

The Civic Deficit: How Limited Civic Education Undermines Electoral Integrity in Africa.

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ABSTRACT

For over fifty years of post-colonial history, African electoral processes have been systematically undermined by a pervasive civic education deficit that leaves vast segments of the electoral vulnerable to manipulation, disinformation, and elite exploitation. Drawing on empirical evidence from multiple African countries including South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, Malawi, and Zambia, this article demonstrates how the civic education deficit manifests in three interrelated and mutually reinforcing ways: through depressed and manipulated voter participation, through the persistence of ethnic voting and clientelism, and through the exploitation of poverty and illiteracy by political elites. The analysis reveals that declining voter turnout across the continent is not merely a reflection of apathy but a symptom of systemic failure in civic education that breed misunderstanding of electoral systems, erode trust in democratic processes, and reinforce perceptions that participation is futile. Furthermore, ethnic voting persists because citizens, lacking information about candidates' policy positions and governance capacity, fall back on ethnic identity as a heuristic for decision-making, a pattern that civic education can disrupt by providing alternative criteria for evaluation. The exploitation of poverty and illiteracy, meanwhile, creates a vicious cycle wherein illiterates and impoverished citizens are vulnerable to vote-buying and manipulation, producing incompetent leadership that perpetuates the conditions enabling such exploitation. The article examines institutional challenges facing civic education, including inadequate resourcing, the concentration of efforts in pre-election periods, and political resistance from elites who benefit from an uninformed electorate. Drawing on comparative case studies ranging from Zambia's historic 2021 voter turnout to Nigeria's persistent democratic hurdles, the analysis identifies effective approaches and structural barriers. The article concludes by outlining a comprehensive agenda for civic education reform that addresses both symptoms and structural causes, including embedding civic education in school curricula, sustaining adult literacy, and education programmes, executing electoral management body reform, political party accountability mechanisms, and strengthened civic society engagement. The future of African democracy depends on citizens who are not only entitled to vote but also equipped to vote wisely; civic education remains the definitive cornerstone of that future.

Keywords: civic education, electoral integrity, Africa, voter apathy, ethnic voting, vote-buying, illiteracy, democratic consolidation, political participation, electoral management bodies, voter turnout, clientelism, political accountability, youth participation, democracy, governance.

INTRODUCTION

Over three decades of observing electoral processes across Africa, both from academic vantage point and through direct engagement with electoral management bodies, civil society organisations, and political parties, we have witnessed a troubling and persistent pattern. Elections on the continent are disproportionately influenced by citizens who lack adequate civic education. This is not a condemnation of African voters, but rather a system critique of the failure of states, political parties, and civil society to cultivate the informed citizenry that democratic governance demands. The democratic transitions that swept across Africa in the late 1980s and early 1990s represented a watershed moment in the continent's political history. From Benin's National Conference in 1990 to South Africa's historic 1994 elections, a wave of political liberalization promised to replace

authoritarian rule with accountable, representative governance. Yet three decades later, the promise remains unfulfilled in main countries. African democracies are characterized by a paradox: while electoral processes have become more regular and institutionally robust, the quality of democratic participation has often stagnated or declined (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997; Cheeseman, 2015).

At the heart of this democratic deficit lies a profound and persistent civic education deficit. This article argues that the quality of elections across Africa is systematically undermined by a pervasive lack of civic education among large segments of the electorate. Drawing on empirical evidence from multiple African countries, I demonstrate how the civic education deficit manifests in three interrelated and mutually reinforcing ways: through depressed and manipulated voter participation, through the persistence of ethnic voting and clientelism, and through the exploitation of poverty and illiteracy by political elites. The article concludes by outlining a comprehensive agenda for civic education reform that addresses both the symptoms and the structural causes of the problem.

The Nature and Scope of the Civic Education Deficit

Defining Civic Education in the African Context

Civic education, in its broadest sense, encompasses the formal and informal processes through which citizens acquire the knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions necessary for meaningful participation in democratic governance. This includes understanding of political institutions and processes, awareness of citizens' rights and responsibilities, capacity for critical thinking about political issues, and the motivation to engage in collective action for the common good. As scholars have long recognized, the assumption underlying civic education is that "better knowledge about the democratic functioning of the state promotes stronger democratic values and norms" and that it "increases trust in institutions and a willingness to participate in politics" (Finkel & Smith, 2011). In western societies, school-based civic education has been considered the primary means to cultivate democratic citizenship since the 1960s (Galston, 2001). However, the application of this model to African contexts raises important questions about cultural appropriateness, resource availability, and the political will of governing elites.

Research in western settings demonstrate that "classroom instruction strengthens political attitudes and behaviour," but scholars have questioned "whether civic education works in the same way in newer democracies" (Finkel & Smith, 2011). In weak democracies, studies have found that civic education "could actually lead young people away from political participation" as they "become more aware of the flaws of their own system and turn away from politics" (Bratton, 2010). This paradox that knowledge can breed disillusionment rather than engagement is central to understanding the complex relationship between civic education and electoral behaviour in Africa.

The theoretical foundations of civic education in Africa must also account for the continent's distinct historical trajectory. Post-colonial state-building efforts often marginalized civic education in favour of nationalist narratives that emphasized loyalty to the ruling party rather than critical engagement with governance (Ngoma, 2014). This legacy continues to shape contemporary civic education efforts, which must contend with state structures that are often ambivalent about cultivating an empowered and questioning citizenry. In many countries, the ruling elite views an uninformed and passive electorate as advantageous to the maintenance of power creating a fundamental tension between democratic rhetoric and authoritarian practice.

The Magnitude of the Deficit

The scale of the civic education deficit across Africa is staggering and demands urgent attention. Former President of the Nigerian Bar Association, Olisa Agbakoba, captured this concern when he stated that "99 percent of those who hold cards have no clue what they are doing" (Agbakola, quoted in Omoniyi, 2025). While this figure is undoubtedly hyperbolic, it reflects a genuine and widespread concern about the level of political awareness among African electorates. "All those my old aunties in my village in Onitsha, they have no idea

what's happening. Yet they all carry voter cards, and you give them two thousand naira and they vote anyhow they like" (Agbakoba, quoted in Omoniyi, 2025).

This anecdotal evidence is supported by systemic research. Across Sub-Sahara Africa, surveys consistently reveal low levels of political knowledge among citizens. Many voters cannot name their elected representatives, do not understand the functions of different branches of government, and lack awareness of their constitutional rights and the mechanisms available for holding leaders accountable (Afrobarometer, 2022). This knowledge deficit is not evenly distributed; it is most pronounced among women, rural populations, the poor, and the less educated groups that together constitute a substantial majority of the population in most African countries.

The problem is particularly acute among young people, who constitute the majority of the population in most African countries and represent the demographic future of the continent. According to the South African Institute of International Affairs, "Africa is a young continent, yet many voters lack an understanding of their power and the importance of voter education and organizing to leverage their demographic strength" (SAIIA, 2025). Research by Kramon and Posner (2016) highlighting structural dynamics in East Africa further underscores how youth have largely been absent from national political decision-making despite the demographic predominance, noting that youth councils and party structures are often tokenistic rather than substantive. The disengagement of youth from political processes is not simply a matter of apathy but reflects a systemic failure to invest in their civic development from an early age.

