

YOUTH VOTER REGISTRATION COSTS & CHALLENGES LIBERIA

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The 2023 general elections were the fourth in a series of elections conducted in post-war Liberia. The country witnessed previous democratic transitions in 2005, 2011, and 2017.

In these 18 years, the election was a joint responsibility of the government of Liberia and the International Community. The 2023 elections were the first post-war election (after 18 years) to be conducted entirely by the National Election Commission (NEC) after a long period of joint electoral administration with the UN. The funding for the election and security operations was initiated, coordinated, and administered by the NEC and the joint security command under the supervision of the Justice Ministry.

The National Election Commission introduced the Biometric Voter Registration-BVR exercise in the history of the country's electoral process. The introduction of the BVR technology in elections was initially received with mixed feelings regarding its applicability, with many citizens and major political actors doubting its usage and achievement for the 2023 elections. During the 2017 elections, Liberia used a manual voter registration system called "Optical Mark Recognition" (OMR) to determine the final voter roll. The final Voter Registration roll in 2017 was a key factor of concern as many politicians and stakeholders cast doubt on its credibility, indicating its lack of transparency and coherence in deleting dead persons from the list, deduplicating double registrants, and presenting a credible voter roll which accounts for legitimate voters in the country.

Due to late procurement challenges (vendors had produced slightly different shapes and lengths of the OMR forms, which the scanning machines could not entirely recognize), NEC technicians were obliged to manually record data that could have been quickly processed by the scanning machines and considerable human errors had been identified on the voter roll. This became a concern, which led to the intervention of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to resolve the impasse temporarily.

Based on these problems, the legitimacy of the election outcome had been challenged before the Supreme Court by the Liberty Party of Cllr Charles Bruskin, who argued that the foundation of the voter roll was flawed. The Liberty Party stated that in a democratic process, a credible election outcome begins with a credible and transparent voter register.

In its ruling, the Supreme Court acknowledged some challenges but deemed them insufficient to overturn the election results. The Court, however, instructed the NEC to adopt new technological methods to resolve the issues raised by the Liberty Party. The NEC opted for the introduction of the BVR system.

The NEC, in adherence to the Court order, introduced the BVR technology and successfully implemented the process. An added feature of significant importance for youth participation was the online platform created to ease long queues during the registration process to pre-register applicants. The approach was embraced by 40% of the population, predominantly youth (LEON BVR report) during the registration.

Due to the particular use of the de-de-duplication application, the NEC was able to identify over 27,192 double registrants, a number accrued from a repetition caused by 3,500 individuals.

This case study, "Youth and Voter Registration," researches Liberia's recent endeavor to transform its voter registration system by introducing Biometric Voter registration (BVR) following the 2017 challenge and based on the Supreme Court ruling. It strives to establish the cost of an election with a specific emphasis on voter registration. It seeks to understand what component of the cost directly addresses youth issues in the registration process.

The case study highlights the barriers faced by the youth during voter registration and disentangles the layers of complexity that Liberia faced in its quest to modernize its voter registration system. From the OMR manual system to introducing technological innovations in BVR that breathed credibility, hope, and trust in the voter roll and the desire for increased youth inclusion through community engagement (introduction of CVEs Cells).

This case study further seeks to establish trends or patterns affecting youth involvement during voter registration and what efforts duty bearers are making to alleviate these challenges for the youth. It emphasizes what personal cost a youth must bear to register as a voter and how these costs affect their active participation. Sowing seeds of democracy with youth inclusion, cultivating its growth, and, most importantly, harvesting its benefits is crucial but achievable with suitable investments.

Background

Liberia's voter registration system had been manual and ad hoc, based on the "Optical Mark Recognition" (OMR) system before the 2023 Legislative and Presidential Elections. The process entails using paper forms to capture vital information for each registrant as they show up during the registration process. The information generated from the paper forms is then inputted into a central database to form the voter register in an election year.

This method identifies voters only by their name, photo, and age provided during registration without electronic verification through technological means on election day. It involves manually recording voters' information: name, image, location, and date of birth on a pre-designed paper form. This does not require the scanning and storing of biodata, such as fingerprints and other required information, that matches the voter's identity to be verified electronically.

The OMR system was used in Liberia's post-war elections in 2005, 2011, and 2017. The total number of registered voters in 2005 was 1,352,730; this number dropped during the 2011 election to 1,288,716 (64,014 decreases) but saw a steady increase in 2017 (2,183,629) and 2023 (2,471,617) (287,988 increase) between 2017 and 2023. In 2017, using the ORM system, 170,000 suspected duplicates were extracted, and 4,567 records were confirmed to have appeared multiple times and were therefore removed from the roll[1].

Even though the ORM system worked for two successive elections in Liberia, 2005 and 2011, without much questioning, during the 2017 elections, the OMR method of voter registration was heavily criticized due to challenges associated with the registration process. Critics of the ORM system cited its lack of transparency, ineffectiveness in detecting double registrants on the voter roll, and non-sequential form numbering. Consequently, the outcome of the 2017 election results was challenged by Liberty Pary, who, after exhausting hearings with the National Elections Commission, appealed to the Supreme Court seeking to overturn the outcome. After the legal hearing,[2] the Supreme Court of Liberia issued a significant opinion regarding the operations of the National Elections Commission (NEC), particularly concerning introducing Biometric Voter Registration (BVR) for future elections. The ruling came in response to concerns about the integrity of the electoral process and aimed to enhance transparency and credibility.



The Supreme Court opinion emphasized the necessity for the NEC to implement technological improvements, such as BVR, to ensure accurate voter registration and to reduce instances of fraud and irregularities in the electoral process. It highlighted that, adopting BVR will help to create a more secured and reliable voter database, leading to more trustworthy elections.

