

Namibia's Youth and Political Participation in the 2024 Presidential and National Elections



Published in 2025 by the NMT Media Foundation
13 Adler Street
Windhoek
NAMIBIA

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ISBN: 978-99916-992-9-5



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Cover photo:

Young Namibians proudly display their voter registration cards ahead of the November 27, 2024 Presidential and National Assembly elections - signalling a new generation's readiness to shape the country's democratic future. Photo by Hildegard Titus/AFP via Getty Images.

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This material has been funded by UK International Development from the UK government; however, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.



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Foreword

The question of youth participation in political processes has long been framed as a matter of individual responsibility, with disengagement often attributed to apathy or disinterest. This framing, however, ignores the structural barriers that actively discourage young people from exercising their democratic rights. Political gatekeeping, economic exclusion, institutional rigidity, and the securitisation of protest spaces have systematically sidelined youth, treating them as a demographic to be mobilised at election time rather than as agents of transformative change.

At the NMT Media Foundation, we take a fundamentally different approach. Through initiatives like our YouthQuake, we do not simply seek to “encourage” youth participation - we work to dismantle the barriers that prevent young people from fully engaging in political life. We believe that the induction of youth into active citizenship cannot be reduced to voter education alone; it must involve critical engagement with power, media literacy, and the development of alternative platforms for youth voices to challenge exclusionary political systems.

This study, *Youth and Political Participation in the 2024 Presidential and National Elections*, is a timely and necessary intervention. It provides both empirical evidence and qualitative insights into how and why young Namibians engage (or disengage) from formal political structures. More importantly, it challenges us to think beyond electoral participation and towards a broader understanding of youth as political actors, whether through digital activism, issue-based movements, or alternative governance models.

Young people are not simply demanding a seat at the table - they are questioning whether the current political system serves their interests at all. This study should not only inform policy but also serve as a wake-up call: if democratic institutions fail to meaningfully integrate youth voices, young people will create their own spaces for political expression, inside or outside formal politics.

There is need to move beyond tokenistic engagement and towards a new political culture - one in which youth are not just participants, but co-architects of our democratic future.

Zoé Titus
Executive Director
NMT Media Foundation



1 Introduction

Youth political participation is a fundamental pillar of democratic governance, as it ensures the inclusion of new perspectives, fosters civic responsibility, and contributes to the sustainability of democratic institutions. Engaging young people in political processes is crucial for renewing leadership, encouraging policy innovation, and ensuring the representation of diverse social groups. Without youth participation, political systems risk becoming detached from the realities and needs of emerging generations, leading to disillusionment and potential democratic backsliding.

Despite its importance, trends indicate that youth political participation is declining in many contexts, particularly in formal electoral processes. Studies show that younger generations tend to exhibit lower voter turnout compared to older demographics, a trend attributed to several factors, including political apathy, distrust in institutions, and systemic barriers to participation (Biney & Amoateng, 2019; Enaifoghe & Dlamini, 2021). However, while formal engagement may be on the decline, there has been a simultaneous rise in alternative forms of participation such as social media activism, issue-based advocacy, and grassroots movements. This suggests that youth are not disengaged from politics altogether but are instead redefining their modes of engagement to align with contemporary realities (Biney and Amoateng 2019; Ojok and Acol 2017; Zang 2022; Henn and Foard 2014).

The evolution of youth political participation has been shaped by several factors. Historically, youth engagement was primarily channelled through traditional means such as party membership, voting, and participation in community forums. However, significant socio-political and technological shifts have transformed the nature of political engagement. The advent of social media, widespread access to digital platforms, and changes in political culture have enabled young people to bypass traditional political structures and engage in activism through online petitions, hashtag movements, and digital protests.¹ Movements like #EndSARS in Nigeria (Uwazuruike 2020; Udenze et.al. 2024), climate activism led by young leaders such as Greta Thunberg, and student-led protests in Chile² illustrate how youth political engagement has taken on new forms that are often more decentralised and digitally driven. These transformations have resulted mainly from the expansion of the internet, the increasing influence of global networks, and declining trust in traditional political institutions.

1 In the European context, the predominantly digital campaigns of anti-elitist parties, such as the Pirate Parties in Sweden and Germany and the Five-Star Movement (M5S) led by Italian comedian Beppe Grillo, exemplify contemporary political groups that operate without a physical presence and campaign solely online (see Hartleb 2013).

2 See for example: <https://time.com/5770308/chile-student-protests/>

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of Political Participation

Political participation refers to the various ways in which individuals engage in activities aimed at influencing political decision-making and governance. Walther et al. (2023) emphasise that political participation is a dynamic and evolving concept, shaped by historical, social, and technological changes. Traditionally, political participation has been understood in terms of electoral engagement - voting in elections, joining political parties, and engaging in campaign activities. However, contemporary research has expanded the definition to include a broader range of activities, including advocacy, protests, digital activism, and issue-based civic engagement.

One way to categorise political participation is by distinguishing between conventional and unconventional participation. Conventional participation includes structured activities such as voting, running for office, attending political meetings, and contacting elected representatives. These activities are widely recognised as essential to democratic governance, ensuring representation and accountability. Unconventional participation, on the other hand, involves activities such as demonstrations, boycotts, sit-ins, and online political activism. These methods have become particularly relevant for younger generations who often feel alienated from traditional political institutions and prefer direct action over electoral engagement.

Walther et al. (2023) argue that political participation is not limited to institutionalised activities but also includes cultural and discursive forms of engagement. For instance, youth political engagement is often expressed through digital media, where individuals participate in online debates, create political content, and engage in grassroots mobilisation. Social media has expanded the avenues for political engagement by allowing young people to engage with political discourse on their own terms, often outside of formal party structures.

Political participation is crucial for democracy and citizenship because it fosters civic engagement and strengthens democratic institutions. Theories of participatory democracy highlight that democracy is most effective when citizens are actively involved in shaping policies and governance. The inclusion of young people in decision-making processes broadens democratic engagement, ensuring that diverse voices and perspectives contribute to policy debates. Furthermore, active political participation helps build a sense of political efficacy, reinforcing the belief that individuals can influence government decisions and societal outcomes.

Political participation also plays a significant role in social justice and representation. Historically, marginalised groups, including youth, have been excluded from political decision-making, limiting their ability to shape policies that affect them. By engaging in political processes, young people can advocate for their interests and challenge existing power structures. Walther et al. (2023) note that the inclusion of youth in political decision-making leads to more inclusive and representative governance, as young people bring unique perspectives on issues such as education, employment, climate change, and digital rights.



Another important function of political participation is the promotion of democratic values and skills. John Dewey (1916) argued that democracy is not merely a political system but a way of life that is learned and practiced through active engagement. When young people participate in politics, they develop critical thinking skills, political awareness, and a sense of responsibility toward their communities. These experiences prepare them for lifelong civic engagement and contribute to the stability and resilience of democratic institutions.

In sum, political participation is a fundamental aspect of democratic governance that extends beyond voting and electoral politics. It encompasses a wide range of activities, from institutional engagement to grassroots activism, and plays a crucial role in fostering civic responsibility, representation, and democratic resilience. The evolving nature of political participation, particularly in the digital age, underscores the need for inclusive and accessible political spaces where young people can engage meaningfully in shaping their societies.

2.2 Methods of Youth Political Participation

Youth political participation encompasses a wide range of methods, from formal institutionalised activities to informal and digital activism. Studies indicate that youth participation varies significantly based on socio-economic factors, education levels, and political environments (Calawa et al., 2023; Biney & Amoateng, 2019).


Conventional (traditional) methods of political participation include voting, party membership, running for office, and participating in campaign activities. These forms of engagement remain fundamental to democratic governance but have seen declining levels of youth participation in many contexts. Studies suggest that barriers such as institutional rigidity, lack of representation, and political distrust contribute to youth disengagement from these traditional avenues (Henn & Foard, 2014).

Unconventional forms of participation, such as protests, demonstrations, and advocacy campaigns, have become increasingly popular among young people. Digital activism, in particular, has seen exponential growth with the rise of social media. Online petitions, hashtag movements, and digital mobilisation strategies allow young people to engage in political discourse without relying on traditional political structures (Zhang, 2022). Lemaire (2023) found that even when governments shut down social media, citizens find workarounds using social media to exercise their fundamental political rights.

Biney & Amoateng (2019) highlight the role of cognitive engagement, which refers to awareness, interest, and discussion about political matters. While youth may not always participate in direct political action, their cognitive engagement through political discussions, online debates, and following political news indicates a form of passive but meaningful political participation.

Several factors shape youth political participation. Education has traditionally been considered a key predictor of political engagement, but some studies suggest an inverse relationship, where higher educational attainment does not necessarily lead to increased participation (Biney & Amoateng, 2019). Gender also plays a role, with males often engaging more in formal political activities while females are more involved in issue-based activism.





Socio-economic status further influences participation, with wealthier youth having greater access to political spaces and opportunities, while economically marginalised youth may resort to alternative forms of engagement, such as protests and grassroots activism (Enaifoghe & Dlamini, 2021).