The consequences of this deficit are measurable and profound across multiple dimensions of political engagement. Afrobarometer data reveals that "the largest generational disparity is in voting, where the youth (aged 18 – 35) trail their elders by a striking 18 percentage points" (Afrobarometer, 2022). Youth are also "less likely to feel close to a political party, to attend a community meeting, to join with others to raise, and to contact traditional leaders and local government councilors" (Afrobarometer, 2022). These patterns of disengagement are not merely reflections of youthful apathy; they are symptoms of a systemic failure to equip young citizens with the knowledge, skills, and motivation to participate meaningfully in democratic life.

Furthermore, the literacy challenge compounds the civic education deficit in profound ways. In Nigeria, for instance, 31 percent of the population is illiterate. This significant illiterate population "limits critical thinking, which is essential for meaningful civic participation," with consequences that include poor governance, political manipulation, and social unrest (UNESCO, 2023). Across Sub-Sahara Africa, adult literacy rates remain substantially lower than global average, creating a structural barrier to effective civic education that cannot be overcome through conventional print-based information campaign alone (World Bank, 2024). The challenge of reaching illiterate populations with accessible civic education requires innovative methods, including radio programmes, community dialogue, and visual materials that transcend the written words.

Voter Turnout, Apathy, and the Failure of Civic Education

The Turnout Crisis Across the Continent

Declining voter turnout across Africa is one of the most visible and troubling manifestations of the civic education deficit. This trend is not uniform across the continent. Some countries have maintained relatively stable turnout rates but the overall pattern is one of decline, particularly in countries with established democratic systems where initial enthusiasm has given way to disillusionment.

In South Africa's 2024 national and provincial elections, "while 27.7 million people registered as voters, only 58.6% voted" (Mbete, 2024). This figure is even more striking when considered in context: "58.6% - 16.23 million voters represent only 40% of the more than" eligible voting population (Mbete, 2024). In other words, the majority of South Africa's citizens chose not to participate in elections that were widely regarded as the most significant since the end of apartheid. This represents a dramatic decline from the days of 1994, when turnout exceeded 86 percent.

In Nigeria's 2023 general election, the situation was even more dire. Only a quarter of the registered voters actually cast their ballots, representing a continued decline from previous election cycles (INEC, 2023). This pattern of declining participation has been observed across multiple electoral cycles, with each election seeing lower turnout than the last. As observers have consistently noted, turnout "has been decreasing with each election largely due to a lack of civic education" (Nwadishi, 2026).

In Uganda's West Nile region during 2021 general elections, the Electoral Commission District Supervisor Juma Shesa reported that voter turnout in Maracha District was only 47.7 percent, the lowest in the region (Shesa, quoted in *The Independent*, 2026). Across the country, "voter apathy has become a growing concern, with many citizens choosing to stay away from the ballot box" (*The Independent*, 2026). This pattern is not limited to West Nile but has been observed across Uganda, with turnout declining in successive elections since the reintroduction of multiparty politics in 2005.

The registration process itself reveals the depth of the problem. In Malawi's Dedza district during the 2025 general elections registration, the National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE) Trust "expressed dissatisfaction with the turnout of people," with "statistics showing that most centres failed to register more than 100 registrants" (NICE Trust, 2025). The Programme Manager noted that "the worst group that has not shown interest to register so far are the youth" (NICE, 2025). This failure to register is a precursor to low turnout on election day, and it disproportionately affects young people who are the future of African democracy. These patterns are not random; they reflect systemic failures of civic education that are deeply embedded in political structures and processes. As one study of voter behaviour in Nigeria's South-East region found, "significant voter apathy" is driven by "disenfranchisement and insecurity, impacting the South-East's representation in national politics" (Okafor & Nwosu, 2024). The study's Sustainable Voters' Education model "underscores the importance of comprehensive voter education in transforming voter behaviour and promoting regime stability," highlighting "key elements like awareness creation and ideological consistency" (Okafor & Nwosu, 2024).

The Mechanisms of Apathy

Understanding why civic education failures lead to voter apathy requires examining the mechanisms at work, the pathways through which ignorance translates into disengagement. Research in Uganda has identified "key drivers of voter apathy including lack of trust in the electoral process, inadequate civic education, and perceptions that voting does not lead to change" (*The Independent*, 2026). These factors are interconnected and mutually reinforcing: inadequate civic education breeds misunderstanding of how electoral systems work and what voting can achieve; this misunderstanding, in turn, erodes trust in electoral processes; and this erosion of trust reinforces the perception that participation is futile.

The psychological dimension of this process is crucial. When citizens lack understanding of how their vote connects to policy outcomes and governance, they are more likely to view voting as a meaningless ritual rather than a consequential act. This perception is reinforced when elected officials fail to deliver on campaign promises or when corruption goes unpunished. In this context, the individual vote appears to have no discernible impact on the quality of governance, leading to a rational calculation that participation is not worth the effort.

In South Africa, research has found that "the youth fail to vote because some believe politics is full of corruption and self-enrichment" (Mbete, 2024). Other factors identified include "poor service delivery, the unemployment rate and government detachment from reality on the ground" (Mbete, 2024). Dr. Sithembile Mbete's analysis of the 2024 elections found that "only about half of the registered 18 – 19 years old young people turned up to vote" (Mbete, 2024). The generational divide in South Africa is particularly stark, with older voters who remember the struggle against apartheid far more likely to participate than young people who have only known democratic rule.

The relationship between civic education and turnout is not simply one of information provision; it is fundamentally about cultivating a sense of political efficacy, the belief that one's participation can make a difference. Research from Zambia demonstrates that civic education providing objective political information alongside an efficacy-promoting curriculum can significantly reduce the gender gap in political engagement

among young voting-age adults (Bratton & Lolojih, 2022). A field experiment conducted in Zambia before the 2021 elections found that the efficacy-promoting course substantially increased young women's political interest and participation, narrowing gender gaps across a wide range of behavioral and attitudinal outcomes (Bratton & Lolojih, 2022). This finding is significant because it demonstrates that civic education can address not only knowledge deficits but also the psychological barriers to participation.

However, the evidence also suggests that voter education alone is insufficient to overcome the broader structural and institutional barriers to participation. A study of youth political participation in Uganda and Kenya found that "voter education is necessary but not a sufficient condition for youth friendly meaningful participation at local level" (Kramon & Posner, 2026). The research indicated that "larger macro-level elements, political trust, economic resources, and institutional trust may have a greater influence" on participation than civic education alone (Kramon & Posner, 2016). This finding underscores the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses not only information deficits but also the broader structural conditions that shape political engagement.

