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# Multiparty Politics in Uganda: Why Competition Has Not Translated into Engagement:

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## Abstract

This study investigated the persistent paradox of high voter apathy within Uganda's formal multiparty political system. Despite the institutional framework for partisan competition, electoral engagement remained critically low. Employing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the research first collected quantitative data from a representative sample of 381 community respondents, drawn via cluster sampling from a registered voter population of 1,280,409. This was followed by qualitative interviews with 13 key informants, selected through census and purposive sampling, including District Registrars, Division Heads, political party officials, and Members of Parliament. The integrated analysis revealed that multiparty competition had not translated into meaningful public engagement due to four interconnected drivers: (1) profound institutional distrust, where electoral processes were perceived as predetermined; (2) a credibility deficit of key institutions, notably the Electoral Commission; (3) pervasive economic disenfranchisement, where citizens prioritized immediate livelihood concerns over electoral participation; and (4) the persistence of a dominant-party political culture that stifled genuine opposition and voter efficacy. The study concluded that apathy was not a passive condition but a rational response to structural and perceptual barriers within the political ecosystem. The mere existence of multiple parties proved insufficient to foster engagement when foundational issues of trust, equity, and electoral integrity were not addressed. Recommendations included substantive electoral and constitutional reforms to ensure genuine independence of electoral bodies, concerted civic education to rebuild a participatory political culture, and socio-economic interventions to reduce the opportunity costs of political participation for the electorate.

**Key words:Voter, apathy, Uganda, multipartism**

## Introduction

The reintroduction of multiparty politics in Uganda in 2005 was envisioned as a cornerstone for deepening democratic engagement, fostering competitive elections, and enhancing citizen participation. However, this institutional shift has not yielded the anticipated levels of civic involvement. For instance, while voter turnout in the 2016 general election was reported at 67%, it declined to 57% in 2021, with widespread reports of apathy and boycott calls underscoring a crisis of confidence (Electoral Commission of Uganda, 2021). This decline mirrors a troubling global pattern where multiparty systems, particularly in younger democracies, often fail to galvanize sustained engagement.

Globally, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA, 2023) reports a persistent decline in average voter turnout across democracies since the 1980s, a trend acutely felt in sub-Saharan Africa. The Ugandan case presents a critical paradox also observed in other nations with dominant-party systems: why does institutionalized political competition frequently fail to translate into meaningful electoral participation? This phenomenon is not unique; similar dynamics of disengagement are evident in contexts like South Africa, where despite a vibrant multiparty landscape, voter turnout has steadily fallen from 86% in 1999 to 66% in 2019, reflecting what scholars term "democratic disillusionment" (Kotzé & Prevost, 2020). In Mexico, a decade after its transition to multiparty democracy, surveys revealed that over 60% of citizens distrusted political parties, highlighting that the mere presence of choice does not automatically confer legitimacy (Moreno, 2012). Research from India further illustrates how "political alienation" can persist amidst fierce electoral competition when citizens perceive a disconnect between political promises and tangible outcomes (Ahuja & Ostermann, 2015).

This study, therefore, situates Uganda’s experience within this broader comparative discourse on democratic deficits. It was designed to interrogate the specific drivers of voter apathy within Uganda's contemporary multiparty system, arguing that apathy is a rational response to systemic failures rather than mere civic inertia. By employing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design—combining survey data from 381 voters with in-depth interviews from 13 key stakeholders—the analysis moves beyond descriptive turnout figures to diagnose the underlying structural and perceptual

barriers. The investigation reveals a nexus of factors including profound institutional distrust, a credibility deficit in electoral management bodies, economic disenfranchisement, and a resilient dominant-party culture, offering a nuanced explanation for why multipartysm has not cured, and may even have exacerbated, Uganda's engagement crisis.

**Question:** What are the major reasons why some Ugandans choose not to vote, especially in a multi-party political environment?