Digital access and social networks also shape participation patterns. The internet and social media have provided new opportunities for engagement, particularly for young people who feel disconnected from traditional political institutions. However, socio-economic background often stratifies digital participation, with disparities in internet access limiting engagement for lower-income youth (Zhang, 2022).

In sum, youth political participation is a complex phenomenon influenced by various socio-biographic and socio-economic factors. While conventional participation has declined, alternative forms of engagement have expanded, highlighting the need for political systems to adapt to new modes of youth involvement.


2.3 Barriers to Youth Political Participation

Despite the benefits of youth political participation, various barriers hinder engagement, limiting the extent to which young people can effectively participate in democratic processes. These barriers can be broadly categorised into socio-economic, institutional, psychological, and cultural barriers.

One of the most significant obstacles to youth political participation is socio-economic inequality, which affects access to resources, education, and political opportunities. Studies indicate that youth from lower-income backgrounds are less likely to engage in political activities due to financial constraints, lack of exposure to political processes, and limited access to digital tools required for online engagement (Biney & Amoateng, 2019; Enaifoghe & Dlamini, 2021). Employment insecurity and precarious working conditions also contribute to disengagement, as young people facing economic hardship may prioritise immediate survival over political activism (Ojok & Acol, 2017). Moreover, those in rural or marginalised communities often lack access to political education and civic engagement opportunities, further exacerbating political exclusion.

Traditional political institutions can also act as barriers to youth engagement. Many young people perceive political parties, electoral systems, and government structures as inaccessible, unresponsive, or dominated by older elites who do not prioritise youth concerns (Henn & Foard, 2014). Institutional rigidity, bureaucratic obstacles, and the complexity of political systems discourage participation by creating the impression that engagement requires expertise or connections. Additionally, tokenistic efforts such as student councils and youth advisory boards, which lack real decision-making power, further alienate young people by reinforcing the perception that their involvement is superficial and symbolic (Enaifoghe & Dlamini, 2021). One study (Oosterom and Gukurume 2023) linked the recruitment of vulnerable youth into party structures as a deliberate strategy to legitimise authoritarianism.

Zhang (2022) identifies several psychological barriers that prevent young people from engaging in politics. Fear of public scrutiny and criticism is a major deterrent, as youth worry about being judged for their political opinions or making mistakes in public discourse.



Many also find politics frustrating and confusing due to its complexity and perceived competitiveness, leading them to disengage. Additionally, some youth fear state surveillance and potential repercussions for expressing dissent, particularly in contexts where political opposition is restricted. Another significant psychological barrier is satisfaction with the status quo. In some cases, young people feel that existing political and economic conditions are sufficient and do not see the need for active participation. Furthermore, many young people prefer to avoid conflict, which is often an inherent aspect of political debates and engagement, leading them to withdraw from politically charged environments.

Prevailing cultural and social norms influence the extent to which young people are encouraged or discouraged from participating in political activities. In some societies, youth are expected to defer to older generations in decision-making, limiting their ability to assert their political views (Ojok & Acol, 2017). Gender norms also play a role, with women often facing additional challenges in engaging with political processes due to societal expectations and structural inequalities. Furthermore, certain communities emphasise passive citizenship, where obedience to authority and disengagement from politics are considered preferable to active participation and dissent.


2.4 Implications for Contemporary Elections

The reviewed studies suggest that youth political participation is complex and multifaceted, influenced by structural, psychological, digital, and economic factors. Addressing these barriers requires a multi-faceted approach that involves institutional reform, digital inclusion, and targeted political education to ensure that young people have meaningful opportunities to engage with democratic processes. Future research should explore localised youth engagement patterns to develop more targeted interventions.

The barriers to youth participation have significant implications for elections and democracy. The persistent socio-economic barriers or “waithood”³ lead to the underrepresentation of marginalised youth in democratic processes, reinforcing existing inequalities in political decision-making. When economically disadvantaged youth are unable to participate due to financial constraints or lack of access to resources, political representation becomes skewed in favour of privileged groups, undermining the inclusivity of democracy.

Institutional barriers further restrict youth engagement by creating the perception that political structures are inaccessible or unresponsive to their concerns. When young people view political institutions as dominated by older elites or as merely paying lip service to youth involvement, their trust in democratic systems erodes.

3 Waithood refers to a prolonged period of suspended youthhood in which young people are unable to achieve social and economic markers of adulthood, such as stable employment, financial independence, marriage, and family formation. The term was popularised by Diane Singerman (2007) to describe the structural barriers that delay young people’s transition to full adulthood, particularly in the Global South. Waithood is characterised by high unemployment or underemployment, prolonged dependence on family, delayed marriage, and increasing frustration with social and economic exclusion. While often viewed as a period of passivity, waithood can also be a time of activism, entrepreneurship, or alternative pathways to adulthood. The concept is particularly relevant in African and Middle Eastern contexts, where economic stagnation, demographic pressures, and limited opportunities for youth have created a “generation in waiting.”



This distrust can translate into declining voter turnout and reduced engagement in civic life, weakening the legitimacy of democratic governance.

Psychological barriers, such as fear of public scrutiny and frustration with political complexity, also impact youth participation. When young people perceive political discourse as combative or difficult to navigate, they may avoid active engagement, leading to the dominance of political spaces by a select few. Similarly, satisfaction with the status quo can discourage political activism, particularly when youth see little incentive to push for systemic change.

Cultural and social norms that discourage youth political involvement contribute to the persistence of generational power imbalances. When political participation is seen as the domain of older individuals, young people struggle to find avenues to influence policy or express their political views. Gendered norms further limit female political engagement, restricting democracy's ability to reflect the interests of all citizens equally.

These barriers collectively create a feedback loop in which youth disengagement from formal political processes weakens the responsiveness of governments to youth concerns, further alienating young people from participation. In the long run, low levels of youth engagement can lead to a decline in political innovation and democratic renewal, as younger generations are unable to shape policies that reflect their needs and aspirations.

To mitigate these effects, electoral systems must be made more accessible and responsive to young people. This includes expanding voter education programs, increasing youth representation in political institutions, and leveraging digital tools to facilitate engagement. Additionally, governments and civil society organisations should address socio-economic disparities that hinder participation, ensuring that all youth—regardless of their background—can engage meaningfully in democratic processes.

The reviewed studies suggest that youth political participation is complex and multifaceted, influenced by structural, psychological, digital, and economic factors. Addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted approach that involves institutional reform, digital inclusion, and targeted political education to ensure that young people have meaningful opportunities to engage with democratic processes. Future research should explore localised youth engagement patterns to develop more targeted interventions.

3 Youth and Political Participation in Namibia

To date, only a few studies on Namibia's youth and their involvement in politics have been published⁴. Therefore, this study aims to fill the research gap by documenting contemporary youth political participation in Namibia and aligning the findings with the broader literature on youth engagement in political processes. Throughout this process, several key themes were identified that reflect global trends while also incorporating Namibia-specific characteristics.

⁴ See for example: Keulder (2021); Mpako and Ndoma (2024); Keulder and Spilker (2001); Van Zyl and Keulder (2001).



3.1 Changing Political Agendas and Modes of Participation

The Namibian youth are becoming increasingly estranged from conventional political processes, exhibiting lower voter turnout and weaker attachments to political parties (Keulder 2021). This trend mirrors global findings on declining formal political participation among youth (Biney & Amoateng, 2019; Henn & Foard, 2014). The shift in political engagement among Namibian youth aligns with Inglehart's (1997) theory of post-materialist values, which suggests that younger generations prioritise social issues and civic engagement over traditional political structures.

Namibian youth are not more inclined toward non-conventional forms of political participation, including discussing politics informally and engaging in issue-specific activism. However, even these forms of engagement are declining, reflecting broader concerns about youth political disengagement (Keulder 2021; Keulder and Spilker 2001; Van Zyl and Keulder 2001). This is consistent with global research indicating that while youth may not be active in traditional political structures, they still participate in discussions and mobilisations through alternative channels, particularly digital media (Walther et al., 2023; Zhang, 2022).

3.2 Socio-Demographic and Economic Factors Shaping Participation

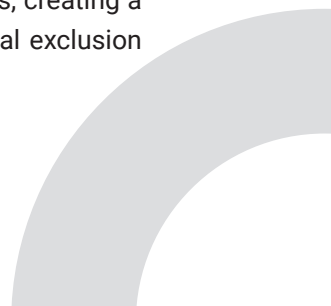
The Namibian context highlights key socio-demographic factors influencing youth political participation (Keulder 2021). Urbanisation has significantly increased, with a large proportion of the youth population residing in cities due to rural-to-urban migration in search of education and employment. This demographic shift suggests that urban-based youth may have greater access to information and opportunities for engagement compared to their rural counterparts. However, this has not necessarily translated into higher participation rates.

Education emerges as a crucial determinant of political engagement. Namibian youth, particularly those with higher education levels, are more likely to participate in elections and protests, consistent with international studies linking education to higher political efficacy (Levy & Akiva, 2019). Nevertheless, high youth unemployment (46.1%) poses a significant barrier to sustained engagement. Economic precarity leads many young people to prioritise personal survival over civic involvement, a trend documented in other studies (Ojok & Acol, 2017).