The Connection Between Civic Education and Voter Behaviour

The empirical link between civic education and voter behaviour is well established in the literature. Voter education initiatives have been shown to be "instructional in increasing voter turnout, reducing electoral apathy, and fostering a more politically literate citizenry" (Omoniyi, 2025). Research has established a "positive effect of voter education initiatives on political participation and electoral engagement" (Omoniyi, 2025). However, these effects are not automatic; they depend on the quality, timing, and reach of civic education programmes.

One of the key challenges is that civic education efforts are often concentrated in the weeks immediately preceding elections. This "election cycle" approach, while understandable given resource constraints, has limited impact on long-term political engagement. As one Nigerian civic educator put it: "We cannot teach democracy in one week. It is a lifetime process. But nobody gives us money to do it in the off-season" (Quoted in Okafor & Nwosu, 2024). Sustained civic education that is embedded in school curricula and community programmes throughout the year is far more effective than last-minute campaigns that compete for attention with electioneering and are quickly forgotten after the polls close.

Moreover, the content of civic education matters as much as its timing. Programmes that simply transit formal knowledge about political institutions have limited impact on behaviour. What is needed is education that develops critical thinking skills, fosters democratic values, and provides opportunities for practical engagement (Galston, 2001) interactive and participatory approaches that encourage discussion and reflection have been found to be more effective than lecture-based instruction.

Ethnic Voting and the Failure of Civic Education

The Persistence of Ethnic Voting

One of the most enduring and consequential features of African electoral politics is the influence of ethnicity on voting behaviour. The politicization of ethnicity has been identified as a prime reason why electoral accountability in Africa may not work as theorized (Eifert, Miguel & Posner, 2010). When voters prioritize ethnic identity over policy considerations or candidate competence, the mechanism of electoral accountability whereby citizens reward good performance and punish poor performance is fundamentally undermined.

Studies consistently reveal persistent ethnic voting patterns across the continent, with a significant proportion of voters influenced by the ethnic backgrounds of candidates (Lindberg & Morrison, 2008). Research on ethnic-based politics in Ghana found that "despite significant strides in democratization, Ghana's political landscape remains deeply influenced by ethnic affiliations, which pose challenges to national unity and democratic consolidation" (Gyimah-Boadi, 2024). Qualitative data analysis reveals "persistent ethnic voting patterns, with a significant proportion of voters influenced by the ethnic backgrounds of candidates" (Gyimah-Boadi, 2024). Similarly, in Kenya, "ethnic identity and communal affiliations continue to shape voter decisions, limiting the emergence of merit-based leadership" (Mwangi & Wanjiru, 2023). The 2007 post-election violence in Kenya,

which claimed over a thousand lives, demonstrated the potentially devastating consequences of ethnic mobilization around elections. Despite reforms implemented after the violence, ethnicity remains a powerful factor in Kenyan electoral politics.

A study of the 2023 general elections in Lagos State, Nigeria, found that “ethnic identity played a pivotal role in voter behaviour and electoral violence” (Ogunyemi, 2024). The research demonstrated that “53% of respondents acknowledged that ethnic affiliation influenced their voting behaviour” (Ogunyemi, 2024). This finding is particularly concerning given that Lagos is Nigeria’s most cosmopolitan and economically developed city, suggesting that ethnic voting is not merely a rural phenomenon but a deeply embedded feature of political culture that persists even in urban, ostensibly modern contexts.

The theoretical underpinnings of ethnic voting are well established in the scholarly literature. Horowitz (1985) argued that ethnic groups serve as political mobilizing vehicles because they provide a sense of strong state institutions that guarantee security and deliver services, citizens turn to ethnic networks for protection and support. Political entrepreneurs exploit these networks, appealing to ethnic solidarity to mobilise voters and win elections.

Most recent scholarship has emphasized that ethnic voting is not simply a primordial attachment but a rational response to informational constraints (Posner, 2005). As scholars have argued, “voters engage in ethnic voting because they have limited knowledge about a candidate in order to make an informed voting decision” (Conroy-Krutz, 2013). When citizens lack information about candidates’ policy positions, track records, and governance capacity, they fall back on ethnic identity as a readily available and reliable heuristic for decision-making. In this context, ethnic voting is not irrational but rather a rational strategy for coping with information scarcity.

Civic Education as a Countermeasure

Civic education has the potential to mitigate ethnic voting by providing citizens with alternative sources of information and criteria for evaluation. Research from Ghana indicates that “electoral reforms and civic education initiatives have begun to reduce the salience of ethnicity in voting behaviour” (Gyimah-Boadi, 2024). The National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) has been central to this effort, conducting sustained civic education programmes that emphasize issue-based voting and national unity.

The study of Lagos State found that “those who had received civic education showed a lower susceptibility to ethnic to ethnic rhetoric ($p < 0.05$),” suggesting that “civic education serves as a crucial intervention in reducing ethnic-based electoral violence by fostering political awareness and promoting democratic values” (Ogunyemi, 2024). This finding provides empirical support for the argument that civic education can reduce ethnic voting, but it also highlights the challenges. The statistical significance of the effect, while real, is not overwhelming, suggesting that civic education alone cannot eliminate ethnic voting.

Qualitative evidence reinforces these findings and provides insight into the mechanisms at work. One civic education officer from Alimosho, Lagos, stated: “Many of the young people we engaged in the pre-election town halls confessed they had never understood how to vote or what the consequences of ethnic bias were. But after our sessions, some said they were ready to vote based on issues and not tribe” (Quoted in Ogunyemi, 2024). This testimony illustrates how civic education can transform voting behaviour by providing citizens with the knowledge and frameworks to evaluate candidates on substantive grounds rather than ethnic affiliation.

However, the limitations of civic education in addressing ethnic voting are also evident. A community leader in Ojo observed: “INEC and civil groups tried, but the message didn’t go round. Many of our people in the inner parts of Ojo didn’t even get one flyer or attend any awareness campaign. That’s why ethnic sentiments still controlled their votes” (Ogunyemi, 2024). This observation highlights the challenge of reaching remote and marginalized communities, where the influence of ethnic identity is often strongest and civic education efforts are weakest.

The findings also reveal that only “47% of respondents reported having adequate exposure to civic education” (Ogunyemi, 2024). This means that more than half of the population in Lagos State, one of Nigeria’s most urbanized and educated regions lacks adequate civic education. If this is the case in Lagos, the situation in rural areas and less developed regions is likely far worse, with civic education coverage being even more limited and ethnic voting correspondingly more prevalent.

The Role of Social Identity Theory

The persistence of ethnic voting in the face of civic education efforts can be understood through Social Identity Theory, which highlights “how voters’ attachment to their ethnic group extends beyond cultural affinity, it becomes a proxy for trust, security, and belonging in a context of state weakness and political uncertainty” (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In such context, ethnic voting is not simply irrational behaviour but a rational response to the structural conditions of political life.

This insight is crucial for understanding the role of civic education. When citizens lack information about candidates’ policy positions, track records, and governance capacity, they fall back on ethnic identity as a heuristic for decision-making. Civic education can disrupt this pattern by providing alternative sources of information and criteria for evaluation. However, doing so requires sustained, systematic efforts that reach all segments of the population, not sporadic campaigns that leave the most vulnerable communities untouched.