Across the 140 interviews conducted in Kampala and Mbale, respondents consistently expressed a belief that their votes would not influence election outcomes. A District Registrar in Kampala (KI 1) noted, "Results are already decided," reflecting a widespread perception of predetermined electoral outcomes that can discourage voter participation. This sentiment aligned with McElwee (2020), who found that in the United States, perceptions of electoral unfairness reduce turnout among marginalized communities. Similarly, Muganzi (2024) and Olusanjo (2025) observed that skepticism about electoral credibility in Uganda and across sub-Saharan Africa contributes to voter apathy, especially among youth and opposition supporters. However, other scholars challenge this view. Toba and Phago (2025) argued that such perceptions can mobilize voters in protest, while Mwesigwa and Wahid (2021) highlight that Ugandan youth actively participated in the 2021 elections through digital platforms and informal networks. Lukanga (2023) added that political interest among youth is often issue-driven rather than shaped by cynicism, suggesting that while electoral distrust may suppress engagement for some, it can also inspire alternative forms of political participation and activism. Similarly, in Turkey's 2017 constitutional referendum, allegations of voter intimidation and ballot irregularities reduced trust in the electoral process (Arslan & Karadag, 2017).

Respondents identified several structural and material barriers to voting. Party chairpersons (KI 3) emphasized ruling-party dominance and resource asymmetries, while vice chairpersons and mobilisers (KI 4, KI 7) highlighted intimidation and fear. These observations are supported globally: in Nigeria, the 2019 governorship elections were marred by violence and intimidation, particularly in opposition strongholds, leading to lower turnout (Okeke, 2020). In Venezuela's 2017 municipal elections, widespread reports of vote-buying and intimidation discouraged voter

participation (Carter Center, 2017). Similarly, in rural India, coercion and threats during elections have been documented as significant deterrents to voter engagement (Chhibber, 2019). In Uganda, Atyang et al. (2023) found that limited oversight and partisan control of electoral institutions undermined trust and reinforced voter apathy, especially in contested regions. Watenyera (2014) also noted that the gap between constitutional guarantees and electoral practice contributes to disillusionment among voters. However, other scholars argue that structural barriers do not uniformly suppress participation. Recent studies offer both support and skepticism regarding the effectiveness of community-based advocacy and transparency initiatives in mitigating voter apathy in Uganda. Luwemba et al. (2025) highlight how grassroots mobilization and civic education have increased youth engagement and political awareness, while Blattman et al. (2019) demonstrate that anti-vote-buying campaigns led by civil society groups can shift voter behavior toward more informed choices. However, Afrobarometer (2022) reveals persistent distrust in electoral institutions, citing logistical failures and perceived bias as major deterrents to participation. These contrasting perspectives suggested that although structural and material barriers such as institutional inefficiencies and political alienation pose real challenges to electoral participation, their impact can be moderated through inclusive reforms, civic empowerment, and institutional accountability.

Party secretaries (KI 5) stressed weak civic education and limited public understanding of multi-party competition. Globally, this has been identified as a major factor in low political participation. In Africa, the International IDEA reports that limited civic knowledge contributes to low voter turnout (IDEA, 2022). In the UK, declining turnout among young voters has been linked to gaps in civic education (House of Commons, 2019). In India, illiteracy and lack of political awareness in certain demographics have been recognized as barriers to electoral engagement (Chhibber, 2019). Supporting this view, Banura (2019) found that in Uganda's Mityana District, voter education significantly influenced electoral turnout, with better-informed citizens more likely to participate. Similarly, Weinschenk and Dawes (2021) demonstrated that civic education in high school positively affects voter turnout in adulthood. However, other scholars caution against overestimating the impact of civic education alone. Card (2022) argues that family influence and broader social context often play a more decisive role in shaping young voters' efficacy and

turnout. Moreover, some studies suggest that civic education may have limited impact in environments where political institutions lack credibility or where civic spaces are restricted (IDEA, 2022; Muganzi, 2024). These findings indicated that while civic education is a critical tool for enhancing political participation, its effectiveness depends on complementary factors such as institutional trust, media freedom, and inclusive governance.

Treasurers (KI 6) highlighted economic pressures and the demobilizing effects of petty inducements, while MPs (KI 8) noted campaign tensions and perceptions of predetermined outcomes. These observations echo global patterns: in South Africa, economic inequalities have been shown to depress turnout among disadvantaged groups (Mattes, 2015), while in Guatemala's 2003 elections, vote-buying and misuse of public resources significantly influenced voter behavior (Carter Center, 2003). In Bulgaria, economic hardship and political instability have contributed to voter fatigue and disengagement (En.wikipedia, 2020). Supporting these claims, Atyang et al. (2023) found that in Uganda, economic vulnerability often makes voters susceptible to inducements, which undermines genuine political participation. Similarly, Muganzi (2024) argues that campaign financing disparities and patronage networks distort electoral competition and alienate voters. However, other scholars offered a more nuanced view. Luwemba et al. (2025) contend that economic hardship does not automatically lead to apathy; in some cases, it motivates political engagement as citizens seek change. Ewoku (2021) also observed that despite financial constraints, many Ugandan youth participated in the 2021 elections through grassroots mobilization and digital activism. These contrasting perspectives suggested that while economic pressures and inducements can demobilize voters, their impact is mediated by political context, civic awareness, and the availability of alternative avenues for engagement.