3.3 Barriers to Youth Participation in Namibia

Early Namibian research also reinforces the structural, psychological, and socio-economic barriers identified in the broader literature:

- *Institutional Barriers:* Namibian youth exhibit declining closeness to political parties, with only 43% of the 18-25 cohort expressing party affiliation in 2019 (Keulder 2021). Political parties and institutions appear unresponsive to youth concerns, creating a sense of alienation. This aligns with global concerns about institutional exclusion and tokenistic youth engagement (Enaifoghe & Dlamini, 2021).



- *Psychological Barriers:* Fear of public scrutiny, confusion about complex political processes, and general dissatisfaction with the relevance of political engagement are evident in Namibia. The reluctance of youth to engage in formal politics is partly due to these factors, as also highlighted by Zhang (2022).
- *Socio-Economic Barriers:* Unemployment, economic dependency until age 27, and disparities in access to digital and traditional media affect participation levels (Keulder 2021). Youth from lower-income backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to disengagement due to financial constraints and a lack of access to civic education opportunities.
- *Cultural and Social Norms:* Traditional norms that prioritise older generations in political decision-making continue to shape political exclusion (Keulder 2021). Gender disparities also persist, with young women facing additional barriers to participation, similar to findings in other African contexts (Ojok & Acol, 2017).

3.4 The Role of Media in Youth Political Engagement

Namibian youth, like their counterparts elsewhere, are highly engaged with digital media. However, despite the rise of internet and social media use (54% of 18-25-year-olds use the internet daily or weekly), traditional media - particularly radio and television - remains a critical source of political information. This reinforces the argument that while digital platforms provide new spaces for engagement, traditional media still plays a significant role in political socialisation (Walther et al., 2023).

The findings also highlight the importance of media literacy in fostering effective engagement. Without the ability to critically analyse political content, young people may be susceptible to misinformation, limiting their capacity for meaningful participation.

3.5 Implications for Elections and Democracy

The trends observed in Namibia (Keulder 2021) have several implications for the future of democratic participation:

- *Declining Electoral Turnout:* With only 22% of 18-25-year-olds voting in 2019, Namibia faces a significant democratic legitimacy challenge. If youth disengagement continues, electoral participation rates will decline, potentially eroding trust in the democratic process.
- *Weakening of Traditional Political Institutions:* The declining attachment of youth to political parties suggests a growing legitimacy crisis for conventional political institutions. This could lead to reduced policy responsiveness to youth concerns and an increase in populist or non-traditional political movements.
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- *Growing Digital Political Activism:* The increased use of digital media provides an opportunity for alternative forms of participation. Political parties, civil society organisations, and government institutions must adapt to digital platforms to reach and engage young voters more effectively.
- *Need for Civic Education and Policy Reform:* Strengthening civic education programs can enhance youth political efficacy and counteract political apathy. Additionally, policies aimed at addressing youth unemployment and economic exclusion could improve political engagement by reducing the structural barriers to participation.

Overall, the findings on Namibia's youth political participation align with broader global trends while reflecting unique national challenges. The shift away from conventional political participation, increased reliance on digital engagement, and barriers linked to socio-economic conditions underscore the need for innovative strategies to reintegrate young people into democratic processes.


4 Namibia's 2024 Presidential and National Assembly Elections

The 2024 Namibian general elections marked a pivotal moment in the nation's political history, which was characterised by significant socio-economic challenges, evolving political dynamics, and procedural controversies. Since gaining independence from South Africa in 1990, Namibia has been under the continuous governance of the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO). Initially celebrated for its role in the liberation struggle, SWAPO's prolonged tenure has faced increasing scrutiny due to allegations of corruption, economic mismanagement, and a perceived disconnect from the populace's evolving needs. The 2019 elections signalled a shift, with SWAPO's support declining from 87% in 2014 to 56%, indicating growing public dissatisfaction.

A central issue influencing the 2024 elections was Namibia's economic landscape. The nation grappled with high unemployment rates, particularly among the youth, leading to widespread discontent. Despite being classified as an upper-middle-income country, Namibia faced significant income inequality and poverty. The discovery of offshore oil and gas reserves offered a glimmer of hope, with projections to double the annual GDP growth to 8% within the next decade. However, the tangible benefits of these discoveries have yet to materialise for the average citizen, leaving many sceptical about their potential impact on employment and economic stability.

4.1 The General Registration of Voters

In preparation for the 2024 general elections, Namibia undertook a comprehensive re-registration of all eligible voters through the General Registration of Voters (GRV) exercise. This process, mandated by Section 25 of the Electoral Act No. 5 of 2014, occurs every ten years and involves the complete renewal of the voters' register, requiring all eligible citizens to register anew, regardless of prior registration status.



The 2024 GRV was conducted from June 3 to August 1, 2024⁵. During this period, the Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN) established approximately 4,297 fixed and mobile registration points across all 121 constituencies in the country's 14 regions. Additionally, Namibian diplomatic missions facilitated voter registration for citizens residing abroad⁶.

The decennial re-registration serves multiple purposes:

- **Accuracy:** Ensures the voters' register reflects current eligible voters, thereby preventing ineligible voting and multiple registrations.
- **Transparency:** Promotes trust in the electoral process by maintaining an up-to-date and accurate voters' register.
- **Resource Allocation:** Assists the ECN in determining the necessary number of ballot papers and other resources by providing accurate voter data per constituency.

The 2024 GRV was particularly crucial due to significant demographic changes, including increased urbanisation and a substantial youth population reaching voting age. By updating the voters' register, the ECN aimed to enhance electoral integrity and ensure comprehensive participation in the November 27, 2024, elections.

The Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN) reported that out of approximately 1.7 million eligible voters, 1,315,124 individuals registered, representing 81% of the eligible population. A substantial portion of these registered voters were young individuals aged 18 to 34, accounting for approximately 42% of the electorate⁷. Early in the registration period, there was a noticeable lag in youth registration. By mid-2024, only about 12.99% of eligible voters aged 18 to 35 had registered, compared to 24.4% of those older than 35. This initial hesitancy among young voters highlighted challenges in mobilising this demographic. Still, despite the early difficulties, the overall youth registration figures predicted a significant level of youth engagement in the electoral process.

4.2 The Changing Party System


The political arena in 2024 was notably competitive as 21 political parties registered to contest for seats in the National Assembly; whilst not all of these parties fielded presidential candidates, Namibians still had 15 presidential contenders to choose from⁸.

5 The 2024 Electoral Calendar can be found here: https://www.ecn.na/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/ECN_A4_Key-Electoral-Activities_2024.pdf

6 ECN, (2024). Presidential And National Assembly Elections, 27 November 2024: Polling Stations. ECN. Windhoek. Accessed at <https://www.ecn.na/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Polling-Stations-2024-PNA-Elections-1.pdf>

7 See: ECN, (2024). 2024 Final Voters Register: National Demographics. 30 September 2024. Accessed at <https://www.ecn.na/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Final-Voters-Register-Demographic-Data.pdf>

8 ECN. <https://www.ecn.na/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Political-Parties-Liaison-Committee.pdf>



A significant portion of the electorate comprised young voters without a direct connection to SWAPO's liberation history. This demographic expressed frustration over limited economic opportunities and perceived governmental neglect. High unemployment and economic hardships particularly affected the youth, leading to calls for new leadership to address enduring issues in Namibia⁹.

In the lead-up to Namibia's 2024 general elections, political parties implemented various strategies to engage the nation's substantial youth demographic, recognising their potential to influence electoral outcomes. Several parties strategically placed young candidates on their parliamentary lists to appeal to younger voters. These included LPM's William Minnie (21), SWAPO's Fenny Tutjavi (22), AR's Gillian Kalf (23), NUDO's Ripuree Mbakurupa (24) and PDM's Julia Nekwya (26). While some analysts viewed this as a genuine effort to empower youth, others perceived it as a superficial tactic to garner votes from the approximately 900,000 young voters among Namibia's 1.4 million registered voters.

SWAPO's candidate, Vice President Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah, vied to become Namibia's first female president. Her candidacy was historic, yet it unfolded amidst declining party support. Opposition figures, such as Panduleni Itula, who previously garnered nearly 30% of the vote as an independent in 2019, capitalised on public dissatisfaction, challenging SWAPO's dominance. The emergence of movements like Affirmative Repositioning (AR), officially registered as a political party in 2024, further diversified the political landscape, advocating for land reform and youth empowerment.

The emergence of youth-centric political movements such as AR highlighted the growing demand for representation of young people's interests. Its primary digital campaign against the "corrupt regime" was aimed at resonating with younger voters who are dissatisfied with traditional political structures and desired political change.