Moreover, civic education must address not only the information deficit but also the psychological and social dynamics that underpin ethnic identification. Programmes that promote intergroup contact, shared civic identity, and understanding of common challenges can reduce the salience of ethnicity in political life. However, such programmes require significant investment and political support that is often lacking.

Poverty, Illiteracy, and Electoral Manipulation

The Exploitation of Vulnerability

The absence of civic education creates a fertile ground for manipulation by political elites who systematically exploit poverty and illiteracy to influence voter behaviour. As Professor Eliasu Alhassa of the University for Development Studies in Ghana has observed, “Some people even voluntarily sell their votes simply because they do not understand what is at stake” (Alhassan, 2026). This is not merely a transaction; it is the wholesale surrender of democratic agency that undermines the very foundations of electoral accountability.

When citizens lack understanding of their rights, the significance of their vote, and the mechanisms of accountability, they become vulnerable to the most immediate and tangible inducements. The decision to sell one’s vote is often made under conditions of extreme material deprivation, where the immediate benefit of cash or food outweighs the abstract and distant benefits of electoral integrity. However, this calculation is only possible because voters lack the civic education to understand the long-term costs of their actions.

In Nigeria, a study of the 2024 Edo and Ondo state off-cycle elections revealed that “extreme poverty, institutional weakness, inadequate voter education and awareness, and political patronage increased the incidence of vote buying among political parties” (Etim, 2025). A political commentator noted that “poverty is the perfect breeding ground for vote-buying. In areas where job opportunities are scarce...elections are not just feeding season for the politicians, but for the people as well” (Etim, 2025). This observation captures the perverse logic of vote-buying: in conditions of desperation, political manipulation becomes not only possible but almost inevitable.

This manipulation extends beyond mere vote-buying to active exploitation of illiteracy. In Zimbabwe, there are documented cases of voters being forced to present themselves as illiterate in order to receive “assistance” from ruling party members at polling stations, assistance that invariably directs their votes towards the party in power (Moyo, 2018). This practice exploits the legal provisions for assisted voting that are intended to help genuinely

illiterate or disabled voters, turning a safeguard into a tool of manipulation. The provision, well-intentioned in its design, becomes perverted in its application.

The scale of this challenge is immense and demands urgent attention. In Nigeria, for instance, 31 percent of the population is illiterate (UNESCO, 2023). This significant illiterate population “limits critical thinking, which is essential for meaningful civic participation,” with consequences that include poor governance, political manipulation, and social unrest (UNESCO, 2023). Across Sub-Sahara Africa, the adult literacy rate is approximately 67 percent, meaning that roughly one-third of the adult population lacks the basic literacy skills necessary to engage with conventional civic education materials (World Bank, 2024). This structural barrier to civic education perpetuates a cycle of vulnerability and manipulation.

The Vicious Cycle of Exploitation and Disenfranchisement

The problem is systemic and self-reinforcing. Illiterate citizens are not merely vulnerable at the ballot box; they are also excluded from meaningful participation in governance between elections. As one editorial on South Africa’s democratic betrayal noted, “Illiterate councilors are easy prey for corruption. They cannot scrutinize tenders, challenge inflated budgets or hold officials accountable” (Daily Maverick, 2024). This creates a vicious cycle: illiteracy enables manipulation, manipulation produces incompetent leadership, and incompetence perpetuates the conditions poverty, unemployment, and further illiteracy that sustain the cycle.

The financial dimension of vote-buying has been extensively documented across the continent. In Nigeria’s 2023 elections, “the cost of vote-buying in Nigeria’s elections has risen from about N500 per vote to as high as N5,000 per vote in the last couple of years” (Etim, 2025). A vote buyer interviewed in Lagos stated: “There is a price for everything. If a man is hungry, you give him food and he will vote for your candidate. It is simple economics” (Etim, 2025). This cynical calculus is only possible because voters lack the civic education to understand the long-term costs of selling their votes for short-term gain.

Moreover, the exploitation of poverty is not limited to vote-buying. Political parties and candidates also use food distribution, cash transfers, and promises of employment to secure votes. In many communities, these inducements are not viewed as bribes but as acts of generosity or patronage, precisely because citizens lack the civic education to recognize them as violations promise and illicit inducement becomes blurred when voters lack the conceptual tools to distinguish between them.

The Role of Poverty in Undermining Electoral Integrity

Poverty creates a structural vulnerability that civic education alone cannot fully address. When citizens are desperate for basic necessities, the immediate material benefit of selling their vote often outweighs the abstract long-term benefits of electoral integrity. However, civic education can help citizens understand the collective consequences of vote-buying and develop strategies for resisting manipulation, even in conditions of material deprivation.

Research from Ghana indicates that “voter education programmes that target communities with high poverty rates and include practical guidance on how to resist vote-buying can be effective” (Alhassan, 2026). Such programmes go beyond abstract democratic values to address the concrete realities of voters’ lives, providing them with the skills and confidence to demand accountability and reject inducements. They acknowledge the material pressures that voters face while offering strategies for collective resistance.

Nevertheless, the challenge is formidable. Political parties and candidates with access to substantial resource will always have an advantage in contexts where poverty is widespread. Closing the civic education gap is therefore essential not only for improving electoral integrity but also for reducing the structural inequalities that enable manipulation in the first place. This requires addressing not only the information deficit but also the economic conditions that make citizens vulnerable to manipulation.

The Role and Limitations of Civic Education

Institutional Challenges

The institutional framework for civic education across Africa remains inadequate and under-resourced. Election management bodies and civil society organisations often lack the resources to conduct sustained, effective civic education. Faith Nwadishi, Executive Director of the Centre for Transparency and Advocacy in Nigeria, has squarely blamed the country's political class and weak civic education systems for persistent voter apathy, warning that failure to address the problem could undermine participation in forthcoming elections (Nwadishi, 2026). She observes that political parties, which once conducted grassroots voter education alongside their campaigns, have abandoned this responsibility in favour of social media messaging that fails to reach many communities (Nwadishi, 2026).

The tendency to concentrate civic education efforts in the weeks immediately preceding elections rather than embedding civic education in school curricula and community programmes year-round limits its transformative potential. This "election cycle" approach, while understandable given resource constraints, treat civic education as a technical fix rather than a fundamental investment in democratic capacity. As one Nigerian civic educator put it: "We cannot teach democracy in one week. It is a lifelong process. But nobody gives us money to do it in the off-season" (Okafor & Nwosu, 2024).

Moreover, the quality of civic education programmes is often compromised by inadequate training of educators, outdated materials, and a lack of cultural relevance. Programmes developed in donor capitals and translated without adaptation to local contexts often fail to resonate with target communities. The use of languages that are not widely spoken, examples that are not culturally relevant, and approaches that do not account for local power dynamics all limit the effectiveness of civic education.

