

# Understanding Political Engagement Amongst South Africa's Youth

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Professor Elirea Bornman



# UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AMONGST SOUTH AFRICA'S YOUTH

Recent studies suggest that South Africa's youth are less engaged in formal politics than earlier generations. **Professor Elirea Bornman** and her students at University of South Africa have recently investigated the opinions of youth on democratic institutions and the state of democracy in post-Apartheid South Africa. Their findings suggest that the apparent political disengagement and withdrawal from voting among young people is not necessarily associated with apathy or a lack of political opinions, but can reflect their lack of confidence in political processes and older generations of leaders.

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## Politics in Post-Apartheid South Africa

The disengagement of youth in politics is a major issue facing democracies worldwide. When young people are not engaged with political processes, this means that they have no influence in important decisions that affect their daily lives. By including the voices of youth and responding to their needs, countries across the globe can build more equitable, stable and peaceful societies.

The involvement of young people in African politics is more controversial than that of youth in other parts of the world. Over the past few decades, African youth have been associated with very different political events, such as the 'Arab spring' in North Africa, where youth were at the forefront of political change, and – on the other hand - the suppression of youth during the 1970s Red Terror in Ethiopia. In addition, African culture highly values age as a cultural symbol. Thus, it often only views young people as citizens of the future.

Because of its unique history, the political situation in South Africa is particularly complex. During apartheid, voting rights were restricted to white people only. These rights were extended to all citizens in 1994, enabling newer generations to vote irrespective of their ethnic or racial background.

## Investigating Political Opinions

People born in South Africa after 1994 are often referred to as the 'Born Frees', as they have grown up in a society where equal rights to vote and to participate in society are guaranteed. Professor Elirea Bornman and her students wanted to understand how 'Born Frees' view their role in South African politics, as well as to gain insight into their opinions about elections, political parties, and party membership.

Recently, analysts suggested that many young people who do not vote might be voicing their opinions in other ways, such as on social media or through political protests. To determine whether this is the case, the researchers gathered the opinions of South African youth residing in the Pretoria area, by

conducting six focus groups conducted between 2014 and 2018.

The participants were between 18 and 34 years old. As past studies suggested that white people in South Africa are sometimes hesitant to voice their opinions in the presence of other cultural groups, the researchers conducted separate focus groups for white and black participants.

## Reasons for Voting

During the focus groups, the young people voiced a wide range of opinions. Overall, the findings gathered by the team suggest that South African youth form a very diverse group, as different participants had very different views on politics, voting, and political processes.

While some participants reported that they regularly voted, others said that they had no intention of participating in elections. The researchers tried to understand the reasons behind these differences and what encouraged South African youth to vote or to abstain from voting.





‘Some participants viewed voting as an expression of their love and dedication to the country,’ says Professor Bornman. Many saw it as a rite of passage into adulthood, through which they could influence decision-making and bring about change. Others, particularly some of the black participants, viewed voting as a responsibility, feeling that they should take full advantage of the rights that were unjustly denied to their ancestors.

### Reasons for Not Voting

While some of the participants were politically active and deeply valued the democratic process, others said that they had no interest in voting or participating in political conversations. This lack of interest, however, did not always appear to be associated with ignorance or with what theorists have described as ‘political apathy’.

Instead, many people who did not vote expressed a general lack of confidence in the older generation of leaders and existing political parties, as they believed that these leaders were too old and did not reflect the needs of younger generations. For instance, some pointed out that current politicians did not understand problems of the modern era and did not communicate using contemporary technological tools, such as social media and the internet.

Others also believed that voting did not bring any real change, as the ANC party, the most supported party in South Africa, would likely win irrespective of their vote. Government corruption and poor performance were also two major reasons why some participants preferred not to vote.

‘In their case, withdrawal from elections cannot be regarded as political apathy, but represents a conscious act of opposition and an alternative form of political participation,’ says Professor Bornman. ‘However, whether they intended to participate

in elections or not, most of the participants expressed dissatisfaction with the current political leadership in the country.’

Interestingly, regardless of whether they voted or not, most participants appeared dissatisfied with the current government in South Africa, as they felt that it did not prioritise the interests of the country and its citizens. As one of the participants put it: ‘I really think the ANC has been in power too long and we need some sort of a change. The politics are becoming... stagnated... the fat cats are getting fatter.’

Another participant added: ‘I feel like they should really start realising our education, our children, our healthcare, our poverty, jobs... they really, really have to start doing something about that, which I don’t feel our government does.’

### Preventing Alienation

Overall, the recent study carried out by Professor Bornman and her team shows that South African youth range from young people who are engaged in politics to those who are largely disengaged. However, their findings suggest that those who do not actively participate in politics do not always desist due to apathy. Instead, some are untrusting of existing politicians and parties.

‘Our findings are important not only to achieve a better understanding of youth in post-apartheid South Africa, but also to get a glimpse of the disillusionment and frustration of youth in Africa where they no longer share the revolutionary ideals of their political leaders,’ says Professor Bornman. ‘They have also become tired of gerontocratic African leaders. Instead, the Arab Spring as well as the influence of the media – and social media in particular – have raised awareness among African youth of what good and accountable democratic governance entails.’

In the future, Professor Bornman’s study could encourage South African leaders and political parties to devise alternative communication strategies and initiatives that address the doubts and concerns of younger generations. Such initiatives could ultimately bring youth back into the political dialogue, ensuring that their voice is heard during important decision-making processes.

‘Youth alienation could, in the end, have far-reaching negative implications for the stabilisation of democracy in South Africa, but also in other post-colonial societies,’ says Professor Bornman. ‘In order to consolidate democracy and to prevent destabilising youth uprisings, political leaders should govern in transparent and accountable ways. The youth should furthermore not be perceived as citizens of the future. Their voice in the current political situation should be taken seriously.’





# Meet the researcher

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Professor Elirea Bornman is a Professor Emeritus in the Department of Communication Science at the University of South Africa (UNISA). She holds a Doctorate in Psychology from UNISA. Her research primarily focuses on language, social, national, and ethnic identities, intercultural and intergroup relations in post-apartheid South Africa, the role of national symbols in post-apartheid South Africa, and nation-building in Africa. Before she started working at UNISA, she worked as a senior researcher at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), where she conducted research into a wide range of socio-political issues. Professor Bornman has published and presented more than a hundred journal articles, books, book chapters, and papers at national and international conferences. She was also recognised for her contribution to research on police training by a former head of the South African Police Service (SAPS), Commissioner George Fivaz.

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## FURTHER READING

E Bornman, J Harvey, H J van Vuuren, B Kekana, M F Matuludi, B Mdakane, and L Ramphele, Political Engagement and Opinions of Youth in Post-apartheid South Africa: A Qualitative Study, *Politikon*, 2021, 48, 372-390, DOI: 10.1080/02589346.2021.1913554.