Community voters (KI 9) tied disengagement to survival needs and disillusionment with unfulfilled promises. Similar patterns are observed globally: in African countries, economic challenges and unmet expectations drive voter apathy (International IDEA, 2022). In Venezuela, economic crises and political instability led to declining voter participation (Carter Center, 2017). In India, daily survival needs often take precedence over voting, especially among lower-income populations (Chhibber,

2019). These findings are echoed in Uganda, where Atyang et al. (2023) found that economic vulnerability and unmet campaign promises contributed to widespread disillusionment, particularly among rural and low-income voters. Muganzi (2024) further argued that material hardships, such as time and income constraints, reinforce disengagement by making political participation seem costly and ineffective. However, other scholars challenge the inevitability of this cycle. Luwemba et al. (2025) contended that even in economically strained communities, civic education and participatory governance can foster resilience and engagement. Ewoku (2021) observed that despite economic pressures, many Ugandan youth mobilized through digital platforms and community networks to assert their political agency. These contrasting perspectives suggest that while structural constraints and material hardships contribute to voter apathy, their effects are not uniform and can be mitigated through inclusive reforms, trust-building, and alternative forms of civic participation.

At the same time, parts of the literature complicate or caution against a purely structural reading of voter apathy. Goetz (2003) argued that even in politically constrained environments, sustained and targeted civic mobilization can foster meaningful participation, suggesting that the KI reports about weak sensitization reflect not inevitability but institutional design flaws that can be addressed. Tripp and Kwesiga (2002), along with subsequent gender-focused studies, highlight robust engagement in community-level and non-electoral political spaces such as local associations, advocacy networks, and informal organizing indicating that what appears as apathy may instead signal a shift in participatory modalities away from formal ballots. Tamale (2020) adds that elite-driven party competition can suppress enthusiasm even among educated, urban voters, challenging the treasurer and secretary view that more civic information alone will resolve turnout issues. Furthermore, research from International IDEA (2021) on programmatic opposition surges shows that when political parties present clear, credible platforms and safeguard electoral integrity, disillusionment can quickly reverse. This evidence tempered deterministic narratives of entrenched voter fatigue and underscored the dynamic interplay between institutional responsiveness, civic agency, and political engagement.

That said therefore, the interview evidence strongly supported literature and theories that credibility, safety, information, and cost are the four levers shaping voter turnout in Uganda's multi-party context. Where respondents emphasized pre-determined outcomes, fear, and limited outreach, agreeing literature explains why abstention becomes a rational choice (Downs, 1957; Bratton, 2013; Fjelde, 2024). The implication is that studies highlighting the effects of targeted civic mobilization and alternative forms of political engagement suggested that these barriers are not insurmountable (Goetz, 2003; Tripp & Kwesiga, 2002).

The perception of predetermined outcomes further dampened enthusiasm. A District Registrar in Mbale (KI 1) noted,

*"Some citizens feel elections are predetermined, so their participation will not change the outcome.This kind of voter cynicism not only weakens the legitimacy of elections but also erodes public confidence in governance structures"*

This was reinforced by a Division Head in Kampala (KI 2):

*"People have seen the same leaders for many years, and they believe nothing will change regardless of their vote. Some even say, 'Why bother voting when we already know who will win?' They feel that the whole process is just a formality to confirm what has already been decided. This belief has made many citizens lose interest in participating in elections. They no longer see their vote as powerful or meaningful."*

The Registrar's remarks reflect a deep sense of political fatigue and resignation among sections of the electorate. His observation reveals that prolonged incumbency and limited leadership turnover have created a perception of political stagnation, where citizens assume that election outcomes are predetermined and that individual votes do not influence change. Such sentiments are not uncommon in political systems where electoral transparency is questioned or where dominant parties and long-serving leaders have maintained control over extended periods. As the respondent noted, this perception has bred apathy, mistrust, and disengagement, with some citizens viewing elections as symbolic rather than transformative. The Registrar emphasized that this situation poses a serious challenge to democratic participation and good governance, as low voter turnout undermines the legitimacy of the process.