Evidence of Effectiveness

It would be a mistake, however, to treat civic education as a panacea. The evidence on its effectiveness is nuanced and context-dependent. While studies have found positive relations between civic education and political knowledge, engagement, democratic values, and trust in established liberal democracies (Finkel & Smith, 2011), the picture in Africa's electoral democracies is more complex. Some research has even found that civic education "could actually lead young people away from political participation" in weak democracies (Bratton, 2010). This counterintuitive finding suggests that as young people become more aware of the flaws in their political systems, they may turn away from participation in disillusionment rather than engagement.

Nevertheless, there are grounds for optimism. Studies of civic education programmes in Africa have found that "youths with high knowledge and values the core objectives of civic education remain committed to democratic political behaviour" (Demarest & Kuppens, 2025). This suggests that when civic education is effective in building both knowledge and democratic values, it can sustain political engagement even in challenging contexts.

Research on civic education in Nigeria's Oyo State found that "students who underwent continuous civic education throughout the school year exhibited 45% higher political efficacy than those who only participated in pre-election sensitization" (Ayodele, 2024). This finding underscores the importance of sustained, embedded civic education rather than sporadic interventions. The difference in efficacy between continuous and intermittent exposure to civic education suggests that the cumulative effect of civic education is substantial.

The effectiveness of civic education also depends on the content and delivery methods. Interactive and participatory approaches that encourage discussion and critical thinking have been found to be more effective than lecture-based instruction (Galston, 2001). Community-based approaches that engage traditional leaders, religious institutions, and local civil society organisations have also shown promise in reaching populations that are difficult to access through formal education system (Kramon & Posner, 2016). Such approaches leverage existing social networks and trust relationships to deliver civic education in culturally appropriate ways.

The Knowledge-Action Gap

A significant challenge facing civic education is the knowledge-action gap. Many citizens who possess political knowledge and democratic values still fail to participate in elections or engage in political processes. This gap is often attributed to institutional barriers, such as complex registration processes, inaccessible polling stations, and perceptions of electoral manipulation (Bratton, 2010). Even when voters are well-informed, they may choose not to participate if they believe their vote will not be counted or will not make a difference.

Moreover, disillusionment with political outcomes can undermine the effects of civic education. As one South African youth respondent noted in a research study: “I understand the importance of voting. I learned it in school. But what is the point when the same corrupt people get elected every time?” (Mbetse, 2024). This sentiment highlights the challenge of maintaining civic engagement in contexts where democratic institutions are perceived as captured by self-serving elites. Civic education that builds knowledge without addressing the perceived illegitimacy of political institutions may paradoxically increase disillusionment.

To address this gap, civic education must be accompanied by broader reforms that improve the responsiveness and accountability of political institutions. Civic education alone cannot overcome the structural barriers to meaningful participation, but it can create the demand for accountability that drives institutional reforms. This requires a comprehensive approach that addresses both the supply and demand sides of democratic governance.

Comparative Perspectives: Successes and Failures

South Africa: A Case of Diminishing Returns

South Africa’s experience illustrates both the potential and the limitations of civic education. The country has one of the most developed civic education infrastructures on the continent, with a robust civil society sector and a school curriculum that includes citizenship education. Yet the 2024 elections saw the lowest turnout since the advent of democracy in 1994, with only 58.6 % of registered voters participating (Mbetse, 2024).

The reasons for this decline are multifaceted and deeply rooted in South Africa’s political trajectory. Citizen trust in democratic institutions has eroded significantly, with Afrobarometer data showing that “only 37% of South Africans trust the Electoral Commission” (Afrobarometer, 2022). This erosion of trust is not simply a function of ignorance; it reflects the real experience of citizens with a political system that has failed to deliver on its transformative promise. Persistent inequality, high unemployment, corruption scandals, and declining service delivery have all contributed to a sense that democracy has not delivered for ordinary citizens.

Moreover, the legacy of apartheid inequality continues to shape political engagement, with poorer and less educated communities showing lower levels of participation despite receiving civic education interventions. The structural determinants of participation including economic inequality, geographical isolation, and historical marginalization continue to exert a powerful influence of participation including economic inequality, geographical isolation, and historical marginalization continue to exert a powerful influence that civic education alone cannot overcome.

South Africa’s experience suggests that civic education is necessary but not sufficient for maintaining high levels of electoral participation. When the perceived quality of governance declines and institutions lose legitimacy, even well-informed citizens may choose to disengage from the political process (Mattes & Mughogo, 2009). This insight has important implications for other African countries that are investing in civic education without addressing the broader conditions of democratic governance.

Ghana: A Partial Success Story

Ghana offers a more optimistic perspective on the potential of civic education. The country has been a beacon of democratic stability in West Africa, with relatively high voter turnout and peaceful elections. The National Commission for Civil Education (NCCE) has been central to this success, conducting sustained civic education programmes throughout the year (Gyimah-Boadi, 2024). Research on Ghana’s 2020 elections found that “voters exposed to NCCE programmes were 25% more likely to reject ethnic voting and 30% more likely to cite policy

platforms as their primary voting criterion” (Gyimah-Boadi, 2024). The NCCE’s approach emphasizes grassroots engagement, with civic educators working in communities across the country on a permanent basis rather than only during election periods. This sustained presence allows for the development of trust and the cumulative impact of repeated civic education contacts.

However, Ghana’s success has not been informing across the country. Rural areas and economically disadvantaged communities continue to show higher levels of ethnic voting and lower levels of issue-based participation, suggesting that the reach of civic education remains limited (Gyimah-Boadi, 2024). The NCCE has also faced chronic funding constraints that have limited its ability to expand its programmes and reach all communities. These limitations demonstrate that even successful civic education programmes require sustained investment and political support to be effective.

Nigeria: A Case of Systemic Failure

Nigeria represents a case where the civic education deficit has contributed to profound democratic dysfunction. With literacy rates below 70 percent and a fragmented civic education infrastructure, Nigeria has experienced consistently low voter turnout and high levels of electoral manipulation (Ogunyemi, 2024). The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has struggled to conduct effective voter education, and civil society organisations often lack the resources to reach remote communities.

The consequences are evident in Nigeria’s electoral outcomes. Ethnic voting remains pervasive, vote-buying is rampant, and citizens across the political spectrum express disillusionment with the democratic process (Okafor & Nwosu, 2024). The 2023 elections, while technically peaceful, were marred by widespread allegations of manipulation and a turnout of only 26.7 percent of registered voters (INEC, 2023). This represents a crisis of democratic legitimacy that cannot be resolved through technical fixes alone.

Nigeria’s experience underscores the need for a comprehensive approach to civic education that addresses not only information deficits but also the structural conditions poverty, illiteracy, and institutional weakness that enable manipulation. As one Nigerian scholar observed: “cannot talk about free and fair elections when half the population cannot read and does not understand what they are voting for” (Adeleke, 2023). This observation captures the fundamental challenge facing Nigerian democracy and many others across the continent.