Despite these efforts, many young voters felt that their specific concerns, such as LGBTQ+ rights and economic opportunities, were inadequately addressed¹⁰. Young LGBTQ+ activists expressed disappointment over the lack of attention to their rights in party manifestos, leading to feelings of marginalisation. Other persistent obstacles, including insufficient civic education, threatened effective youth participation in the political process. Therefore, while Namibian political parties recognised the importance of the youth vote and took steps to engage this demographic, challenges remained in effectively addressing the diverse concerns of young voters and overcoming barriers to their active participation in the political process.

9 See for example: Gaiseb, R. (2024). Analysts weigh in on impact of Young Turks... as youth dominate party lists <https://neweralive.na/analysts-weigh-in-on-impact-of-young-turks-as-youth-dominate-party-lists/>

10 See, for example: Shikongo, A. (2024). Young Namibian voters push for LGBTQ+ equality. Context. 8 November. Accessed at <https://www.context.news/socioeconomic-inclusion/young-namibian-voters-push-for-lgbtq-equality>

4.3 Controversies

In June 2024, the Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN) de-registered the Namibia Economic Freedom Fighters (NEFF) and the Christian Democratic Voice (CDV) for failing to comply with the Electoral Act's provisions, particularly regarding the submission of financial statements.

NEFF challenged the ECN's decision in the High Court. In September 2024, Judge Thomas Masuku ruled in favour of NEFF, setting aside the ECN's de-registration decision. Following the judgment, the ECN acknowledged its error in de-registering NEFF and CDV, leading to the reinstatement of both parties' registration statuses.

The electoral process itself experienced significant challenges. Logistical issues, including ballot shortages and technical failures, led to extended voting periods in certain regions. These alleged "irregularities" prompted opposition parties to question the election's legitimacy, with some threatening legal action. The Electoral Commission of Namibia faced criticism over its handling of the process, and subsequent court rulings permitted opposition parties to inspect election materials, highlighting the contentious nature of the electoral proceedings.

5 Methodology

5.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilising focus group discussions to explore the barriers and motivators influencing youth political participation in Namibia. The qualitative approach is particularly suited for heuristic studies, as it provides in-depth insights into the lived experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of young Namibians toward political engagement.

Focus groups are a widely used qualitative research method that involves structured discussions among a small group of participants guided by a moderator. This method is particularly effective for exploratory research, as it allows for dynamic interactions between participants, fostering deeper discussions and the exchange of diverse perspectives. In heuristic studies such as this one, focus groups are instrumental in uncovering hidden attitudes, contextual influences, and social dynamics that may not be captured through surveys or structured interviews. They provide a flexible setting where participants can freely express their views, challenge one another's opinions, and collectively generate new insights.

5.2 Data Collection

Data collection took place between December 2024 and February 2025 and involved conducting eight focus group discussions across five locations in Namibia. These locations were selected to capture a broad range of socio-political contexts and to ensure geographic diversity in the findings. The focus groups were distributed as follows:

- *Windhoek* (4 groups) – representing the capital city and urban perspectives.

- *Swakopmund* (1 group) – capturing the experiences of youth in a coastal and tourism-centered environment.
- *Keetmanshoop* (1 group) – reflecting the perspectives of youth in a regional administrative centre.
- *Lüderitz* (1 group) – providing insights from a smaller coastal town.
- *Oshakati* (1 group) – incorporating the perspectives of youth from the northern region, which has historically been a political stronghold.

Each focus group consisted of at least eight discussants, ensuring a diverse range of viewpoints. Participants were selected from the 18 to 35 age group to ensure generational representation. The groups were mixed in terms of age cohorts, gender, and sexual orientation, with deliberate inclusion of members of the LGBTQ+ community. The diversity of participants was intended to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and challenges related to youth political participation.

5.3 Project Objectives


The study, titled *Assessing Barriers, Motivators, and Youth Political Participation in Namibia*, aims to generate comprehensive qualitative research findings to address the pressing issue of youth disengagement from democratic processes. By identifying the barriers and motivators influencing youth political participation, the project seeks to empower young Namibians with the knowledge and tools necessary to engage meaningfully in electoral activities. The broader goal of the study is to foster a more inclusive and resilient democratic system in Namibia by promoting informed civic activism and facilitating greater youth involvement in political decision-making.

This report examines the barriers and motivators affecting youth political participation in Namibia's 2024 elections, explores the different forms of engagement young people pursue, and their media use. Finally, it discusses policy recommendations for fostering greater youth involvement in democratic processes.

6 Main findings

Youth political participation is a fundamental pillar of democratic governance, as it ensures the inclusion of new perspectives, fosters civic responsibility, and contributes to the sustainability of democratic institutions. Engaging young people in political processes is crucial for the renewal of leadership, policy innovation, and ensuring the representation of diverse social groups. Without youth participation, political systems risk becoming detached from the realities and needs of emerging generations, leading to disillusionment and potential democratic backsliding.

Despite its importance, trends indicate that youth political participation has been declining in many contexts, particularly in formal electoral processes. Studies show that younger generations tend to exhibit lower voter turnout compared to older demographics, a trend attributed to several factors, including political apathy, distrust in institutions, and systemic barriers to participation (Biney & Amoateng, 2019; Enaifoghe & Dlamini, 2021).



However, while formal engagement may be declining, there has been a simultaneous rise in alternative forms of participation, such as social media activism, issue-based advocacy, and grassroots movements. This suggests that youth are not disengaged from politics altogether but are instead redefining their modes of engagement to align with contemporary realities.

We commence our discussion by reflecting on general perceptions of politics and participation before proceeding to examine the barriers and motivators of participation, as well as actual experiences of participation. Thereafter, we consider the contentious issue of disinformation, as well as, media usage and trust, before concluding with recommendations to enhance youth participation.


6.1 General Perceptions of Politics and Participation

The focus group discussions revealed a complex and multifaceted relationship between young Namibians and the political system. While some participants expressed enthusiasm about engaging in electoral processes, many voiced deep skepticism about the capacity of elections to bring about meaningful change. Across all regions, young voters articulated a sense of disillusionment with political institutions, reflecting a broader global trend in which youth feel increasingly alienated from traditional party politics.

Participants repeatedly emphasised that Namibian politics is dominated by older elites who control decision-making and resist youth inclusion. As one participant in Windhoek stated, *“Those in power do not give the youth a chance; they hold onto positions for decades, and we are expected to just wait our turn.”* The Lüderitz group was among the most cynical. One participant expressed their frustration, saying, *“Politicians come and promise us jobs and development, but nothing changes. It’s the same story every election.”* Another added, *“They say they want to hear our voices, but when we try to speak up, they ignore us.”* These sentiments reflect broader concerns about representation and the perceived lack of responsiveness of political leaders to the needs of young Namibians and contribute to disengagement, as many young people see politics as inaccessible and unresponsive to their needs.

Despite widespread frustration, the 2024 elections saw an increase in youth voter turnout compared to previous years, suggesting a growing recognition of the importance of political participation. Many young voters approached the elections with a sense of duty rather than genuine optimism, believing that while their votes might not lead to immediate change, participating was still necessary. One participant from Swakopmund remarked, *“We went to vote, but we knew nothing would change. Still, not voting wasn’t an option for me.”* This sentiment highlights a paradox wherein youth simultaneously distrust the political system but feel compelled to participate in it.

One participant in Oshakati described voting as an obligation rather than a meaningful exercise, stating, *“We vote because that’s what we are told to do, but do things really change?”* Another participant noted the predictability of election outcomes in their region, adding, *“Where I come from, you already know which party will win. So why even bother?”* These sentiments indicate that for many young voters in Oshakati, political engagement is viewed as a formality rather than a tool for meaningful transformation.



A significant factor shaping youth perceptions of politics is the prevalence of what they described as “propaganda” and “political self-enrichment.” Many participants believed that political parties prioritised their own interests over those of the electorate, reinforcing a sense of detachment from formal politics. A participant from Keetmanshoop described the political landscape as follows: *“They come to us with promises when they need votes, but once they win, we never hear from them again.”* This disillusionment was particularly pronounced among unemployed youth, who expressed frustration at the lack of economic opportunities despite repeated campaign promises to address joblessness.

In contrast, some participants reported feeling empowered by the 2024 elections, particularly first-time voters who viewed participation as an important rite of passage into civic life. A Windhoek respondent reflected on their experience, stating, *“It was my first time voting, and I felt like I was finally part of something bigger than myself.”* This suggests that while systemic barriers exist, some youth still find personal significance in the act of voting. For these individuals, political engagement was less about immediate outcomes and more about affirming their role in a democratic society.


Even in the Oshana region, where the ruling party have always dominated elections, respondents acknowledged that youth involvement in elections had increased. Some participants recognised that more young people were registering and voting compared to previous years. One participant remarked, *“This election felt different. I saw more young people, even those who never cared before, showing up at polling stations.”* This suggests that while scepticism remains, a sense of agency is beginning to take hold among the youth.

