreter application was used by the IEBC in the dissemination of election and voter information in preparation for the elections. IEBC partnered with AssistALL to roll out this.

to individuals with hearing impairment. Qualified national and local organisations were accredited to conduct voter education on behalf of the IEBC. After signing a code of conduct for voter educators, the accredited organisations were issued with voter education support materials. A subsequent evaluation revealed that 111 voter education providers were accredited and trained. Other strategies deployed in the voter education initiative included the use of influencers and opinion leaders[32] to disseminate voter education, the use of mobile campaign caravans to reach out to Kenyans at the grassroots and the use of bulk SMS messaging during voter verification and voting.



Figure 8. An example of an interview with the Chairperson of the IEBC Youth Coordinating Committee, streamed on social media

In line with its voter registration mandate, the IEBC is committed to ensuring the registration of citizens residing outside Kenya. The 2012 Elections (Registration of Voters) Regulations set out the procedures for registering Kenyan citizens residing outside the country's borders. In 2015, the IEBC's Policy on Voter Registration and Voting for Citizens Residing Outside Kenya (Diaspora) institutionalised a sustainable electoral process for citizens residing abroad, including young people. It provides for the establishment of registration centres based on official data on residency outside Kenya. For cost-effectiveness, the policy proposes establishing a registration centre in each country where Kenya has a diplomatic presence and a population of at least 3,000 eligible Kenyan citizens registered with the mission or the IEBC. In 2022, the IEBC conducted voter education for the Kenyan diaspora in Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada.

The IEBC conducts continuous voter registration, mass voter registration and enhanced continuous voter registration, which are periodic drives to enlist voters, particularly young people, to register at any point in the election cycle. There is, however, limited awareness among young people of these three registration options, with most opting for the month-long enhanced registration process.

Various state and non-state electoral actors, including ELOG, cooperated with social media companies like Meta to address concerns and develop strategies to moderate and mitigate the dissemination of false information and disinformation related to electoral processes, including voter registration.

The IEBC offers various services to facilitate access to identification and voter registration for persons living with disabilities (PWDs), including young people. Stakeholders are engaged to gather input and mapping is carried out to accommodate the specific needs of PWDs during voter registration.

Mobile registration centres are established to enhance accessibility for PWDs and the public. The registration kit enables the registration officer to record the type of disability, allowing the IEBC to plan for and utilise disability-compliant facilities. Additionally, the Disability Inclusion Coordinating Committee plays a role in mobilisation during enhanced continuous voter registration and in the verification of the register. IEBC also cooperates with institutions such as Disability Mainstreaming Foundation Kenya in the development of braille versions of materials. Furthermore, voter assistance is provided during the processes of voter registration, identification and voting.

Despite the breadth of initiatives, youth voter registration rates have consistently fallen short of targets, indicating that while awareness and access have improved,[33] focus group discussions have revealed that underlying issues such as political apathy, economic hardship and distrust in the electoral process remain significant obstacles to effectiveness. Additionally, the underfunding of key youth-focused committees and the sporadic nature of mass registration drives have limited the sustainability and reach of these interventions, reducing their long-term impact on youth engagement. It is also important to note that technology-driven approaches and partnerships with educational institutions have shown promise, particularly among urban and digitally connected youth populations, but have not entirely bridged the gap in rural or marginalised communities. For youth with disabilities, Inclusive measures by various actors have increased accessibility; however, the overall impact is limited by resource constraints and the need for broader systemic reforms. Overall, while the IEBC and its partners have made significant progress in expanding opportunities and reducing barriers to youth voter registration, the effectiveness of these initiatives is hampered by persistent structural and contextual challenges that require sustained, multifaceted solutions.

32 These are examples of videos using popular personalities to encourage young people to register as voters.

33 IEBC, Post Election Evaluation Report for the 9th August, 2022 General Election, (Nairobi: IEBC, 2022), 35

Lessons Learned

1. The lack of transparent, comprehensive and easily accessible information about election costs remains problematic, not only in terms of transparency and citizen oversight, but also in planning for electoral assistance and support. Addressing this issue is essential for fostering accountability and informed decision-making among stakeholders.

2. The absence of a synchronised registration system in the country, with databases scattered across multiple institutions, makes it particularly difficult for many young people to participate effectively in the political process and opened loopholes for registration impersonation attempts Requiring young people to pay for registration at various institutions serves as a significant disincentive.



3. The economic burden and the associated logistical challenges generally lead young people to view registration as a lesser priority compared to seeking means of livelihood. Similarly, the high costs of political participation, including campaign expenses and nomination fees, further discourage youth from running for office.

4. Stakeholders consistently emphasised the need to ensure that funding is disbursed in accordance with the electoral cycle approach. The early disbursement of funds is a crucial prerequisite for the successful planning and implementation of voter education and registration campaigns, which must commence early in the electoral cycle to have a significant impact.

5. Kenya's comparatively high levels of internet usage and smartphone penetration present both an opportunity to modernise outreach efforts and a challenge, particularly due to the proliferation of misinformation, including fake news. These digital platforms should be leveraged to enhance voter registration services and refine communication strategies, particularly those targeting young and first-time voters.

6. Young people play a pivotal role in the democratic process, yet they continue to face significant barriers to voter registration. Current awareness-raising and communication methods are widely perceived by young people as outdated and unengaging, underscoring the need for more innovative and appealing approaches.

7. Young people perceive the registration process as "complex". Simplifying voter registration and other electoral processes is crucial for reducing barriers and promoting broader engagement, particularly among young people and first-time voters.