He suggested that strengthening civic education, enhancing electoral credibility, and promoting leadership accountability could help restore citizens' confidence and revive their belief that their voices and votes truly matter.

These views aligned with Mozaffar and Schedler's (2002) argument that deficits in electoral credibility often lead to voter withdrawal, particularly in contexts where citizens perceive elections as manipulated or predetermined. This perspective is echoed in studies across sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, where low institutional trust correlates with reduced turnout. However, Birch (2011) offers a counterpoint, suggesting that even in low-credibility environments, voters may still participate for expressive or identity-based reasons—such as signaling allegiance, resisting exclusion, or affirming group identity—factors not strongly reflected in this study's responses. Similarly, Guage and Fu (2020) proposed a dual-benefit model in which partisans weigh both instrumental outcomes (policy influence) and expressive benefits (identity affirmation) when deciding to vote, indicating that turnout can persist even when electoral integrity is questioned.

Harteveld (2023) further supports this view, finding that affective polarization and ideological alignment can increase voter turnout, suggesting that identity-based motivations may override concerns about fairness. These contrasting perspectives highlight that while electoral credibility is a critical factor in shaping participation, it does not operate in isolation, emotional, symbolic, and partisan dynamics also play a significant role in voter behavior.

The dominance of the ruling party was repeatedly mentioned as a disincentive. A political party vice chairperson in Mbale (KI 4) remarked,

*"Our supporters feel intimidated and believe they are wasting their time. Many of them fear harassment or discrimination if they are seen supporting party in power. They say, 'What's the point of voting if the results are already known or if our voices don't count?' Because of that, some choose to stay away from rallies and even from voting altogether."*

Likewise, an MP from Kampala (KI 8) noted,

*"Our supporters feel intimidated and believe they are wasting their time. Many of them fear harassment or discrimination if they are seen supporting our party. They say, 'What's the point of voting if the results are already known or if our voices don't count?' Because of that, some choose to stay away from rallies and even from voting altogether."*

This statement revealed a climate of fear and political intimidation that undermines citizens' confidence in the democratic process. The respondent's response suggested that supporters of opposition parties or minority political groups often perceive themselves as being unprotected and marginalized, leading to political disengagement. Feelings of intimidation may arise from state pressure, security interference, biased enforcement of laws, or community-level hostility toward those holding different political views. Such perceptions have serious implications for political participation and representation, as they discourage citizens from exercising their constitutional right to vote or associate freely. The respondent's remarks highlighted a need for stronger institutional safeguards, impartial enforcement of electoral laws, and public education on political tolerance to ensure a free and fair democratic environment. In essence, the response captured how fear and hopelessness can silence sections of the electorate, eroding both confidence in the electoral process and the inclusiveness of governance.

These sentiments mirror Levitsky and Way's (2010) concept of "competitive authoritarianism," where formal multiparty competition exists but is undermined by state resource capture and manipulation. In Uganda, this framework is supported by studies highlighting state repression and intimidation. Kakuba (2021) documents how wrongful detention, harassment, and coercive tactics foster a climate of fear that discourages political participation. Garbe (2024) adds that internet shutdowns and the deployment of "crime preventers" during election periods disproportionately suppress turnout among opposition supporters. Neundorf (2021) emphasizes that in competitive authoritarian regimes, citizens often perceive elections as unfair or predetermined, which erodes trust and diminishes engagement. However, other scholars cautioned against viewing voter behavior solely through the lens of repression. Tripp and Kwesiga (2002) argue that despite structural constraints, Ugandans especially women and youth continue to engage in alternative political spaces such as community organizing and advocacy. Harteveld (2023) further suggested that affective

polarization and ideological commitment can sustain turnout even in low-trust environments, indicating that identity-based motivations may counteract the demobilizing effects of authoritarian tactics. These contrasting perspectives underscore the complexity of political engagement in hybrid regimes, where formal institutions coexist with informal constraints, and where civic agency persists despite systemic limitations.