The court's decision was also a response to ongoing public concerns about previous elections, where issues such as double registration and ineligible voters were raised. As a result, the introduction of BVR was seen as a step towards reforming the electoral system in Liberia and restoring public confidence in the electoral process.

This ruling marked a pivotal moment in Liberia's electoral governance, signifying the court's commitment to upholding democratic principles and ensuring that future elections are conducted fairly and transparently. Thus, the NEC was tasked with planning and implementing the BVR System in anticipation of upcoming elections, aligning with international best practices in electoral administration. (Liberia, 2017) In adherence to the Court's instructions, the NEC announced in early 2023 that it would roll out a Biometric Voter registration (BVR) process to conduct the 2023 elections for the first time in Liberia.

1 NEC Policy Paper No.4

2 See here

Introducing Biometric Voter Registration in Liberia

The National Election Commission-NEC was motivated by several factors in introducing the BVR system and honoring the court's orders. Among them was the desire to reduce the high number of multiple registrations seen during previous exercises (2005, 2011, and 2017), increase public confidence in the voter roll, reduce public perception of distrust in the NEC, enable a successful deduplication process, and to easily distinguish voters with similar names on the voter roll and avoid duplication of voter's cards.

The Carter Center, in its final report for the 2017 Legislative and Presidential Election, noted that during the exhibition period, several issues were identified, including the misallocation of voters to polling places as well as missing, duplicate, or inaccurate entries on the roll. According to the Center's 2017 report, the nature and extent of the issues discovered impacted voter and stakeholder confidence in the integrity of the list[3]. The Carter Center recommended, **"To further increase confidence in the electoral process, the NEC, political parties and civil society organizations should increase efforts to conduct voter education and related information and awareness campaigns. This should include the development of voter information toolkits for educators and improved coordination among partner and community-based organizations."**

To address these anomalies, the NEC, with UNDP and ECOWAS technical support, initiated a feasibility study on the potential implication of introducing new technology in voter registration and election processes, including a possible biometric voter registration (BVR) system. The feasibility study assessed whether any new technology was sound, feasible, and advisable in the Liberian context relative to the conduct of the 2023 elections. The study assessed all aspects of introducing BVR. It made recommendations based on the viability, financing options, appropriate application, sustainability, and cost-effectiveness of technology in both voter registration and electoral processes in Liberia. To ensure transparency of the process, trust in the report, and full national ownership, a Reference Committee on Electoral Technology was constituted to which Civil Society Organizations, including the Liberian Election Observation Network (LEON), were represented.

Many believed the BVR process would allow voters to be identified using an electronic digitized system during the 2023 election, but that was not the case. As most stakeholders had anticipated, it was only used for registration and not for voting. The NEC clarifies that due to insufficient verification kits at polling station levels and internet coverage nationwide, polling station-level electronic verification was impossible, thus stating that the BVR process would only affect registration and not voting. Therefore, the registration process for the 2023 elections was biometric, but voter verification on election day was manual and based on the ORM system.

Due to logistical challenges, the BVR process was conducted in two phases. The initial stages of Liberia's BVR evolution were marked by inherent challenges due to changes from traditional methods to technologically advanced processes. Issues such as clear motives, financial sustainability of the BVR system, stakeholders' buy-in, human capacity/local expertise, BVR link with the National Identification System, and cost-effectiveness became stakeholders' concerns, thus posing challenges to the start of the BVR process.

In response to the concerns posed by stakeholders, the NEC held several consultative meetings providing information to stakeholders regarding the financial effectiveness of the BVR process and how it would enhance the accuracy and security of voter data. The infusion of technology aimed not only to overcome logistical hurdles but also to instill confidence in the electorate regarding the integrity of the democratic process, achieve cost efficiency, and a comprehensive endeavor of civic education that increased transparency and public trust in administering the elections.

As part of its strategy, the NEC introduced an innovative online platform to ease the challenge of long registration queues. The platform allows registrants to pre-fill in their details and then show up at a BVR center to verify their information and get their photo taken for the issuance of a voter card. 534,286 individuals used the online system throughout the 2080 BVR centers. BVR centers were places identified by the NEC where citizens could show up to get registered during the registration period; these centers are also used as voting centers on election day. The determination of a BVR center based on the population of the area; Chapter 4.1 (2) of the New Election Law states that "The number of registered voters in every precinct shall be approximately equal, and unless the Commission in any particular case so determines, the number of registered voters in any precinct shall not exceed three thousand (3000)". This allows for a maximum of (six) 6 polling places per precinct (500 voters per polling place).

3 Nation Elections in Liberia, Fall 2017, Final Report the Carter Center pg. 41, 131

A total of 2080 BVR centers were created across the country, which eventually became voting centers on election day; 92 of the centers had more registered voters above the prescribed threshold (3000) in the law. The overage in these centers was due to population growth and the impossibility of creating new centers around the already-established centers.

Overall, Liberia adopted a holistic approach to voter registration that extended beyond technological enhancements. Community engagement initiatives, outreach programs, and partnerships with local organizations became integral to such evolution. The NEC established 82 Civic and Voter Education Cells (CVE cells) to conduct civic and voter education around the BVR. This approach sought to empower citizens with knowledge, ensuring that voter registration was not only accessible but also a shared responsibility and a sense of ownership in the democratic process.