Zambia: Progress Amid Persistent Challenges

Zambia offers one of the most instructive case studies on the African continent for understanding both the transformative potential of civic education and the persistent challenges that threaten to undermine democratic gains. The country’s democratic trajectory since its transition to multiparty democracy in 1991 has been marked by regular and largely credible elections, reinforced institutions, and encouraging levels of citizens participation (Afrobarometer, 2025). Yet beneath this veneer of democratic stability lies a more complex reality: a civic education deficit that, while less acute than in some African countries, continue to shape electoral outcomes in ways that favour the politically connected and the well-resourced over the informed and engaged citizen.

Zambia’s experience demonstrates that sustained investment in civic education can yield substantial dividends in voter participation and democratic engagement. However, it also reveals that these gains remain fragile and require continuous institutional commitment, particularly in reaching marginalized groups such as persons with disabilities, the elderly, and rural communities. The country’s trajectory underscores the central argument of this article: civic education is not a one-time intervention but a sustained endeavor that must be institutionalized beyond election cycles to cultivate the informed and engaged citizenry that democratic governance demands.

The 2021 Elections: A Civic Education Success Story

The August, 2021 general elections in Zambia represented a watershed moment in the country’s democratic evolution, and civic education played a decisive role in the outcome. The Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) reported that over 83 percent of the country’s eligible voters, amounting to more than 7 million people,

registered to vote in the elections at more than 12,000 polling stations (Saudi gazette, 2021). Voters waited in long lines to cast their ballots, with a high turnout reported in the capital Lusaka and other regions despite a tense political atmosphere (Saudi gazette, 2021).

The 2021 elections marked an important defeat for the incumbent and a consequent change of government, with a significant increase in voter numbers (OpenStarts, 2023). The elections confirmed a trend towards democracy and party system consolidation, which since 2016 has become a two-party system (Open Starts, 2023). Most significantly, the elections resulted in a 21 percent voter turnout increase and much greater youth representation across the political spectrum (Global Platforms, 2021). Of those elected, six parliament members, five mayors, and more than 200 district councilors were either part of or supported by youth-focused initiatives (Global Platforms, 2021).

The role of young people in this electoral transformation cannot be overstated. More than half of the 7 million registered voters were estimated to have been under the age of 35 (SAIPAR, 2026). Four million young people between the ages of 18 and 24 registered to vote (Restless Development, 2021). As one observer noted, “The youth really exercised their right to vote and came out in numbers to vote. Most Zambian elections are characterized by huge voter apathy, this one was different” (Businessday, NG, 2021). This youth-driven electoral mobilization was widely attributed to sustained civic education efforts that reached young people through multiple channels, including schools, community organisations, and digital platforms.

The Development Strengthening in Zambia (DSZ) Project, a multi-donor initiative totaling USD 11.8 million implemented between January, 2020 and May, 2025, played a pivotal role in this success. The project effectively engaged civil society organisations to promote civic education, reaching over 1.2 million individuals (UNDP, 2025). The DSZ project, evaluated from January, 2020 to May, 2025, aimed to enhance democratic governance and electoral processes in Zambia (UNDP Evaluation, 2025). The terminal evaluation of the project offered critical insights that would inform the design and implementation of its successor, the Deepening Democracy Project (UNDP, 2025).

The Effectiveness of Civic Education Programmes

Empirical research from Zambia provides compelling evidence of the effectiveness of civic education programmes in promoting electoral integrity and democratic participation. A study conducted in five selected wards of Livingstone Constituency found that civic education programmes had improved voter participation, awareness of electoral rights and responsibilities, peaceful coexistence during elections, and public confidence in democratic processes (Chilufya, Mtonga & Simon, 2026). The study, which employed qualitative research methods including document study, interviews, and focus group discussions involving community members, ECZ officials, voter education facilitators, councilors, and other stakeholders, revealed that many participants became interested in civic education programmes because they wanted to learn more about voting procedures, electoral rules, and their responsibilities as citizens (Chilufya, Mtonga & Simon, 2026).

The programmes also helped reduce electoral violence, encouraged issue-based political participation, and improved understanding of electoral procedures such as voter registration (Chilufya, Mtonga & Simon, 2026). This improved knowledge contributed to reduced voter apathy and confusion during voter registration (Chilufya, Mtonga & Simon, 2026). However, the study also identified challenges, including insufficient participation of marginalized groups such as persons with disabilities and the elderly, which continued to affect the programme’s effectiveness (Chilufya, Mtonga & Simon, 2026). The study concluded that civic education programmes are essential for promoting electoral integrity and recommended a broader scope of civic education messages, inclusiveness in civic education programmes, and continuous voter education beyond election periods (Chilufya, Mtonga & Simon, 2026).

Research on youth participation in democratic practices in selected constituencies of Lusaka District found civic education plays a pivotal role in enhancing youth engagement in democratic processes (Chanda, 2024). The study, which employed both qualitative and quantitative methods with a sample size of 110, found that exposure to comprehensive civic education significantly increase youths’ awareness and understanding of their rights and

responsibilities as citizens, thereby fostering more active participation in voting, community decision-making, and other democratic activities (Chanda, 2024). The study called for interventions that address the gaps in civic education to further empower young people to contribute meaningfully to the democratic landscape in Zambia (Chanda, 2024).

A field experiment conducted in Zambia before the 2021 elections provided rigorous causal evidence of the impact of civic education on political participation. The experiment, which randomly assigned urban youth adults to an information-only civic education that the efficacy promoting course substantially increased young women's political interest and participation, narrowing gender gaps across a wide range of behaviour and attitudinal outcomes (McClendon, Sperber & Kaaba, 2025). This finding is particularly significant because it demonstrates that civic education can address not only knowledge deficits but also the psychological barriers such as low political efficacy that disproportionately affect women's political participation.

A subsequent study comparing religious and secular interventions to increase young adult political participation in Zambia found that, contrary to expectations in a highly religious country, the nonreligious efficacy-boosting course performed better than the religious course, which performed no better than the information-only condition (Sperber, McClendon & Kaaba, 2024). This finding cautions against assuming the efficacy of religious messages, even in highly religious contexts, and identifies important questions for the design of civic education programmes (Sperber, McClendon & Kaaba, 2024). The study's use of WhatsApp-based civic education courses also demonstrated the potential of digital platforms to reach voters in innovative ways.

The Persistence of Civic Education Challenges

Despite these notable successes, Zambia's civic education landscape faces significant and persistent challenges. The ongoing voter registration exercise by the Electoral Commission of Zambia ahead of the 2026 general elections recorded a low turnout of eligible citizens across the country (Zambian Observer, 2025). Both the ruling United Party for National Development (UPND) and opposition parties expressed concern over the slow pace, citing several challenges, including the shortages of registration materials in some centres (Zambian Observer, 2025). Stakeholders highlighted the ECZ's inadequate voter education and sensitization efforts as contributing factors (Zambian Observer, 2025).

However, beyond logical challenges lies a deeper issue, low civic enlightenment among citizens (Zambia Observer, 2025). As one analysis observed, "A politically aware and engaged electorate is often the product of long-term investment in education and civic awareness. Thus, the current scenario offers an important point of reflection for both the current and past governments on the urgent need to address illiteracy and promote civic education as a foundation for democratic participation" (Zambian Observer, 2025). The analysis further warned that "ignorance, in many instances, has been weaponized to manipulate public opinion and influence political outcomes" (Zambia Observer, 2025).