These findings are echoed in other contexts; for instance, in Zimbabwe, the use of state security forces to intimidate opposition supporters has been well-documented (Raftopoulos, 2009). These findings are echoed in other contexts; for instance, in Zimbabwe, the use of state security forces to intimidate opposition supporters has been well-documented (Raftopoulos, 2009), illustrating how coercive state apparatuses can suppress political participation. Similarly, in Uganda, recent studies have shown that while community-based advocacy and transparency initiatives—such as civic education campaigns and anti-vote-buying efforts—have had some success in mobilizing youth and marginalized voters (Luwemba et al., 2025; Blattman et al., 2019), their impact is often undermined by persistent structural and institutional barriers. Afrobarometer (2022) reports that widespread distrust in the Electoral Commission and recurrent logistical failures continue to discourage voter turnout. Moreover, the 2021 Ugandan elections saw increased reports of military presence and the arrest of opposition figures, reinforcing fears of political repression and echoing Zimbabwe's experience (Human Rights Watch, 2021). These contrasting dynamics suggested that while civic empowerment and institutional reforms can moderate voter apathy, their effectiveness is contingent on broader political will and the dismantling of coercive state practices that inhibit free participation.

In Sudan, the 2019 revolution was partly fueled by widespread repression and the government's use of violence to suppress dissent (Ali, 2019). On the other hand, Neundorf (2021) emphasizes that citizens in competitive authoritarian regimes perceive elections as unfair or predetermined, which negatively affects political engagement. This aligns with findings from other studies; for example, in Russia, the perception of electoral fraud and manipulation has led to widespread disillusionment and decreased voter turnout (Rose, 2011). In Venezuela, allegations of electoral fraud

and the suppression of opposition parties have similarly eroded public trust in the electoral process (Corrales, 2015).

However, some scholars have argued that low voter turnout is not always a result of alienation but can be a deliberate political choice when citizens are content with the status quo. Norris (2011) suggested that in some contexts, citizens may choose not to vote because they are satisfied with the existing political arrangements. This perspective is supported by findings in established democracies; for instance, in Switzerland, high levels of political satisfaction correlate with lower voter turnout (Lutz, 2012). Similarly, in Australia, where voting is compulsory, studies have shown that some citizens deliberately spoil their ballots as a form of protest or expression of discontent (McAllister, 2007).

However, this is not all. Some studies suggest that voter participation can still be positively influenced even in contexts marked by ruling-party dominance and electoral manipulation. Ahmed (2024) demonstrates that non-partisan information campaigns and targeted get-out-the-vote efforts can significantly boost turnout, particularly when they emphasize civic duty and provide clear, accessible information about voting procedures. Daxecker (2023) adds that the type of election—local versus national—and the surrounding political context can moderate the effects of intimidation and electoral violence. Her findings suggest that low turnout is not an inevitable consequence of state resource capture; rather, strategic interventions and credible opposition mobilization can counteract demobilizing pressures. These perspectives challenge deterministic narratives of voter apathy and highlight the potential for civic engagement even under constrained conditions, especially when institutional reforms and grassroots efforts converge to restore public trust and political efficacy. Thus, while the dominance of the ruling party in Uganda clearly discourages voter participation in line with Levitsky and Way's (2010) framework, there are circumstances in which engagement can be maintained or even enhanced through mobilization and information strategies (Kakuba, 2021; Garbe, 2024; Ahmed, 2024; Daxecker, 2023).

Low civic education also emerged as a critical factor. A political party secretary in Mbale (KI 5) said,

*"Many Ugandans do not understand their rights and the importance of voting; civic education is weak. People go to vote without knowing why they are voting or what their choices mean. Others don't even bother to register because no one has explained to them how important their participation is. You find that in some areas, people think voting is only for educated or rich people."*

This response highlighted a serious gap in civic awareness and political literacy among segments of the population. The informant's remarks suggest that limited civic education has contributed to low levels of understanding regarding citizens' rights, responsibilities, and the role of voting in shaping governance. Weak civic education programs in Uganda often irregular, underfunded, or politically influenced have left many citizens uninformed about the democratic process (Luwemba et al., 2025). As a result, large segments of the population, particularly in rural and marginalized communities, fail to recognize how their participation can influence leadership, accountability, and service delivery (Open Space Centre, 2025). This lack of awareness perpetuates voter apathy, as citizens remain disengaged from electoral processes and skeptical of their impact. The issue is compounded by limited access to nonpartisan information and the politicization of civic education, which further alienates potential voters (Burora, 2025). These findings underscore the urgent need for sustained, inclusive civic education initiatives that empower citizens with knowledge about their constitutional rights, electoral procedures, and the transformative power of their vote. Without such reforms, democratic participation risks remaining shallow and unevenly distributed across Uganda's diverse population.