Liberia's Voter Registration System

Liberia runs an active registration system that requires the physical presence of voters during the registration period at a designated center by the NEC in their area of residence. A period for new registration is set in an election year to enroll people of voting age every six (6) years. After the set period for registration, there are no provisions that enable the automatic enrollment of individuals on the voter list before election day. Citizens turning 18 between elections must wait for the next registration period to be enlisted on the voter roll. Those individuals are not allowed to vote in any by-election in their constituency even if they turned 18 one month after the registration date.

Liberia's registration system is not continuous; however, there is a window for replacing lost and damaged registration cards for those previously registered. No new registration is done during this window, and citizens who turn 18 years old after the previous registration dates are not allowed to exercise their constitutional rights.

The standards for obtaining a voter card are fixed across the country. Applicants must be Liberian Citizens (by birth or naturalization), have obtained the age of eighteen (18) years and above, must be domiciled in the constituency of registration, must show up during the period stipulated by the NEC for registration, must complete all the processes required and received the voter card. At first instance, obtaining the voter card is free, but if the card gets damaged or lost before the stated elections, a voter is required to pay an amount of five ($5.00) United States Dollars. Section 3.5 (2) of the New Election Law states, "In the event of loss or destruction of the registration card, and after a proof has been established, the registrar shall issue a new card for a minimum fee of five ($5.00) dollars to be paid in the Internal Revenue."

These payment requirements challenge most youth, especially those in rural areas who do not have the economic means to sustain themselves and will have to walk a distance to reach a registration center.

For the 2023 Elections, Liberia used a mixed system: Biometric Voter Registration-BVR during the registration process and the Optical Mark Recognition-OMR method for voter identification at the polling station level on election day.



Voter Registration Costs

Budgetary allocation

The NEC receives budgetary support for elections through the government of Liberia and international partners. On previous occasions since 2005, Liberia's elections have primarily been supported by international contributions to the UN mission, with the government progressively and steadily taking a more prominent role. However, the 2023 election was almost entirely financed and administered by the Liberian government and the NEC for the first time in post-war Liberia. It must be stated that though the Liberian Government somehow funded the process, other international parties like the European Union-EU contributed to the 2023 election through the UNDP.

The cost of the election was financed through the national budget. In keeping with section 11.2 of the New Elections Law-NEL, the NEC, in June of 2023, submitted a draft budget of US$91,958,547.72 to the Legislature for the conduct of the 2023 Presidential and Legislative Elections. The budget submitted had several different components: The Biometric Voter Registration pilot project, the Biometric Voters' Registration (BVR) exercise, Public Information, and Geographic Information System (GIS), among other costs. In the communication bearing the signature of the NEC's chairperson, Madam Davidetta Browne Lansannah, the breakdown for each component was as follows:

Activities	Proposed Amounts/Allocations
Biometric Voters' Registration pilot project	US$3,968,304.84
Biometric Voters' Registration (BVR)	US$29,680,200.06
Public Information	US$795,590
Geographic Information System (GIS)	US$561,932.44
the Data Center Management	US$3,442,340
Civic and voters' education activities	US$6,881,655
Gender voters' education	US$1,308,510
conduct the 2023 elections itself	US$16,560,425.46
Presidential runoff elections	US$ 12,062,033.05
Administrative operations at the NEC headquarters	US$ 8,932,053.56
Field operation	US$3,454,682.80
Personnel and other related expenses	US$3,838,680.0
Monitoring and evaluation	US$471,840.50

The US$91,958,547.72 amount proposed by the NEC for the conduct of the 2023 elections was reduced to sixty-one million (US$61,000,000) by the Legislature. The reduction by the Legislature forced the NEC to reprogram the scope of its activities, drastically affecting each budget line. Significant areas affected by the NEC's programming were Civic and Voter Education, which mainly benefits the youth, especially first-time voters. Activities designed for the youth, like the online pre-registration exercise awareness, were cut off from the NEC's activities plan due to lack of funds, thus affecting youth awareness about the availability of the online service.

It is important to note that of the reduced amount of US$61,000,000, the National Elections Commission only received US$53,000,000 for the 2023 election. The 53M was categorized as follows:

- US$20,000,000 was allocated for the conduct of the BVR process, hiring of temporary registration staff and logistical materials, while-

- US$33,000,000 was allocated for elections, payment of polling staff, and the printing of ballot papers, including the runoff election.

Budgetary allotment provided by the Liberian Government to the NEC included a specified portion dedicated to the voter registration process that allowed for a transparent and acceptable electoral process. To determine the cost of "Voter Registration," several factors must be considered: cost to advertise positions for the Recruitment of temporary staff, Training and deployment of Staff, Rental of private facilities, purchase of equipment and other voter registration materials, among other factors.

In addition, these factors can be categorized into three phases of voter registration: the pre-registration phase, the registration period, and the post-registration phase. These phases of the voter registration circle have cost implications and are delicate when implementing the full circle. The costs associated with each circle must be fully executed to have a credible and publicly credible voter register.

Voter Registration Cost Disaggregation

The National Election Commission undertakes different sets of activities in an electoral circle. These activities include all processes (from planning) leading to election day that require funding at all stages. However, there is no disaggregated cost information on specific activities in each phase of the electoral circle (pre-, during, and post-voter registration period -) that itemizes cost per activity and cost points that document categories of activities within the electoral circle.

Budget allocations are lumpsum and expenditures not captured along these specific activities' lines, e.g., youth voter registration, the cost for civic and voter education targeting youth, etc. A separate cost of voter registration for each election year is not accessible or available online for public reference. Though the detailed costs remained unknown, however, every election year has a different envelope in which voter registration cost is determined and informed by these factors as listed above.