Another key theme that emerged from the discussions was the disconnect between political leadership and young citizens. Many participants lamented the lack of youth-centred policies and the exclusion of young voices from decision-making processes. There was a strong demand for intergenerational dialogue and greater representation of youth in governance structures. Some participants argued that political parties should create more opportunities for young people to assume leadership roles within their structures rather than being confined to tokenistic youth leagues. A participant in Windhoek noted, *“If political parties really wanted youth participation, they would put young people in real positions of power, not just use them for rallies.”* This reflects broader frustrations about the ways in which youth engagement is often instrumentalised rather than meaningfully integrated into governance.

Overall, young Namibians have diverse and often conflicting views on politics and elections. While some remain hopeful about the potential for political change, others are disenchanted with a system they perceive as exclusionary and self-serving. Nevertheless, the 2024 elections demonstrated that despite these frustrations, youth participation remains a critical aspect of Namibia’s democratic process. Addressing the concerns raised by young voters—particularly those related to inclusion, accountability, and economic opportunity—will be essential in fostering a more engaged and politically active youth electorate.

6.2 Barriers to Youth Participation

Youth political participation in Namibia’s 2024 elections was hindered by a range of barriers, including socio-economic, institutional, psychological, and cultural obstacles. These barriers shaped young people’s experiences with elections and contributed to political disengagement among certain segments of the population. Despite increasing awareness of the importance of voting and activism, many young Namibians faced significant challenges in fully participating in democratic processes.




One of the most pervasive barriers was *socio-economic inequality*, which directly affected young people's ability to engage in political activities. Many participants from marginalised backgrounds cited economic hardship as a deterrent to voting. Unemployment, job insecurity, and financial struggles meant that many young people prioritised daily survival over political engagement. For some, even the cost of transportation to polling stations was a major obstacle. A participant from Keetmanshoop stated, *"We are too busy trying to survive; politics is the last thing on our minds."* These economic constraints also influenced the way youth interacted with political campaigns, with some reporting that financial incentives were offered by parties in exchange for votes or attendance at rallies.

Institutional barriers further discouraged youth participation. Many young voters criticised the inefficiencies of the Electoral Commission of Namibia (ECN), particularly regarding long queues, administrative delays, and voter registration challenges. Some participants reported that polling stations lacked clear guidance, and there were inconsistencies in the way election officials handled voter lists. A respondent noted, *"I got there at 7 a.m. and by 10 a.m. I still hadn't voted. I eventually left."* Another participant recounted, *"I stood in line for hours only to be told I was at the wrong polling station. By the time I got to the right place, I was too tired to care."*

Some questioned the use of pencils instead of pens for marking ballots, which also raised suspicions about electoral integrity, with some young voters fearing their votes could be tampered with after submission. In Swakopmund, a respondent asked: *"Why were people voting with pencils and not pens? How do we know they didn't change our votes?"* One participant expressed this frustration: *"There were reports of more votes counted than the number of registered voters in some areas. How does that even happen?"* In Lüderitz, one respondent stated, *"[T]he ECN had five years to actually prepare for the election, and they claimed that they had printed an additional 400,000 ballot papers. But they failed to deliver the ballot papers in time. There was so much deliberate inconvenience by the electoral commission."*

Psychological barriers, including disillusionment with politics and low political efficacy, also played a role in discouraging participation. Many youth respondents expressed scepticism about whether their votes could lead to meaningful change, particularly given perceptions of entrenched political dominance by established parties. A participant from Swakopmund explained, *"We went to vote, but we knew nothing would change. Still, not voting wasn't an option for me."* A respondent from Oshakati expressed a similar sentiment: *"Even when we vote, the same faces remain in government. What's the point?"*, and in Lüderitz, a respondent maintained, *"The election is just a show. The real decisions are made behind closed doors."* This sense of resignation was exacerbated by the belief that political leaders only engaged with youth during elections, ignoring their concerns once in office. As a result, some young people opted out of voting altogether, believing that their participation would not translate into tangible improvements in governance.

Cultural and social barriers further contributed to youth disengagement. In some traditional communities, older family members held significant influence over political decision-making, often pressuring younger relatives to vote along family lines. A participant remarked, *"My whole family supports SWAPO. Even if I wanted to vote differently, I wouldn't say it out loud."* This generational influence limited political autonomy among young voters, reinforcing a passive approach to political engagement.



Additionally, gender norms played a role in shaping youth political participation, with some female participants noting that politics was often seen as a male-dominated space where young women struggled to have their voices heard.

Misinformation and disinformation also emerged as significant barriers to youth engagement. Social media, while a powerful tool for mobilisation, was also a platform for the spread of false information about candidates, election procedures, and political parties. Some participants reported encountering misleading narratives, including false claims about voter eligibility and manipulated news articles designed to sway public opinion. A participant recalled, “A whole fake newspaper was spreading false stories about the opposition.” Another participant recalled, “I saw a post saying if you register in Swakopmund, you can’t vote anywhere else. That wasn’t true, but a lot of people believed it.” The prevalence of misinformation made it difficult for some young voters to navigate the electoral landscape, increasing uncertainty about the voting process and political candidates.


Lastly, *logistical and accessibility challenges* affected participation, particularly for young voters in rural areas. Some polling stations lacked adequate facilities for disabled voters, while others were situated far from communities, making it difficult for those without transportation to vote. A respondent highlighted, “Blind voters had no proper assistance; they had to rely on someone else to mark their ballot.” These challenges reinforced the perception that the electoral system was not designed with young and marginalised voters in mind, further discouraging participation.

In sum, multiple barriers intersected to limit youth political engagement in Namibia’s 2024 elections. Economic struggles, institutional inefficiencies, psychological deterrents, cultural norms, and misinformation all contributed to lower levels of participation among certain groups of young voters. Addressing these challenges will require targeted policy interventions that improve electoral accessibility, enhance voter education, and foster greater trust between young people and political institutions.

6.3 Motivators for Participation

Despite the various barriers that hinder youth political engagement in Namibia, many young people remain actively involved in democratic processes. Several factors were strong motivators for political participation, ranging from personal and community-driven influences to broader socio-political dynamics. The 2024 elections illustrated that young Namibians are not entirely disengaged from politics but are rather selective about their modes and reasons for participation.

A primary motivator for youth political participation is the *desire for change*. Many young Namibians feel that the existing political leadership has failed to address pressing socio-economic concerns such as unemployment, inequality, and poor governance. As a result, elections present an opportunity to challenge the status quo and push for new leadership. A participant from Windhoek emphasised this point, stating, “People chose to vote because they were frustrated. They were tired of the system.” An Oshakati participant expressed hope, saying, “We are tired of empty promises. If we don’t vote, nothing will ever change.” Others in that group were motivated by seeing their peers take an interest in politics. One respondent noted, “When you see your friends talking about elections, you also want to be part of it. Nobody wants to feel left out.”



This sense of urgency and dissatisfaction with governance structures fuelled political engagement, particularly among first-time voters who saw participation as a means of advocating for a different political future.


Peer influence and social networks also played a critical role in motivating youth to participate in the elections. Many young voters indicated that discussions with friends, family, and colleagues encouraged them to engage in political activities. Social media, in particular, amplified these conversations, creating an environment where political participation was actively promoted within online communities. A respondent in Windhoek noted, *"The voter's card peer pressure was real. It was literally, 'You're not my friend if you're not voting.'"* Elsewhere, a participant remarked, *"I saw a lot of people online explaining why voting is important. That pushed me to go vote."* The ability of social networks to normalise political engagement highlights the significance of collective action in motivating individual participation.

The *presence of younger candidates* in the 2024 elections also served as a motivating factor for youth engagement. Many young voters were inspired by the idea that people closer to their age group were contesting for political office, offering a sense of representation and relatability that had been previously lacking. A participant in Swakopmund remarked, *"For the first time, we saw young people on party lists. That gave us hope."* Someone in the Oshakati group resonated with this: *"Finally, we have people who look like us in politics. That makes me want to participate."* This shift in political representation suggests that youth are more likely to participate when they see themselves reflected in leadership positions, reinforcing the need for greater generational diversity in politics.

Another key motivator was the *influence of regional developments*. One respondent from Keetmanshoop noted, *"When we saw what happened in South Africa and Botswana, we realised that if the youth rally together, we can shift the status quo."* These regional influences demonstrate how young people increasingly view political participation as a method for achieving political change.

Political education and awareness also played a crucial role in motivating youth engagement. Some young voters indicated that attending civic education workshops, engaging in policy discussions, and learning about governance structures made them more inclined to participate in elections. However, many argued that voter education efforts remained inadequate, particularly in rural areas. A participant from Windhoek stated, *"If we were properly taught about the importance of voting and how the system works, more young people would show up."* This underscores the importance of sustained civic education efforts to empower youth with the knowledge and confidence needed to engage in political processes.

The *symbolic and psychological significance of voting* was another critical factor. For many first-time voters, casting a ballot represented a transition into full citizenship and political maturity. Some participants described voting as an empowering experience that reinforced their sense of belonging and civic responsibility. A young voter in Windhoek shared, *"It was my first time voting, and I felt like I was finally part of something bigger than myself."* This highlights the emotional and symbolic weight of political participation for many young individuals, particularly where civic engagement is a marker of active citizenship.