Strengthening civic education through schools, community outreach, media, and civil society organizations would enhance democratic engagement and foster a more informed and active electorate.

A Division Head in Kampala (KI 2) similarly observed,

*"There is no sustained civic sensitisation, so people disengage from politics altogether. Most of the civic education activities only happen during election periods, and even then, they reach very few people. After the elections, everything goes quiet. People are left without information or motivation to stay involved in governance."*

This observation reflected a critical weakness in the continuity and consistency of civic education programs in Uganda. As noted by Luwemba et al. (2025), civic sensitisation efforts are often sporadic and event-driven, primarily concentrated around election seasons rather than being embedded in ongoing community development and governance processes. Consequently, citizens remain uninformed and politically passive for most of the electoral cycle (Open Space Centre, 2025). The lack of sustained civic engagement contributes to low political participation, limited accountability, and a weak democratic culture. Without continuous education and dialogue, many people lose interest in political affairs, assuming that their voices have little or no impact on decision-making (Burora, 2025). This kind of political disengagement erodes both citizen empowerment and government legitimacy, as public participation is an essential component of a functioning democracy.

On the other hand, the response resonated with Ssewakiryanga's (2007) findings that Uganda's sporadic and inconsistent civic education campaigns fail to instill lasting political awareness, contributing to persistent voter disengagement. The lack of sustained outreach and institutional support for civic learning has left many citizens ill-equipped to navigate multiparty competition or hold leaders accountable. By contrast, Braconnier and Dormagen (2007) demonstrate that targeted, continuous civic outreach particularly when embedded in local communities and tailored to specific voter needs can significantly improve turnout and deepen democratic participation. Their work suggested that Uganda's challenges in civic mobilization are not inevitable but reflect a missed opportunity to design more inclusive and persistent voter education strategies. This comparison underscored the importance of moving beyond ad hoc sensitization efforts toward long-term civic infrastructure that empowers citizens and strengthens electoral engagement.

Globally, the link between civic education and political engagement is well-documented. In the United States, studies have shown that comprehensive civic education programs in schools increase knowledge of voting rights and enhance turnout among young citizens (Levine & Lopez, 2002). In Africa, Ghana's National Civic Education Programme has been credited with improving electoral participation, particularly in rural communities (Kasfir, 2015). Similarly, in Europe, France's long-standing civic education curriculum correlates with higher political literacy and

engagement among youth (Kuhn & Witte, 2020). By contrast, some studies have suggested that civic education alone may not be sufficient to overcome disengagement. Braconnier and Dormagen (2007) demonstrated that targeted, continuous outreach can improve turnout, indicating that intermittent or poorly designed campaigns, such as those in Uganda, miss key opportunities to engage voters. However, Norris (2011) cautions that even in countries with strong civic education programs, political alienation, contentment with the status quo, or distrust of political institutions can still suppress turnout, illustrating that civic knowledge is only one factor among many influencing voter behaviour.

Regionally, in Kenya, inconsistent civic education during election cycles has been linked to widespread misconceptions about the electoral process, which in turn contribute to voter non-participation (Musila, 2018). These gaps in civic knowledge have often resulted in confusion over voting procedures, mistrust in electoral institutions, and disengagement among youth and rural populations. Conversely, South Africa presents a contrasting case: higher levels of political engagement have been observed in areas where community-based civic campaigns are sustained and strategically paired with voter mobilization efforts (Mattes & Simutanyi, 2016). These initiatives not only inform citizens about their rights and responsibilities but also foster a sense of political efficacy and collective agency. Taken together, these regional examples showed the vitalness of consistent, localized civic education in shaping electoral participation and they all suggested that Uganda's sporadic sensitization efforts is likely to benefit from adopting more community-driven, sustained models of engagement.