8. Civil society organisations play a critical role in promoting transparency, supporting electoral planning and enhancing voter outreach. Their involvement is vital in bridging the gap between electoral institutions and the public and in ensuring that marginalised voices are heard.

9. Building effective partnerships and collaborations among electoral institutions, civil society and other relevant organisations, including educational institutions, is essential for achieving coordinated, inclusive and sustainable voter information and education campaigns.

Recommendations

Integration of civil registry

To reduce the complexity of Kenya's voter registration process, consideration should be given to integrating the civil and voter registration processes. Transitioning from an active to a passive registration model would ensure near-universal registration, with individuals automatically registered as voters upon reaching the age of 18. The IEBC has already recommended strengthening linkages between voter registration and national civil registration activities.[1]

Online voter registration:

The current legal and regulatory framework should be revised to allow for online voter registration, or at least pre-registration. The IEBC should establish digital voter registration platforms, specifically targeting younger, tech-savvy citizens. This would alleviate congestion at registration centres and reduce logistical costs for both IEBC staff and prospective voters, while keeping duplicate detection mechanisms updated.

Sufficient and timely funding:

To ensure effective voter education and registration campaigns, the IEBC must receive adequate and timely funding. Disbursement of funds earlier in the electoral cycle enables well-planned, regular outreach, particularly to first-time voters. This underscores the importance of increasing budgetary allocations to the IEBC even during non-election years. Development partners should also be encouraged to provide financial support for voter mobilisation and education during the post-election stages.

Voter registration in higher learning institutions:

The IEBC should publicise in a timely fashion, the locations and schedules of mobile voter registration booths and biometric kits at higher learning institutions (universities, colleges and technical and vocational education and training colleges). Announcements should be published in the official gazette to ensure that students are well-informed about registration and verification dates and venues. Effective deployment of these resources will require collaboration with student leaders and deans, whose institutional knowledge can guide the development of tailored and practical voter mobilisation strategies.

Social media initiatives:

To boost youth voter registration, the IEBC should enhance its social media presence throughout the electoral cycle and establish strong partnerships with the Youth Coordinating Committees. This proactive strategy should emphasise ongoing voter registration at IEBC offices and highlight the availability of continuous voter registration. Additionally, the IEBC should work with platforms such as Meta, X, Instagram and TikTok to conduct comprehensive online campaigns aimed at combating misinformation and engaging young voters. Adequate funding for Youth Coordinating Committees must be secured to sustain these efforts. A concerted effort should be made by the IEBC, political parties, CSOs and youth-led initiatives to promote the responsible use of digital spaces and to build the digital literacy of social media users.

Enhanced partnerships and cooperation:

The IEBC should deepen its collaboration with youth-serving organisations, civil society and other key electoral actors. These partnerships are essential for empowering young people as both participants and leaders in voter registration efforts, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of outreach efforts. The boda-boda sector , employing approximately 1.4 million young Kenyans, presents a significant opportunity. Cooperation with riders' associations and youth-based savings and credit cooperatives can significantly expand the reach of voter education and registration initiatives across both formal and informal sectors.

Civic education:

Civic education should be enhanced to raise awareness of the significance of electoral participation, particularly registration. Community-level sensitisation forums should be established, with tailored messaging directed at youth, the largest group of unregistered and first-time voters. Influencers and social media personalities should be strategically engaged to amplify voter education messages, capitalising on the growing influence of peer-driven content in the youth demographic.

Mobile registration centres:

To ensure inclusivity and increase youth registration in pastoral communities, mobile voter registration centres should be designed to follow these nomadic groups as they move in search of pasture and water. This flexible, community-responsive approach will help to overcome geographic and logistical barriers to participation.

Identification documents:

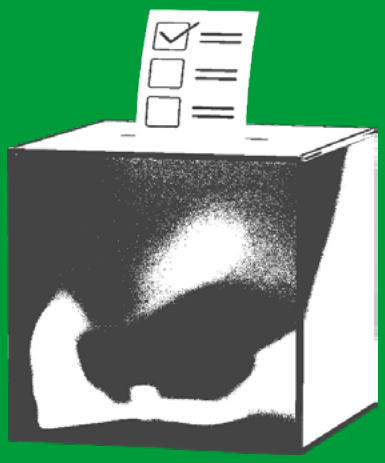
The National Registration Bureau should establish an expedited process for ID issuance targeting 18- to 25-year-olds, with clear timelines and simplified procedures. Furthermore, county governments, in collaboration with national government administration, should initiate regular mobile ID registration drives targeting educational institutions and youth centres. The current ID application process should be digitalised, tracking systems for applications should be introduced and documentation requirements should be reduced without compromising security. Additionally, the government should establish integrated service centres that combine ID registration and voter registration services at the ward level to reduce the registration timeline.

34 IEBC, Post Election Evaluation Report for the 9th August, 2022 General Election, (Nairobi: IEBC, 2022), 35.

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This case study was conducted by Agenda (YAA), a leading youth organization in Kenya committed to amplifying the voices and participation of youth in governance, leadership, and socio-economic development. Rooted in its vision of "A society where the Youth Factor counts!", YAA empowers youth through gender-responsive, evidence-based, and youth-led interventions that foster equitable partnerships and inclusive progress. Its work is anchored on three strategic priorities, Youth Economic Empowerment, Youth Participation and Representation, and Strengthened Youth-Led Organizations, all designed to ensure that youth voices and leadership remain central to Kenya's governance, prosperity, and sustainable future.

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YOUTH VOTER REGISTRATION COSTS & CHALLENGES KENYA

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