Despite the various structural and attitudinal challenges facing youth political engagement, the 2024 elections demonstrated that young Namibians remain motivated to participate in different ways. Whether driven by a desire for political change, social influence, increased representation, or personal empowerment, many young Namibians recognised the value of engaging with the democratic process. Moving forward, ensuring that these motivators are reinforced through institutional reforms, expanded youth representation, and improved voter education will be crucial in sustaining and increasing youth political participation in Namibia.

6.4 Experiences with Political Participation

Young Namibians engaged in the elections through multiple channels, ranging from formal voting to digital activism.

Voting remained the most common form of political participation, with many young Namibians making an effort to cast their ballots despite the logistical challenges. However, digital and social media activism also played a crucial role, with young people using platforms such as X (Twitter) and WhatsApp to share information, fact-check election-related claims, and mobilise others to vote.

The level of political participation varied across different social groups. Youth in urban areas were more engaged due to better access to information and digital resources, while those in rural regions faced more significant challenges in obtaining voter education and political news.


Marginalised groups, including LGBTQ+ youth, encountered additional barriers to participation. Some participants from these communities expressed concerns about discrimination within political spaces, making them hesitant to engage in mainstream political activities.

Gender also played a role in shaping participation. While the prospect of a female president inspired many young women to vote, some male participants admitted to holding biases against female political leaders, demonstrating the ongoing impact of gender norms on electoral behaviour.

Positive Experiences

One of the most commonly cited positive experiences was the *enthusiasm and determination* of young voters. Many participants expressed a strong sense of eagerness to cast their ballots, with some highlighting the resilience displayed by youth despite logistical challenges. A Windhoek participant noted, “*Just on top was the youth participation; what for me was positive is as hideous as the process was, as wrong and chaotic, my friend here stood in the lines from the AM till midnight. As chaotic as it was, I just feel like the youth was eager to vote*”.

Another major highlight of the election was the *sense of solidarity* among young voters. Many participants reported instances where individuals shared water, food, and encouragement to ensure that as many people as possible remained in line to vote. A respondent observed, “*Some people didn’t even come with chairs; it was hot. And funny enough, days prior, it was cloudy, it rained a bit, but that day it was sunny, and the youth was standing, and no one was giving up*”.



This communal spirit reinforced a sense of unity and collective commitment to political engagement.

Additionally, some participants appreciated the *peaceful nature of the election*, particularly in comparison to other African countries. As one individual remarked, *"If we had done this in any other African country, I don't think a lot of people would be alive today"*. This sentiment reflects an awareness of Namibia's relative political stability and the importance of maintaining a non-violent electoral process.

For those who had efficient voting experiences, the process was largely seen as smooth and well-organised. A participant stated, *"With me, my experience was very lovely. I finished voting 17 minutes past 7 in the morning. I was done"*.

Negative Experiences

While there were notable positive experiences, many youth voters also faced significant challenges during the election. One of the most frequently mentioned issues was the *excessive waiting times* at polling stations. Several participants reported standing in line for hours, with some even waiting from morning until late at night. A respondent from Windhoek shared, *"I had a very bad experience. I started at 7 in the morning and finished past 10 in the evening. So, I went to three different polling stations"*. Someone in Oshakati recorded a similar experience: *"I waited for so long, I almost gave up. Some people actually left without voting."* Such delays were not only frustrating but also led to voter fatigue and, in some cases, voter dropout.

Another significant issue was the *lack of proper communication* from electoral officials regarding delays and logistical problems. In some instances, polling stations ran out of ballot papers, causing further delays and confusion. A participant expressed frustration, stating, *"From 12 to 2, the lines were just not moving. Only later we went to notice, and then apparently the papers were done. They could have communicated that with us"*.

Weather conditions also presented a major challenge, with extreme heat making long waiting times even more difficult. Some participants reported cases of dehydration, fainting, and general discomfort, which were exacerbated by the lack of medical support at polling stations. One individual pointed out, *"It was really hot outside, and we had a few people that got dehydrated, and some even collapsed. Why didn't they have ambulances standing by?"*.

Lastly, there were *expressions of disillusionment* with the overall electoral outcome. Some participants felt that despite their efforts, the results did not align with their expectations, leading to frustration and political disengagement. One respondent noted, *"It's so draining to want to participate in a movement for change, but you don't see it. So, when I saw the results, I was just like, yeah, it is what it is"*. This sense of disenchantment suggests that, for some young voters, the gap between political expectations and electoral outcomes remains a significant obstacle to sustained engagement.



6.5 Media Use and Trust

Media consumption played a central role in shaping how young Namibians accessed election-related information and formed their political opinions. The focus group discussions revealed a strong reliance on digital media, particularly social media platforms, while traditional media sources such as newspapers, radio, and television remained relevant for verification and in-depth reporting. However, trust in these different media types varied significantly, with many participants expressing scepticism about specific sources and concerns over misinformation.


Social media was identified as the primary source of election-related information for most young voters. Platforms such as Twitter (X), Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp were widely used to share news, discuss political developments, and mobilise voter participation. Many participants appreciated the immediacy and accessibility of social media, which allowed them to stay informed in real-time. A respondent from Windhoek noted, *“With Twitter, you get updates as things happen. It’s where everything breaks first.”* Similarly, WhatsApp was frequently cited as a key platform for receiving election-related messages from friends, family, and political groups.

However, while social media was the most used source of information, it was also the most distrusted. Many participants acknowledged that these platforms were filled with misinformation, political bias, and unverified claims. The presence of political influencers who changed allegiances or promoted different parties over time further contributed to scepticism. A participant remarked, *“One public figure was campaigning for three different parties within a week. It made me question whether they were being paid.”* The spread of fake news and misleading narratives was also a significant concern, with some participants mentioning encounters with wholly fabricated stories, such as false election results and conspiracy theories about electoral fraud.

Traditional media, particularly newspapers and radio, was seen as more credible and trustworthy than social media. While fewer young people actively read physical newspapers, many relied on the digital versions of reputable outlets such as The Namibian for verification purposes. One respondent explained, *“I always check newspapers like The Namibian or the Namibian Sun before I believe anything I see online.”* This highlights a common media consumption pattern among young voters—using social media for immediacy but turning to established media for fact-checking.

Radio, once a dominant source of political information, appeared to be losing its influence among youth. Some participants mentioned that they only listened to the radio when travelling or when older family members were tuned in. A radio presenter who participated in the discussions acknowledged this shift, stating, *“I work in radio, but I’ll be honest—I don’t listen to radio, and I don’t think young people do either.”* This suggests that while radio remains a trusted medium, its reach among younger demographics diminishes.

Television news was perceived as reliable but not as frequently used as social media and newspapers. Some participants reported watching election debates and coverage on national broadcasters, but others felt that television news was too slow compared to digital media. One respondent commented, *“By the time it’s on TV, I’ve already seen it on social media.”* However, there was a general consensus that television remained a credible source.



Overall, the focus group discussions revealed a clear distinction between media consumption habits and levels of trust. While social media was the dominant source of information, it was also seen as unreliable due to the prevalence of misinformation and bias. Traditional media, though less frequently used, retained higher levels of trust, with newspapers being particularly valued for fact-checking. The findings suggest that efforts to improve digital literacy and critical media engagement among young voters could help mitigate the impact of misinformation and enhance informed political participation.

6.6 Disinformation During the 2024 Elections


According to the focus group respondents, the 2024 elections in Namibia were significantly influenced by the spread of disinformation and misinformation, particularly on digital platforms. The focus group discussions revealed that many young voters encountered misleading information regarding candidates, voting procedures, and election results. The proliferation of false narratives shaped public perceptions, fuelled political divisions, and, in some cases, discouraged participation altogether.

Social media emerged as a key vector for disinformation, with platforms such as Twitter (X), Facebook, and WhatsApp being used to circulate misleading content. Many participants recalled encountering manipulated images, fake news articles, and voice recordings claiming to reveal secret deals between political candidates. One respondent from Windhoek stated, *"There was a whole newspaper on social media that wasn't even real, but people believed it because it looked legit."* Another respondent admitted, *"I believed some things at first, but later I realised they were not true."* This highlights the challenge of distinguishing between credible and fabricated information in the digital age.

Disinformation also took the form of rumours about the voting process itself. Some young voters were falsely informed that failing to register would result in legal penalties, while others were led to believe that voting in certain regions would automatically be rigged in favour of the ruling party. A participant from Keetmanshoop recalled, *"People in my area thought their votes wouldn't count if they weren't from a big city. It made some people decide not to bother voting."* Others described how viral disinformation influenced public perceptions. A respondent in Oshakati noted, *"People were sharing voice notes saying the election was already rigged before voting even started."* These misconceptions had tangible effects on voter confidence and turnout.

Political figures and influencers also played a role in spreading misleading information. Some focus group participants pointed out that public figures who endorsed multiple parties over a short period created confusion among young voters. One participant noted, *"One day they were supporting Party A, the next day it was Party B. It made people question if they were actually sincere or just paid to say things."* This raised concerns about the authenticity of political endorsements and the role of paid influence in shaping public opinion.