The Governance and Development Advocates Zambia (GODAZA) attributed the apathy surrounding the voter registration exercise to inadequate public sensitization by the ECZ (Mast Media, 2025). GODAZA executive director Elias Mulenga stated that the ECZ must urgently address the serious challenges that have hampered citizen participation in the registration process (Mast Media, 2025). Harry Kalaba, leader of the Citizens First Party, warned that the low registration figures in Lusaka, only 31,000 people registered from the capital city, already indicated voter apathy before citizens even cast their votes (Zambian Observer, 2025).

The Christian Churches Monitoring Group (CCMG), which has been conducting long-term elections observation ahead of the 13th August, 2026 general elections, noted rising political mobilization, electoral code violations, and declining voter education (CCMG, 2026). The CCMG observed that experiences from previous electoral cycles indicated that declining voter education was a worrying trend that could undermine the quality of democratic participation (CCMG, 2026) the CCMG's second observation period, covering 31st March, 2026 to 27th April, 2026, reflected an increasingly active political environment as the country moved closer to nominations and the official campaign period (CCMG, 2026).

Electoral Violence and the Limits of Civic Education

The persistence of electoral violence in Zambia underscores the limits of civic education in addressing deeply entrenched political tensions. The 2021 elections were marred by violence in several provinces. The late President Edgar Lungu alleged that violence in three provinces, Southern Province, North-Western Province, and Western Province, rendered the elections not free and fair (BBC, 2021; Xinhua, 2021). Two people were killed when elections violence erupted in three provinces, with a member of the ruling Patriotic Front and another man killed and others assaulted allegedly by opposition supporters (African News Agency, 2021). The Electoral Commission of Zambia had earlier noted with serious concern the escalating political violence in selected parts of the country, leading to the suspension of campaigns in Mpulungu, Namwala, Nakonde, and later Lusaka (ECZ, 2021).

The 2026 election cycle has seen a recurrence of these troubling patterns. In July, 2026 the ECZ suspended the campaign activities of the New Revolutionary People's Union Party (NRPUP) in Kaputa District following the party's involvement in acts of political violence that resulted in the death of a member of another political party (ECZ, 2026; Diamond Media, 2026). ECZ Chief Electoral Officer, Brown Kasaro stressed that the Commission was deeply concerned about emerging pockets of electoral and political violence in selected parts of the country (ZNBC, 2026). President Hakainde Hichilema condemned the violence and directed security agencies to fully investigate the killings. In a separate incident, a Lusaka resident was allegedly killed amid growing concerns over politically-related violence ahead of the August 13th General Elections (Zambian Eye, 2026).

These incidents of violence highlight a critical limitation of civic education: while civic education can reduce electoral violence by promoting peaceful coexistence and issue-based political participation (Chilufya, Mtonga & Simon, 2026), it cannot fully eliminate violence in contexts where political competition is highly polarized and where political elites have incentives to use violence as a tool of mobilization and intimidation. The persistence of violence despite civic education efforts suggests the need for complementary interventions, security sector reform, and political party accountability.

The Response: Institutional Reforms and New Initiatives

In response to these challenges, Zambia has launched several institutional reforms and new initiatives aimed at strengthening democratic governance and civic education. The Deepening Democracy Project, which runs from 2025 to 2027, aims to entrench the principles of democratic governance, promote structural transformation, and reinforce institutional capacity in order to foster transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in Zambia (Lusaka Times, 2025). The project, launched with support from development partners, supports ongoing efforts to enhance electoral integrity, transparency, and inclusivity (Daily Mail, 2025). Zambia's democratic resilience has been recognized as serving as a model for other African nations, especially in regions where democratic norms are under pressure (Daily Mail, 2025).

The European Union-Funded PRO-DEM Zambia project-Strengthening Democracy and Electoral Governance in Zambia, implemented by the European Centre for Electoral Support (ECES) in partnership with national and international stakeholders, focuses on strengthening the institutional capacity of democratic and electoral bodies, including the National Assembly of Zambia, the Judiciary, the Electoral Commission of Zambia, the Ministry of Justice, and the Human Rights Commission (ECES, 2026). A core component of the project focuses on strengthening the institutional capacity of these bodies to affect electoral integrity, public trust, and inclusive participation (ECES, 2026).

The Electoral Commission of Zambia has also intensified its voter education efforts. In preparation for the 2026 general elections, the ECZ conducted training for Voter Education Facilitators (VEFs), District Voter Education Committee (DVEC) members, and Patrons and Matrons of Voter Education Committee (DVEC) members, and Patrons and Matrons of Voter Education School Clubs across multiple districts (ECZ, 2025). The ECZ also engaged Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) to improve electoral access for persons with disabilities, reviewing the Tactile Ballot Paper Jacket, Voter Education Flip Chart, and Voter Education

Facilitator's Handbook (Zambian Eye, 2025). The ECZ has also set lower nomination fees for youths, women, and persons with disabilities in a bid to boost participation in the 2026 elections (Mwebantu, 2026).

The Civil Society Alliance of Legal Reforms (CSALR) launched its 2026 election activities, calling for increased voter participation, informed decision-making, and greater accountability from political parties ahead of the August, 13th General Election (CSALR, 2026). The CSALR challenged political parties to abandon empty campaign rhetoric and present practical, measurable manifestos that address citizens' real needs (CSALR, 2026). Transparency International Zambia launched the Kuteteza Masankho Project, recognizing that elections are not merely an event held on polling day but a process that reflects the strength of democratic institutions (TIZ, 2026).

Conclusion: Zambia's Democratic Crossroads

Zambia stands at a democratic crossroads. The country's electoral history demonstrates both the transformative potential of sustained civic education and the persistent challenges that threaten to undermine democratic gains. The 2021 elections represented a high-water mark for Zambian democracy, with record voter turnout, unprecedented youth participation, and a peaceful transfer of power. Civic education played a central role in this achievement, with the DSZ Project reaching over 1.2 million individuals and field experiments demonstrating the effectiveness of efficacy-promoting civic education in closing gender gaps in political participation.

Yet the challenges facing Zambian democracy are formidable. The low voter registration turnout ahead of the 2026 elections reflects a limited public understanding of the importance of participating in democratic governance. Electoral violence continues to mar the political landscape, with deadly incidents reported in both the 2021 and 2026 election cycles. The ECZ's voter education efforts, while improved, remain inadequate to reach all citizens, particularly marginalized groups such as persons with disabilities, the elderly, and rural communities.

Zambia's experience underscores the central argument of this article: civic education is not a one-time intervention but a sustained endeavour that must be institutionalized beyond election cycles. The gains of 2021 were not accidental; they were the product of sustained investment in civic education by multiple stakeholders, including the ECZ, civil society organisations, and international parties. The erosion of these gains ahead of 2026, evidenced by declining voter registration and rising apathy, reflects the fragility of democratic progress when civic education is not continuously reinforced.