According to a release from the NEC in one of its updates to stakeholders and observations made by observers' groups, the NEC has been underfunded for the conduct of elections since 2005. In addition, the NEC receives financial support from the Government in phases, which grossly affects significant aspects of election activities. This includes pre-election preparatory activities, the voter registration process, and media outreach, among others, which usually happens at a time when the electoral budget is yet to be secured. It has been proposed in recommendations of Election Observation Missions, including citizen observer groups, that an extra account be established to enable NEC's smooth operation during an election year.

Even as the NEC receives election-related funds in phases, the budget projected by the NEC is still reduced to a bare minimum, leaving the NEC with no option but to prioritize operational activities and reduce the cost within the budget received. Civic education and voter information for youth are normal activities affected by these cuts. The chronic underfunding of NEC has affected its operations over the years, leading to several documented consequences. These consequences include the late procurement of essential election material, including vendors, as was experienced in 2017, payment to vendors as in the 2020 Senatorial Elections, deployment of infield materials in 2005 and 2011, and roll-out of the 2023 BVR process, among others. This creates a difficult condition in disaggregating election-related costs as anticipated.

2023 Biometric Voter Registratiion-(BVR) Cost

The National Election Commission requested a budget of twenty-nine million (29M) to cover areas such as equipment, the procurement, and maintenance of biometric devices: fingerprint scanners, solar panels, and cameras. Other areas include the recruitment and training of staff, deployment of BVR material across the country, compensations for staff, storage, media coverage, civic and voter education, exhibition period, and replacement of lost and damaged cards, among others. The amount was reversed to twenty million (20M) after an appearance before the National Legislature. The twenty million (20M) was spread over the below activities the NEC undertook. Though these activities were implemented, there are no actual itemized activity costs documented that reflect the separate costs of activities conducted by NEC. The below activities accumulatively accounted for the twenty million (20M):

Training and capacity building: the NEC conducted training programs for personnel involved in the BVR process to ensure accurate and efficient system operation. This included training on using biometric devices, data management, and voter education.

Logistics and transportation: The BVR process requires the deployment of registration teams and equipment to designated locations across the country. There were costs associated with transporting, accommodating, charging, and storing voter registration materials in the counties.

Public awareness and voters' education: The NEC set up 82 Civic and Voter Education(CVE) cells to raise awareness about the BVR process. These CVE cells conducted voter education and public awareness campaigns to inform citizens about the BVR process and encourage their participation in it. The costs of producing informational materials, media campaigns, and community outreach activities were considered.

Data management and storage: for transparency and increased public confidence, the NEC brought in UNDP support international experts to audit the voter registration roll. The UNDP experts audited the voter roll after the preliminary registration figures were displayed and before the NEC published the final voter registration roll. The cost of managing and storing the biometric and voter registration data collected during the voter registration process was considered, including an external power supply to maintain the equipment efficiently during and after the voter registration period. This category also included data cleaning, database management, and ensuring data security.

Voter registration costs to the individual

It is important to note that while the above cost factors are associated with the system and must be in place for the smooth conduct of a voter registration process, there is also a cost associated with individuals under certain circumstances during the voter registration process.

The issuance of voter registration cards at first instance is free for all citizens who meet the qualifications as set in the New Election Law (NEL) and the Constitution. However, Sub-charter B: Registration Roll, section 3.5 (2) of the New Election Law prescribes a fee to be paid: "In the event of loss or destruction of the registration card and after proof has been established, the registrar shall issue a new card for a minimum fee of five ($5.00) dollars to be paid in the internal revenue." The five ($5.00) cost for replacing lost and damaged cards placed a burden on prospective voters who, due to the challenging economic situations, could not afford to renew their voting cards, thus preventing them from exercising their democratic rights.



The Bridge over Rising Waters

The Unforgettable Experience by (Justin Saydee) a first-time voter of Sinoe County

Liberia has two major climatic seasons: dry (Summer) and rainy (fall). The period for voter registration is always around the rainy season, which generally creates challenges for the National Election Commission, the Electorates, and citizens regarding logistical deployment and citizen movement to registration centers. In 2023, this challenge increased when NEC conducted the BVR process and divided the country into two regions.

The experience of a First-Time Voter:

For the first time, little Justin was excited to get registered. He had to travel five hours to the nearest registration center, crossing rivers and other challenging road conditions. Justin left the mining site where he had gone to help his father and headed for the registration center. On their way, Justin and his friends crossed the overflooded Dubeh River due to the rain the day before. Upon reaching the registration center, they were informed that the equipment was malfunctioning and, therefore, could not process their registration the same day.

Justin and others had to sleep over with relatives, which was unanticipated. The next day, they went through the registration process, obtained their voter cards, and mediately headed back to the mines. Upon reaching the Dubeh River, the rising waters of the Dubeh River covered the bridge, making it difficult to cross. Justin and his friends took the risk to cross but experienced a very terrible situation that nearly cost their lives. The force of the waters pushes them into the flooded river, leaving them to struggle for their lives. As experienced swimmers, they managed to cross, but unfortunately, Joseph lost his voter card.

In his lamentation, Justin said that this situation left him frustrated and had vowed not to participate in the elections. However, he said that his motivation came when a politician offered to pay the five (5) United States required by law to replace lost and damaged cards in exchange for his vote for the politician.

As a first-time voter Justin could not make an independent decision but had to rely on a politician who helped him.

Barriers to Youth Voter Registration

Youth voter registration is a crucial aspect of any democratic society, as it empowers the younger generation to actively participate in shaping the political landscape. In Liberia, a country that emerged from a protracted civil war and has made significant strides towards democratic governance, there are still notable barriers preventing youth from engaging in the electoral process. This study explores the various obstacles hindering youth voter registration in Liberia and suggests potential strategies to overcome these challenges.