Beyond social media, mainstream media was not entirely free from accusations of bias and misinformation. Some young voters expressed scepticism about how certain newspapers and radio stations covered the elections, believing that reporting was skewed in favour of specific political actors. A participant in Swakopmund remarked, *"Even the newspapers sometimes sounded like they were pushing an agenda. It's hard to know who to trust."*



This lack of trust in both digital and traditional media underscores the broader crisis of information credibility in contemporary elections.

To counter the spread of disinformation, some young voters took active steps to verify claims before sharing them. One participant explained, *“Social media is fast, but full of lies. You have to be careful what you believe.”* Respondents relied on fact-checking services, cross-referenced news from multiple sources, and turned to reputable outlets such as The Namibian and the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) for confirmation. One respondent stated, *“If I see it in The Namibian, then I know it’s true.”*

However, these efforts were not universal, and several participants admitted that they had unknowingly shared false information at some point during the election period.

The findings suggest that combating misinformation and disinformation requires a multifaceted approach. Strengthening digital literacy programs, encouraging responsible journalism, and promoting fact-checking initiatives are essential for ensuring that young voters have access to reliable and accurate election information. Without these interventions, the growing influence of misleading narratives could continue to undermine electoral integrity and weaken trust in democratic processes.

Identifying and Recognising Disinformation¹¹

We included two fake news videos in the focus groups to learn more about respondents’ ability to recognise disinformation and their processes for deciding whether media content is truthful or fake.


In the first video¹², a Zimbabwean activist named Talent Rusere, representing a bogus organisation, claims to be part of an international election observation mission that condemns the electoral process and asserts he has seen a document proving that the ruling party (SWAPO) attempted to bribe the ECN. He also created an “observers’ report” that was shared online. All content was fabricated, and Rusere was never part of any observers’ mission. One fact-checking website¹³ exposed Rusere as a ZANU-PF activist posing as a lawyer and professor, and using the title of “high commissioner” of the spurious Southern Africa Human Rights Lawyers (SAHRL). Rusere has been linked to disinformation campaigns during elections in Mozambique and Botswana, and his misleading content has been cited by mainstream Namibian media.¹⁴

11 Misinformation refers to false or misleading information that is spread regardless of intent to deceive, while disinformation is deliberately fabricated or manipulated content designed to mislead people for political, financial, or ideological purposes.

12 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4TBgHuNNWI>

13 <https://www.zimeye.net/2024/12/25/talent-rusere-fact-check/>

14 <https://www.facebook.com/namibiansun/posts/professor-talent-rusere-high-commissioner-of-southern-africa-human-rights-lawyer/873567441615952/>



The second video¹⁵ was distributed through TikTok and contains an AI-generated image of SWAPO presidential candidate Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah allegedly collapsing on stage during a party rally in Otjiwarongo. This video and the AI-generated picture from it have been exposed as fake by Namibian fact-checkers¹⁶ but found their way into mainstream media.¹⁷

The video verification exercise provided insight into how young Namibians interpret and engage with digital media, particularly during the 2024 elections. Participants across multiple focus groups were asked to assess the credibility of the two fake news videos and determine whether they contained accurate or misleading information. The exercise revealed varying levels of media literacy and a deep-seated scepticism toward political content shared on social media.

Many respondents first encountered these fake news videos on social media platforms such as TikTok, WhatsApp, and Facebook. In some cases, participants had seen both videos before the discussion, while others had only seen one. For instance, a respondent noted, *"It was posted on one of our WhatsApp groups."* Another participant stated, *"I saw it on TikTok."*

In several discussions, participants pointed out that their initial reactions to the videos were shaped by their pre-existing perceptions of political events. Many felt that aspects of the videos seemed plausible because they echoed real experiences, such as logistical failures at polling stations, the shortage of ballot papers, and the overall disorganisation of the election process. One Keetmanshoop respondent stated, *"The first video, it's more truthful. Why am I saying it's truthful? Because all they said is the fact that the ECN had five years to put everything in place to make sure that this election would go smoothly."*

The videos appeared credible to some viewers, especially since they aligned with real grievances about election management, such as delays, ballot shortages, and verification machine failures. One Windhoek participant remarked, *"There are aspects of it that we can relate to. Because we've seen the old verification machines not working. We've seen how long the lines were."* This suggests that personal experiences with electoral inefficiencies made some participants more likely to accept certain claims as factual, even in the absence of verifiable evidence.

Some participants initially believed the videos to be accurate but later realised they were misleading after verifying facts through other sources. A participant from Keetmanshoop reflected, *"I thought it was truthful, but after the elections, the president came and clarified that it was fake."*

However, participants also demonstrated critical thinking in identifying misleading elements. Several respondents noted discrepancies in visual elements, the use of AI-generated images, and inconsistencies in reporting, which led them to question the legitimacy of the videos.

15 https://www.tiktok.com/@david_angala/video/7431287211238198533

16 <https://namibiafactcheck.org.na/news-item/election-fake-news-surge-in-october-2024/>

17 <https://futuremedianews.com.na/2024/10/28/swapo-presidential-candidate-rebounds-after-collapse-at-otjiwarongo-rally/> and, <https://neweralive.na/nnn-i-never-collapsed-nbc-editor-lands-in-hot-soup/>



One participant in a Windhoek group observed, *“If I hadn’t watched the videos prior, because of the sound, and because of, you know, this is how most creators make their videos, it would be very difficult to tell. But the editing of pictures and collecting certain things from different areas makes it seem staged.”*

Another Windhoek respondent expressed doubt over a claim in one of the videos, stating, *“For him to state so clearly and confidently that only elders managed to vote on the first day... where does he get so much confidence to say that? We came out and we voted.”*

Some participants acknowledged that political misinformation is often designed to mix elements of truth with exaggeration, making it harder to distinguish fact from fiction. They described how misleading claims gain credibility by incorporating real concerns, such as delays in voting or rumours of political interference. A Windhoek participant explained, *“They are using videos from different areas and AI-generated pictures. If you don’t have prior knowledge, it becomes difficult to tell what is real and what is fake.”*

Interestingly, the discussions also revealed the role of virality in shaping perceptions of credibility. Some participants admitted that they were more likely to believe content that had been widely shared or discussed on social media. One individual from Swakopmund noted, *“When it’s not viral, then it’s not real. But if it goes viral, it must be real. That’s how trends work.”* This highlights a significant challenge in countering misinformation, as viral content—whether truthful or not—tends to be perceived as authoritative.

The video verification exercise underscored the importance of improving digital literacy among young voters. Many participants expressed a desire for greater media education to help them critically assess political content online. The findings suggest that while some young Namibians are adept at detecting misinformation, others remain vulnerable to misleading narratives, particularly when they align with personal experiences or anxieties about the political system. Addressing this issue requires targeted efforts to promote fact-checking initiatives and encourage responsible digital engagement ahead of future elections.

6.7 Recommendations for Increasing Youth Participation

The focus group discussions provided several concrete recommendations on how to improve youth political participation in Namibia. Participants emphasised the need for targeted interventions that address both structural barriers and attitudinal challenges to ensure greater youth engagement in future elections.

One of the most frequently suggested recommendations was the expansion of voter education campaigns tailored specifically for young people. Many participants felt that existing civic education initiatives were inadequate, and that schools and community organisations should play a greater role in educating youth about the electoral process, democratic governance, and their rights as voters. A participant in Windhoek noted, *“We need real voter education, not just slogans. Teach us why our vote matters.”* This suggests that civic education should go beyond procedural explanations and focus on fostering a deeper understanding of the role of elections in shaping governance.





Participants also called for increased political accountability and more direct engagement between political leaders and young citizens. Several respondents expressed frustration that political parties only engaged with youth during election campaigns, failing to address their concerns between electoral cycles. A participant remarked, *"If political parties really want our votes, they should come talk to us, not just hire South African artists for rallies."* Many recommended the establishment of regular forums where young people could engage with policymakers on issues affecting them, thereby making political participation a continuous process rather than a once-every-five-years event.

Another key recommendation was improving election administration to make the voting process more accessible and efficient. Many young voters experienced long waiting times, technical failures, and confusion regarding voter registration, all of which discouraged participation. Some suggested extending voting hours or introducing digital voter registration to make it easier for youth with work or school commitments to participate. Others advocated for increased transparency in the management of elections to build trust in the system.

Additionally, participants highlighted the need for a merit-based political system that prioritises competence over party loyalty. Many expressed frustration with political appointments that appeared to be based on party affiliation rather than expertise. A respondent in Keetmanshoop stated, *"We don't want just anyone running ministries. If you lead agriculture, you should actually know something about agriculture."* This sentiment underscores the desire for governance structures that are more responsive and reflective of youth aspirations.

To counteract the influence of misinformation and disinformation, several participants suggested the implementation of digital literacy programs to help young voters critically assess political information. Many acknowledged that while social media was their primary source of news, it was also the least reliable due to the prevalence of false information. Some recommended that fact-checking initiatives be integrated into voter education campaigns, with media organisations taking on a more proactive role in combating election-related misinformation.

