

Youth and Electoral Political Participation in Southern Africa

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Southern Africa has in much of its colonial past been dominated by apartheid and the inherently undemocratic colonial rule. This was followed by protracted struggles by African nationalist movements for political independence in the 1950's, 1960's and 1970's. These struggles were to culminate in the indigenisation of political control and multi-party electoral systems. The 1990's have been a period of both democratisation and a decade of disillusionment with democratic processes. Young people have been at the centre of both these trends. Organs of civil society such as students' organisations, trade unions, churches and women's organisations have played leading roles in the various waves of the struggle for democracy. With the success of the democratization process they are now faced with the new challenges of participation in the new political dispensation.

This paper focuses on the changing trends and patterns in the youth's participation in the electoral process in the region. It examines trends in electoral participation in general and that of the youth in particular and proposes ways of improving youth participation and representation in political life. This we admit is a very narrow view of participation as the youth have other modes of political participation for instance they do get involved in house to house campaigns on behalf of political parties, they do organise fund raising events for their parties, they organise rallies and their youth wings have been vocal on issues of both national and party interest. The ultimate however is the extent to which they can be able to influence who gets elected as elections provide an important opportunity for the electorate to express their preferences on the policies and programmes of both the government of the day and those of the other contenders for political office. What the youth think about elections and the electoral system is of importance in how they view their leaders and motivate them to go to the polls when so required.