Lack of Civic Education

Insufficient civic and voter Education efforts in Liberia pose a daunting obstacle to fostering an informed and engaged youthful population. The lack of comprehensive civic education programs within the educational system hinders youths from developing a proper understanding of their political rights and responsibilities. Without access to fundamental knowledge about the democratic process, the significance of civic participation, and the mechanics of voter registration, many young individuals are left disenfranchised and disinterested in political affairs.

By integrating lessons on democratic principles, the electoral process, and civic duties, the educational system can empower youths to become active and responsible participants in shaping Liberia's future. Targeted outreach programs and community initiatives can supplement formal education, ensuring that those outside the traditional academic sphere receive essential civic knowledge.

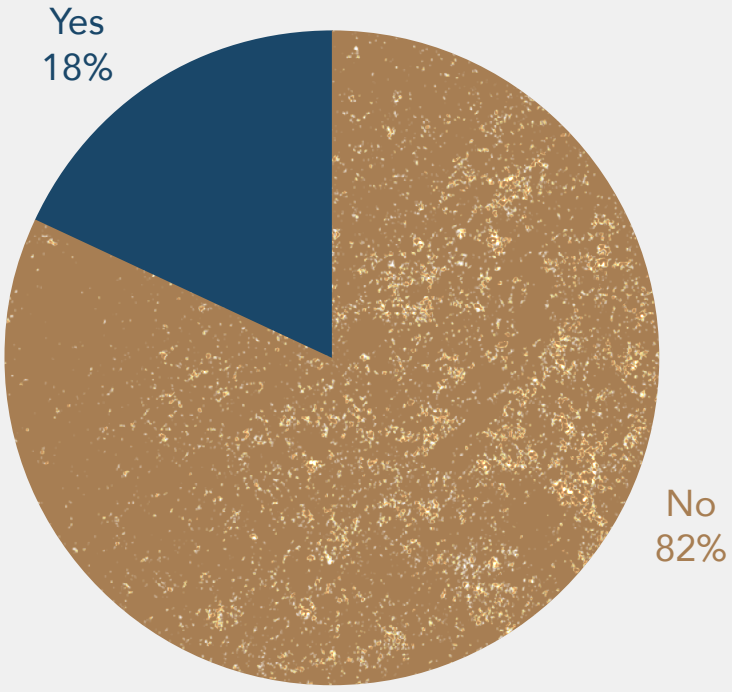
Bridging this educational gap is pivotal in building a foundation for a thriving democracy, where the youth are not only aware of their rights but also equipped to exercise them meaningfully, thereby contributing to a more vibrant and inclusive political landscape in Liberia. The need to also include civic and voter education in the school curriculum is highly recommended.

Inadequate Access to Voter Registration Information

Limited access to voter registration information poses a critical challenge to rural youth in Liberia. This deficiency is particularly profound in marginalized communities, hindering their ability to make informed decisions and participate fully in democratic processes. Whether due to technological disparities, geographic isolation, or socio-economic constraints, the absence of comprehensive information perpetuates inequality.

LEON observed the BVR processes and documented different aspects in a report. The report reveals limited access to information for both women and youth. According to the report, "Forty-one percent[4] (41%) of the BVR activities observed by LEON involved information sharing targeting women, while 59% had "NO" information on BVR targeting women. This means that there was not much BVR information specifically targeting women during the BVR process across Liberia.

For youth, 46% of all centers observed by LEON had information targeting youth. Over half, 54%, of centers observed had "NO" information targeting youth on the BVR process. Like the lack of enough or no BVR information targeting women, youth across Liberia did not receive much or had no information on the BVR process in all fifteen counties during both BVR phases. This disparity in targeted information affected specific segments of the population, especially rural youth entrapped with basic economic activities in small-scale mining and farming with limited or no interest in voter registration activities.



4 LEON_2023_Final_BVR_Report page 17

Source: LEON 2023 final BVR report

Socioeconomic Factors

Poverty and limited access to information are challenging barriers to youth voter registration in Liberia. Widespread economic challenges, particularly prevalent in rural areas, hinder the ability of young individuals to engage in the political process. Youths in Liberia are the most vulnerable group who are poor, less educated, and lack employability opportunities. Their state of vulnerability leaves them with little or no independence during voter registration periods.

According to the LEON final BVR report, "82% of the total BVR centers observed reported "NO" to voters trucking. However, at 18% of centers observed, LEON observers reported "YES" to voters' trucking across all fifteen counties and 73 electoral districts. Trucking in the context of Liberia refers to transporting voters from one district or county to another to register to influence the results of an election. Money is usually used to encourage the movement of individuals from one district or county to another. What is of interest to note is that of the 18% of centers reporting incidents of trucking, over 90% of those trucked were young people who saw the transaction as a means of earning money during the election period.

Most youths fall victim to the so-called "trucking" to other parts of the country in exchange for money or opportunities in favor of a political candidate or party. The financial opportunities given to youth during voter registration and the inability of the political parties or candidates to transport those individuals back in case of a second round of elections pose a challenge to youth voter registration. The youths influenced by money did not independently exercise their right to choose freely but were motivated by using money. Additionally, high levels of youth unemployment create a situation where pursuing necessities takes precedence over political participation. Poverty and lack of essential opportunities for the youth serve as barriers to youth active participation in voter registration processes.

Distrust in the Political System

Many youths view participation with suspicion, questioning whether their engagement will bring positive change. Distrust in Liberia's political system stands as one of the barriers to youth voter registration. The scars of past political deception have left a lasting impression on the nation's young population, nurturing skepticism about current political actors. Many young people view political processes as the making of the powerful and influential in society. They believe that their participation will not count in so far as people with affluence (money) are in the election; they then prefer to trade their vote for immediate benefits.