Finally, participants stressed the importance of youth representation in decision-making bodies. Many advocated for structural changes that would allow for greater inclusion of young leaders in political parties, parliament, and other governance institutions. They suggested that political parties create more leadership opportunities for youth beyond symbolic youth leagues and that legislative reforms be introduced to ensure better youth representation in national and local government.

These recommendations underscore the need for a multi-pronged approach to improving youth political participation in Namibia. Strengthening civic education, enhancing election administration, promoting accountability, and increasing youth representation will be essential in ensuring that young Namibians are not only encouraged to vote but are also empowered to actively shape their country's democratic future.



7 Conclusions

The findings of this study reveal that youth political participation in Namibia's 2024 elections was shaped by a combination of structural, psychological, and socio-economic factors. While young Namibians demonstrated a heightened awareness of their political rights and an eagerness to participate in democratic processes, they faced multiple barriers that hindered full engagement. These included economic hardships, logistical challenges on election day, limited access to voter education, and widespread disillusionment with political institutions. Many young Namibians viewed politics as an exclusive space dominated by older elites, reinforcing a sense of detachment and scepticism about the impact of their votes.

Despite these challenges, the study also identified key motivators that drove youth participation. A strong desire for political change, peer influence, social media activism, and the presence of younger political candidates all contributed to increased engagement. The symbolic and emotional significance of voting, particularly for first-time voters, underscored the potential for sustained youth involvement in future elections. However, the study also highlighted the need for greater political accountability and representation, as young Namibians expressed frustration over unfulfilled promises and a lack of meaningful engagement by political leaders beyond election periods.

A major issue that emerged during the 2024 elections was the role of disinformation and misinformation in shaping voter perceptions. Many young Namibians encountered misleading narratives, fake news, and politically motivated distortions that influenced their understanding of the electoral process. The findings suggest that digital literacy initiatives and fact-checking mechanisms are essential to countering the spread of misinformation and ensuring that young voters have access to reliable election-related information.

The role of media was also critical in shaping youth political engagement. While social media platforms were the dominant sources of information, they were also the least trusted due to the prevalence of misinformation. Traditional media, including newspapers and national broadcasters, remained important for fact-checking and verification, although their reach among young audiences appeared to be declining. Strengthening media literacy and encouraging responsible journalism will be necessary to foster a more informed electorate in future elections.

Overall, the study highlights the need for a multifaceted approach to increasing youth political participation in Namibia. Addressing structural barriers, improving electoral processes, enhancing voter education, and fostering youth-inclusive political representation are key steps toward strengthening democracy. Moving forward, policymakers, electoral bodies, and civil society organisations must work collaboratively to ensure that young Namibians are not only encouraged to vote but are also empowered to actively shape the country's democratic future.

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9 Appendix 1

Youth Political Participation Focus Group Guide

Total Time: 2 Hours

1. Introduction (5 minutes)

- **Purpose of the Discussion:**
 - We are here to discuss your experiences, thoughts, and feelings about youth participation in politics and elections in Namibia, especially in the 2024 Presidential and National Assembly elections. Your input will help us understand what encourages or discourages young people from participating and help improve future initiatives.
 - **Ground Rules:**
 - This is a safe space for honest and respectful discussion.
 - There are no right or wrong answers—your perspectives are what matters.
 - **Icebreaker:**
 - “Please introduce yourself and tell us one thing stood out for you about the 2024 elections.”
-

2. General Perceptions of Politics and Participation (10 minutes)

- **Opening Question:**
 - “What comes to mind when you think about politics in Namibia?”
 - **Probes:**
 - “How did you feel about the 2024 elections? Were they important to you? Why or why not?”
 - “What do you think are the most common ways young people participate in politics—voting, online activism, or protests?”
 - “What could politicians or political parties do differently to better connect with young people?”
-

3. Barriers to Youth Participation (12 minutes)

- **Opening Question:**
 - “What are some reasons why young people might not participate in elections or politics?”

- **Probes:**
 - “Did anything prevent you or people you know from voting in the 2024 elections?”
 - “Do you think economic challenges like unemployment or poverty affect political participation?”
 - “Are there challenges like lack of information, distrust in politicians, or location (urban vs rural) that impact participation?”

4. Motivators for Participation (12 minutes)

- **Opening Question:**
 - “What motivates young people to participate in elections or other political activities?”
- **Probes:**
 - “Were there any issues, events, or campaigns during the 2024 elections that encouraged youth participation?”
 - “How do social media celebrities, influencers, friends, or community leaders influence youth engagement in politics?”
 - “What benefits, if any, do young people feel they gain from participating in politics?”

5. Experiences with Political Participation (10 minutes)

- **Positive Experiences:**
 - “For those who participated in the 2024 elections, what was your experience like? What was positive about it?”
- **Negative Experiences:**
 - “Did you face any challenges during your participation? For example, misinformation, feeling unheard, or judgment from others?”
- **Probe:**
 - “How did these experiences affect how you feel about participating in politics in the future?”
 - “What would need to change for you to feel more encouraged to participate in the future?”

6. Disinformation During the 2024 Elections (12 minutes)

- **Opening Question:**
 - “Were you aware of any false or misleading information during the 2024 elections?”

- **Probes:**
 - “What kind of disinformation did you come across, and where did you see it (social media, conversations, etc.)?”
 - “How did you respond? Did you ignore, share, or try to verify it? Did you visit a fact-checking platform to verify its authenticity?”
 - “Who do you think was behind these campaigns, and what do you think their goals were?”
 - **Impact:**
 - “What impact do you think disinformation had on youth participation or trust in the election process?”
-

7. Media Use and Trust (12 minutes)

- **Opening Question:**
 - “What types of media did you rely on for information about the 2024 elections?”
 - **Probes:**
 - “How much do you trust traditional media like newspapers, radio, or TV compared to social media?”
 - “What makes you trust or distrust certain media sources?”
 - “In your opinion, which type of media—traditional media or social media—had a bigger influence on youth during the elections?”
 - “Which platforms, e.g. TikTok, Instagram, or Facebook, do you think are most effective for political engagement among young people?”
 - “Do you think online activism is seen as ‘real’ participation, or do people think it’s less meaningful than other forms of political activity?”
 - **Impact:**
 - “How did the media you consumed shape your understanding of the elections and the candidates?”
-

8. Recommendations for Increasing Youth Participation (12 minutes)

- **Opening Question:**
 - “What could be done to encourage more young people to participate in politics and elections in Namibia?”
 - **Probes:**
 - “What role could schools, universities, or youth organisations play?”
 - “How can political parties and the government better connect with young people?”
 - “Do you think creating more platforms or activities for youth involvement would help? If so, what kind?”
-

9. Wrap-Up and Closing (5 minutes)

- **Reflection:**
 - “If you could suggest one change to improve youth participation in Namibia, what would it be?”
 - “Is there anything else you’d like to share that we haven’t discussed?”
 - **Thank You:**
 - “Thank you for sharing your thoughts and experiences. Your input will help shape recommendations for improving youth political participation in Namibia.”
-

10. Facilitator’s Notes

- A. **Time Management:** Stick to the allotted time for each section to ensure all themes are covered.
 - B. **Encourage Participation:** Use open-ended questions and invite quieter participants to share.
 - C. **Probes:** Adjust or skip probes based on the flow of the discussion to maintain momentum.
-

11. Disinformation During the 2024 Elections (15 minutes)

Sharing Examples of Disinformation

- **Opening Question:**
 - “During the 2024 Presidential and National Assembly elections, were you aware of any false or misleading information or campaigns?”
- **Prompt:**
 - “If you saw any examples of this—such as photos, videos, posts, or audio clips on social media, WhatsApp, or other platforms—please share them with us. This can be on your phone or describe it if you don’t have it with you.”

Group Activity: Reviewing Specific Content

- **Activity Instructions:**
 - “I’m going to show you two **video clips** that were widely shared during the elections. After watching, I’d like to hear your thoughts.”
- **The facilitator shows pre-selected videos** to the group on a screen or shared device.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4TBgHuNNWI>

https://www.tiktok.com/@david_angala/video/7431287211238198533

Discussion Questions (Post-Viewing):

- 1. Awareness:**
 - “Did you see or come across these videos during the elections?”
 - “If so, where did you encounter it (social media, forwarded on WhatsApp, in conversations)?”
- 2. Truthfulness:**
 - “Do you think this content is truthful or misleading? Why or why not?”
 - “What clues helped you decide if this was real or false? For example, did you look at the source, the content itself, or other indicators?”
- 3. Responses to Disinformation:**
 - “If you believed this content was false or misleading, how did you respond to it? Did you share it, ignore it, or try to verify it?”
- 4. Impact:**
 - “What effect do you think content like this has on young people during elections? Does it change how they vote or how much they trust the process?”

Probes for Deeper Insights:

- “What makes disinformation convincing or hard to spot?”
- “Do you think such campaigns were deliberate? Who do you think might have been behind them, and why?”



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A Research Report Prepared for the NMT Media Foundation
By Christiaan Keulder
February 2025

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