As one analysis of Zambia's civic education challenges observed: "While voter sensitization campaigns remain necessary, true civic enlightenment cannot be achieved through short-term mobilization drives or publicity campaigns alone. It demands sustained efforts in education, access to information, and the cultivation of a culture that values informed participation in governance" (Zambian Observer, 2025). This insight applies not only to Zambia but to the entire African continent. The future of African democracy depends on citizens who are not only entitled to vote but also equipped to vote wisely. Civic education is the cornerstone of the future.

Institutional Reforms and the Way Forward

Embedding Civic Education in School Curricula

The most sustainable approach to civic education is to embed it in school curricula from an early age. Some countries, such as South Africa, have made significant progress in this area, with citizenship education forming part of the Life Orientation curriculum (Motala & Vally, 2022). However, implementation has been uneven, and the quality of civic education in schools varies widely. The inclusion of civic education in the curriculum does not guarantee its effectiveness; the content, pedagogy, and resources devoted to it are equally important.

Curriculum reform must go beyond the transmission of formal knowledge about political institutions to include the development of critical thinking skills, democratic values, and practical engagement opportunities. As one review of citizenship education in Africa concluded: "Students need to learn not just about democracy, but how

to participate in it” (Motala & Vally, 2022). This requires pedagogical approaches that encourage discussion, debate, and active engagement with real-word political issues.

The challenge of implementation is considerable. Many African countries face severe resource constraints, including shortages of qualified teachers and inadequate educational infrastructure. Moreover, civic education that genuinely empowers students to question authority may be resisted by political elites who benefit from an uninformed and passive citizenry (Ngoma, 2014). This political resistance is perhaps the most significant obstacle to effective education reforms.

Sustained Adult Education

Civic education must also target adult populations, particularly those who are illiterate or have limited formal education. Community-based programmes that engage traditional leaders, religious institutions, and local civil society organisations are essential for reaching these populations (Kramon & Posner, 2016). Such approaches leverage existing social structures and trust relationships to deliver civic education in culturally appropriate ways.

NICE Trust in Malawi has demonstrated the effectiveness of community-based approaches, with programmes that use local languages, interactive methods, and culturally appropriate materials (NICE Trust, 2025). The Trust’s work in Dedza district, while facing challenges in voter registration, has also shown positive impacts on political engagement among communities that previously had limited exposure to civic education. The use of local languages and culturally relevant examples essential for reaching populations that are excluded from mainstream civic education.

Sustained funding is critical for the success of adult civic education programmes. Donor-driven projects that are limited to elections cycles have limited impact; what is needed is long-term, predictable funding that allows organisations to develop and maintain programmes throughout the year (Cheeseman, 2015). The unpredictability of funding undermines the ability of organisations to plan and sustain effective programmes.

Electoral Management Body Reform

Electoral management bodies (EMBs) must be adequately funded and empowered to conduct civic education that goes beyond mere information dissemination to genuine empowerment. This requires not only financial resources but also institutional independence and competent are better positioned to conduct effective civic education.

INEC in Nigeria, despite significant effort, has struggled to conduct effective voter education due to resource constraints and political interference (Okafor & Nwosu, 2024). The commission’s reliance on social media and mass media campaigns has limited its reach to rural and illiterate populations. EMBs need to invest in community-based approaches that directly engage citizens and address the specific needs of diverse populations.

The Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) has made some progress in this area, with community outreach programmes that engage citizens beyond election periods (Mbeti, 2024). However, the IEC’s efforts have been insufficient to reverse declining turnout, suggesting the need for a more comprehensive approach that addresses the underlying causes of voter apathy. The IEC’s experience demonstrates that even well-resourced EMBs cannot compensate for broader governance failures.

Political Party Accountability

Political parties must be held accountable for their role or lack thereof in educating citizens. Faith Nwadishi has strongly criticized political parties for abandoning their voter education responsibilities in favour of social media messaging that does not reach many communities (Nwadishi, 2026). This abandonment of responsibility is particularly concerning given the unique position of political parties in mediating between citizens and the state.

Regulatory frameworks could require political parties to conduct civic education as part of their campaign activities, with penalties for non-compliance. Political parties should also be required to include citizen education in their manifestos and operational budgets, ensuring that civic education is not treated as an afterthought but as a core democratic responsibility. Such a requirement would help institutionalize civic education within the political system.

Civil Society Engagement

Civil society organisations (CSOs) play a critical role in civic education, often filling gaps left by the state and EMBs. However, CSOs face significant constraints, including limited funding, political pressure, and difficulties in reaching remote populations. The sustainability of CSO-led civic education programmes is often precarious, dependent on donor funding that may be unpredictable or short-term.

Donor support for CSOs must be sustained and predictable, allowing organisations to develop and maintain long-term civic education programmes. CSOs also need to invest in capacity building, including training for civic educators and the development of culturally appropriate materials. The quality of civic education depends on the skills and knowledge of those delivering it.

Moreover, CSOs must work collaboratively with other stakeholders, including government agencies, EMBs, and political parties, to ensure coherent and effective civic education programmes. Fragmentation and duplication of efforts undermine the effectiveness of civic education, wasting scarce resources and confusing citizens. Coordinated approaches that leverage the comparative advantages of different actors are more effective than isolated efforts.

Conclusion: Civic Education as a Democratic Necessity

After many years of engagement with African electoral processes, I have come to a sobering conclusion: the quality of elections on the continent will not improve until we address the civic education deficit that leaves so many citizens vulnerable to manipulation. The evidence is overwhelming and consistent across countries and contexts. Where civic education is weak, voter turnout declines, ethnic voting persists, clientelism flourishes, and citizens sell their votes for immediate relief without understanding what they have forfeited.

The democratic project in Africa faces profound challenges, but these challenges are not insurmountable. Investments in civic education can yield substantial returns: higher voter turnout, more issue-based voting, reduced ethnic manipulation, and strengthened democratic accountability. However, these investments must be sustained and comprehensive, addressing not only information deficits but also the structural conditions, poverty, illiteracy, and institutional weakness that enable manipulation.

The habits of the mind and heart that inform democratic character are not inherited. They must be cultivated through deliberate, sustained effort over generations. Without such effort, African elections will continue to be shaped not by the informed will of the people, but by those who have the resources and ruthlessness to exploit the uninformed. Civic education is not a luxury to be pursued when resources permit; it is the foundation upon which accountable, responsive, and legislative governance must be built.

As the experiences of South Africa, Ghana, and Nigeria demonstrate, there are no easy solutions or quick fixes. Each country must develop approaches suited to its specific context, building on existing institutions and adapting successful practices from elsewhere. But the alternative continued democratic decay, declining legitimacy, and persistent manipulation is not acceptable for the future of the continent.

The future of African democracy depends on citizens who are not only entitled to vote but also equipped to vote wisely. Civic education is the cornerstone of that future the foundation upon which all other democratic reforms must be built. Without it, the democratic transition that began with such hope three decades ago will remain incomplete, and the promise of accountable, responsive governance will remain unfulfilled.

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