Rebuilding trust requires a concerted effort by political institutions to address grievances, demonstrate transparency, and engage in open dialogue with the youth. Initiatives that highlight the impact of civic participation, coupled with tangible actions that address the root causes of distrust, can help bridge the gap and encourage the younger generation to actively participate in shaping the country's democratic landscape.

Amid the high level of distrust, the National Election Commission took steps toward ensuring transparency, accountability, and integrity in the electoral process. The commission's resolve not to extend the deadlines during the BVR process, its handling of the candidate's nomination process, the conduct of the election, and the systematic pronouncement of election results in a more transparent manner rebuilt public trust in the commission. The NEC was kin in upholding its internal policies and guidelines despite public perception against it. It allowed youth organizations (Federation of Liberian Youth-FLY and other youth groups) to participate in observing and reporting on the electoral processes fully.

By implementing policies that alleviate economic hardships, provide employment opportunities, and improve living conditions, political institutions can signal a commitment to the well-being of the nation's youth. Breaking the cycle of distrust requires a holistic approach that combines transparent governance, targeted communication, and tangible improvements in the socio-economic conditions of Liberian youth.

Technological Barriers

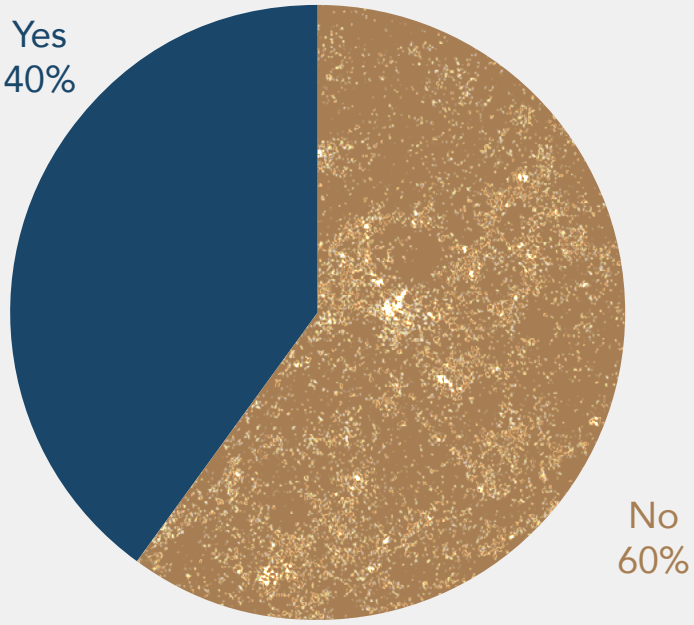
Technology presents a challenge to youth voter registration initiatives in Liberia. The limited access to digital tools and lack of internet connectivity hampers the effectiveness of online registration processes, particularly in remote or poor regions. There are poor networks and a lack of internet connectivity in most parts of the country, making it difficult for the youth to come up to speed in this technological era. This is particularly critical as the experience with the 2023 election shows that technology plays a major role in enhancing youth participation in voter registration processes where internet connectivity and access are facilitated for youth.

During the 2023 election, the NEC introduced an online pre-registration system to enable easy access and quick completion of registrants details on-line prior to identification in BVR centers. The system provided an opportunity where individuals could pre-fill their details (name, date of birth, father and mother names, and area of residence) online and generate a QR code that contains basic information. Upon showing up at a BVR center, the voter registrar would scan the QR code that automatically uploads the registrant information in the system easily. The use of the online registration system enhanced the participation of the youth during the BVR process as they became active mobilizers and guidance for the use of the system. Many of them used the online system for themselves and other family members, becoming often

the motivators or the registration enablers for their entire family nucleuses. This application motivated and placed youth at the center of the process in urban centers where internet connectivity was guaranteed. The youth willingness and adaptability to the use of technology helped in reducing long queues at BVR centers and peer engagement with the youth was more positive by the use of this technology.

A LEON study on the time taken to register an[5] individual during the BVR process shows that on average it took between 5-9 minutes to complete on the registrant. "It was observed that the average time taken to complete one registration was between 5-9 minutes at 52% of all BVR centers observed by LEON monitors. At 33% it took 0-4 minutes. It also took 10-14 minutes at 10% of the centers, 15-20 and 20-24 minutes constituted 2% each, and 25-30 minutes at 1% of all centers observed."

When compared with those who made use of the online pre-registration system, the report revealed that it took between 0-4 minutes to complete one registration. "Sixty percent of centers observed reported "NO" to registrants' use of the Optional Personal Data Entry online portal option provided by the NEC and 40% reported



Source: LEON 2023 final BVR report

"YES" to registrants making use of the pre-registration option as provided by the NEC nationwide during both phases of the BVR.

Of the 530 centers that reported registrant use of the online registration portal, 82% of those centers took between 0-4 minutes to register a single person, 11% of the centers took between 5-9 minutes, it took 10-14 minutes at 3% of the centers, 15-19 minutes at 2% centers, and 20-24 minutes and 25-30 minutes reported 1% of centers." (LEON BVR final report 2023)

The data shows how effective the use of technology can be during the voter registration process, but the lack of technology information coupled with limited access to internet connectivity posed bigger challenges than those solved by the application where conditions were favourable for its employment.

Table presentation of responses to online registration during both phases of the BVR process

	Did people present preregistration form during your time of observation? Phase One	Did people present preregistration form during your time of observation? Phase Two	Phase one & two
No	404	379	783
Yes	262	268	530
Grand Total	666	647	1313

5 LEON 2023 BVR-Observation-FINAL-REPORT.pdf page 16

Youth Voter Registration Initiatives

There were several initiatives targeting youth undertaken by different groups during the 2023 voter registration period. The groups include the NEC, political parties or candidates, and national and international actors. These groups target youth for several different reasons:

National Election Commission-NEC

worked with the youth as a strong workforce with a high potential to accomplish the needed in-field tasks for election management. The NEC recruited youth and youth organizations during voter registration for voter education and awareness raising in communities nationwide. The NEC also engaged the Youth as temporary staff during the voter registration, which created job opportunities and some form of economic empowerment for the youth. The NEC engaged the youth as active agents in the dissemination and awareness of the online platform. The NEC saw the approach as a means of providing an avenue through which youth organizations can get funding beyond the NEC to engage with communities during voter registration.



i. Civic Education and Awareness

Youth-led organizations were hired by the NEC in some instances for civic education and awareness purposes. The National Election Commission-NEC hired 82 Civic and Voter Education Cells (CVE) cells during the 2023 Legislative and Presidential elections for voter education in the communities. These CVE cells were recruited in all 73 electoral Districts, and their activities were centered around providing the youth with a comprehensive understanding of their rights, the democratic process, and the broader socio-political landscape, at the same time encouraging them to form part of the registration processes. The impact of such programs resonated not only during elections but also in everyday interactions, contributing to the development of a socially conscious and responsible generation that is vital for the sustained growth of Liberia's democratic institutions. Based on the extensive impact of the approach, it suggested that the NEC and partners continue to support youth organizations during elections to sustain information dissemination of civic and voter education.

ii. Temporary workers for EMBs

The National Election Commission relied on the youth as temporary workers (registrars, photographers, data-entry clerks, among others) to carry out accurate voter registration for NEC during the voter registration period. Once recruited, the youth took over these initiatives on behalf of the NEC to ensure the smooth execution of the voter registration process. In some instances, these youth hired as temporary workers were maintained for extended periods as NEC staff based on their performance on the job. The contribution of these youth hired to play a middle managerial role during the voter registration period is worth noting because they acquired competencies and skills that were helpful throughout the electoral period. Without them, there would be great challenges for the NEC workforce.

Political Parties and Candidate

During the voter registration period, political parties and independent candidates conducted massive door-to-door campaigns using the youth within their political parties. The youth were seen as the driving force in mobilizing citizens to turn out and register for these parties' victories in the elections.

The political parties understood that the youth were in high numbers and open to being motivated, and with their intintellectual strength in convincing others during voter registration could be leveraged to their advantage. The youth were organized into foot soldiers and community mobilizers during the registration period. Youth were active mobilizers for their political parties. The role of youth in political parties during voter registration cut across different activities to include radio engagement, social media messaging, community outreaches, recruitment of community members to register for their parties, and mass mobilization of other youth to turn out and register.

Youth in political parties are also used as party agents during the conduct of the registration processes. This is to ensure that they document and report back to their parties the accuracy of the voter registration process and to ensure that the EMBs remain in the conferment of the regulations and are transparent. This surge in youth engagement contributes to breaking down barriers that limit the representation of marginalized groups.

National and international organizations

Other initiatives were undertaken by CSOs targeting the youth. The National Youth Movement for Transparency Elections-NYMOTE Partners for Democracy was one such institution that had active community engagement with the youth during the voter registration. NYMOTE and its partners had young people in teams deployed in the counties, raising awareness about the importance of citizens coming out to get registered.

The Liberia Election Observation Network (LEON), on the other hand, has online voter registration awareness campaigns encouraging first-time voters to turn out and get registered. LEON also uses its Long-Term Observers in all 73 electoral as Civic and Voter education campaigners during the voter registration period. Mobilization of disadvantaged youths in the slum communities, radio awareness, youth peer engagements, and encouraging First-Time voters, among others, were all initiatives undertaken by CSO in the country.

i. Community Engagement

Several Youth-Led Civic Organizations were accredited and certificated by the NEC without direct funding support to engage communities during voter registration periods. These organizations served as catalysts for mobilizing and educating young people on the importance of political participation, beginning with registering as citizens. Leveraging social media platforms, community events, and educational workshops, they amplify their advocacy for increased voter registration among their peers. Their grassroots approach not only encourages youth to register to vote but also instills a deeper understanding of democratic processes, ensuring that the impact extends beyond mere participation to informed and conscientious citizenship.

ii. Social Media Engagement

Some civil society organizations conducted online campaigns on social media to encourage youth to participate in the voter registration process. These institutions included the Liberia Elections Observation Network-LEON, NAYMOTE-Partners for Democratic Development, Democracy Network-DemNet International-Liberia Chapter, and the Paramount Young Women Initiative. These were among the institutions visibly involved with online messaging during the registration period, and methods like infographics, Facebook posts, and voice clips were used.



Lessons Learned

1

The Liberia 2023 voter registration process presents several lessons that can be learned and improved for future processes. One of the major lessons learned was using the dual system for voter registration and voting on election day. It was expected by many citizens in the country that the introduction of the BVR could have paved the way for the use of electronic and automated identification at polling station level on Election Day.

However, BVR was only used during the voter registration but not on Election Day to electronically verify that a voter had not previously cast their vote. Voters were verified using the OMR paper-based recognition process, which many viewed as an application of the old system. However, the BVR registration and the OMR verification process worked very well during the 2023 elections in Liberia. Using both BVR as a form of technology during registration for the election and the manual processing of individuals on election day was an excellent lesson for Liberia's 2023 election.

2

The introduction of the Biometric voter registration application helped deduplicate multiple registrants and identifying persons under the required age was another great lesson learned, which is encouraged to be continued. The deduplication process was fast, reliable, and comprehensive for public consumption, which increased trust and confidence in the registration process, unlike in past elections.

3

The online pre-registration portal that the NEC introduced to reduce tension in queues and lessen the time taken to complete one registration was a giant step forward in the use of technology and the active engagement of the youth. The portal was effective but not widely publicized and had challenges due to poor internet connectivity. It yields great potential that should be further tapped in the future.

Recommendations

For future voter registration initiatives in Liberia, the below are recommended for the holistic participation of the youth in the democratic process:

Develop and implement civic education programs to inform young people about the importance of voter registration, the electoral process, and their civic responsibilities.

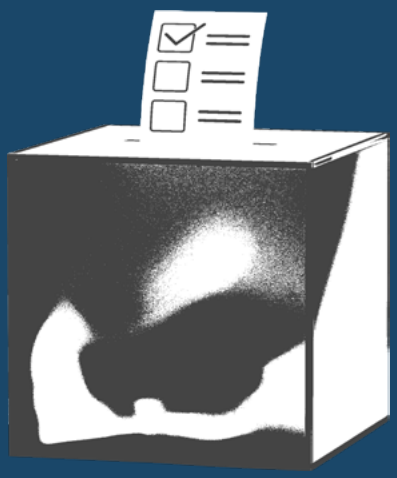
1. Conduct outreach activities in schools, colleges, and communities to directly engage with young people and provide information about Voter registration procedures, eligibility criteria, and deadlines.
2. Utilize digital platforms, such as social media, to disseminate information on voter registration. Develop engaging content that educates and motivates young people to participate in the electoral process.
3. Organize events targeting youth, such as workshops, seminars, and forums. Create spaces where young people can discuss political issues, ask questions, and learn about the significance of their participation.
4. Support youth advocacy programs for policy changes that make voter registration more accessible to young people. This may include pushing for online registration options, extended registration hours, and flexible locations.
5. Provide financial support to national organizations conducting youth voter registration initiatives. This support can fund outreach programs, educational materials, and awareness campaigns.
6. Offer training and capacity-building programs for local organizations to enhance their ability to implement youth voter registration initiatives effectively.
7. Support research initiatives to better understand the barriers to youth voter registration. Data-driven insights can inform strategies to address specific challenges and tailor outreach efforts.
8. Facilitate collaboration and networking among national organizations, sharing best practices and lessons learned. International organizations can serve as platforms for knowledge exchange.
9. Provide technical assistance in the form of expertise, tools, and resources to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of youth voter registration programs.
10. Continuous Civic Education: Prioritize the integration of civic education into formal and informal settings, ensuring a sustained understanding of democratic principles and the electoral process among the youth.
11. Resource Mobilization: Establish mechanisms for sustained funding involving partnerships with both domestic and international stakeholders. Adequate resources are essential for the success and expansion of youth voter registration initiatives.
12. Technology and Accessibility: Invest in improving digital infrastructure while maintaining traditional outreach methods. Ensure that online registration options are accessible and user-friendly, particularly in areas with limited technological access.
13. Empower Youth-Led Organizations: Support and empower youth-led civic organizations by providing resources, mentorship, and advocacy platforms. Recognize their role as effective change agents in mobilizing and educating their peers.
14. International Collaboration: Strengthen international collaborations to garner support in terms of funding, expertise, and knowledge exchange. Utilize diplomatic and regional channels to foster partnerships that enhance the efficiency and inclusivity of voter registration initiatives.
15. Gender-Inclusive Approaches: Develop gender-inclusive strategies to overcome sociocultural barriers. Engage with communities to challenge traditional gender norms and ensure equal participation of young women in the electoral process.
16. Tailored Communication Strategies: Develop communication strategies that resonate with diverse youth demographics. Use language and platforms that are relevant to different groups, ensuring that information reaches all segments of the population.
17. Evaluate and Learn: Implement robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to continuously assess the impact of initiatives. Use feedback to adapt and improve strategies, ensuring that programs remain responsive to the evolving needs of the youth population.
18. Community Engagement: Prioritize community engagement to build trust and address sociocultural barriers. Work collaboratively with community leaders and influencers to foster an environment encouraging youth participation in the political process.
19. Policy Advocacy: Advocate for policy reforms that simplify registration procedures, ensure inclusivity, and remove unnecessary barriers. Engage with policymakers to create an enabling regulatory environment that accommodates the specific challenges faced by young voters.

This report is supported by an EU-funded project, WYDE Civic Engagement, led by EPD, the European Partnership for Democracy. The WYDE project is a component of the European Commission's Women and Youth in Democracy Initiative (WYDE). The aim of the project is to strengthen the participation of young people in democratic processes at national, regional and global levels. The findings and recommendations of this report are based on the authors' assessments only and do not in any way reflect the official position of the European Union.

This report was conducted by the Liberia Elections Observation Network (LEON) is a Liberian civil society organization established in 2017 to promote democratic governance, electoral integrity, and citizen participation. LEON conducts independent citizen election observation throughout the electoral cycle, providing credible, impartial, and evidence-based assessments of electoral processes.

Published posthumously, this work by the late Mr. Augustine Tamba stands as a testament to his dedication, expertise, and enduring legacy in strengthening democratic processes and advancing electoral integrity.

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YOUTH VOTER REGISTRATION COSTS & CHALLENGES LIBERIA

Powered by European Union
Produced by EDGE FOUNDATION LEON
Led by European Partnership for Democracy
Under the project WYDE Civic Engagement