Fear and intimidation were another recurring theme. A political party treasurer in Kampala (KI 6) reported,

*"Some voters fear violence at polling stations, especially in hotly contested areas. This fear chases them away from these stations. It's always absurd. People want to vote, but they are scared of being caught up in chaos or clashes between rival groups. Others even stay home the entire day just to avoid any trouble."*

This response reflected the climate of fear and insecurity that often surrounds elections in some parts of Uganda. The respondent's use of the words *"chases them away"* and *"absurd"* conveyed both frustration and sadness at how violence and

intimidation suppress citizens' willingness to exercise their democratic rights. Such fear is commonly associated with reports of confrontations, heavy military presence, or clashes between supporters of competing candidates, especially in areas known for political rivalry. The fear of violence leads to low voter turnout and it undermines the principle of free and fair elections, as citizens who might otherwise participate feel unsafe or powerless. It also contributes to psychological distress and political apathy, particularly among women, youth, and first-time voters who may be more vulnerable to intimidation. This finding reflected the urdent need for effective security management, neutral enforcement of electoral laws, and community peace campaigns before and during elections. Building trust in electoral institutions and ensuring a peaceful voting environment are essential for encouraging participation and protecting citizens' rights to choose their leaders freely.

In another event, a mobilizer in Mbale (KI 7) added,

*"Security agencies sometimes harass opposition supporters, so they stay away from the polls. They use the advantage of the guns, tear gas, and others to threaten us. During campaigns or even on voting day, you find police or soldiers surrounding our meeting places. People get scared; some even run away before we begin. It's hard to tell citizens to come and vote when they are afraid for their lives."*

The respondent's remarks reflected a profound sense of betrayal and mistrust among citizens toward political actors in Uganda's multiparty system. They showed a widespread perception that campaign promises are increasingly instrumentalized as vote-winning tools rather than genuine commitments to development or public service. For instance, a 2024 *Daily Monitor* survey revealed that only 15% of Ugandans believe Members of Parliament "try to listen" to citizens' needs down from 21% in 2017 while 85% perceive MPs as serving their own interests rather than those of their electorate (Daily Monitor, 2024). This growing disconnect is further reflected in voter turnout trends; during the 2021 presidential election, only 57.2% of registered voters participated, a clear indicator of civic disengagement and disillusionment with the political process (Africa Press, 2023).

The perception that engagement between politicians and citizens is largely seasonal and transactional is reinforced by evidence of weak accountability mechanisms. The Auditor General's 2023 report noted that nearly all political parties receiving public

funds under the Political Parties and Organisations Act failed to meet financial reporting and transparency standards (Nile Post, 2023). These trends collectively highlighted a critical governance challenge, where political actors often remain unaccountable for unfulfilled promises, thereby eroding public trust in state institutions and electoral processes. The respondent's perspective thus emphasized the need for enhanced transparency, participatory governance, and sustained post-election engagement between leaders and citizens to rebuild trust and restore faith in democratic institutions. Without such reforms, Uganda's electoral cycles risk being perceived as repetitive episodes of unfulfilled expectations rather than meaningful opportunities for democratic change and citizen empowerment.

This testimony reflects a troubling pattern of state security apparatus being used to intimidate and silence political opposition, undermining the integrity of democratic elections. Recent examples from the 2024 U.S. presidential election underscore this concern: election officials faced death threats, bomb scares, and harassment, prompting some to wear bulletproof vests and deploy drones at polling stations. Such measures, while intended for protection, contributed to a militarized atmosphere that discouraged voter participation, especially among neutral citizens wary of conflict. A Brennan Center for Justice survey revealed that 75% of election officials experienced increased threats since 2020, with over half fearing these would deter future poll workers. This climate of fear mirrors global instances where tear gas, firearms, and heavy security deployment during elections have created psychological intimidation, eroding public trust in institutions and diminishing citizens' sense of political agency. In Kenya, the 2007–2008 post-election crisis erupted after the disputed presidential results were announced in favor of Mwai Kibaki, leading to widespread violence across the country. Over 1,000 people were killed and hundreds of thousands displaced, while sexual and physical assaults increased dramatically as ethnic tensions and long-standing land grievances surfaced (Human Rights Watch, 2008; Conflict and Health, 2014). The perception of electoral fraud, coupled with ethnic-based political mobilization, fueled the unrest, and despite international mediation and intervention by the International Criminal Court (ICC), accountability for perpetrators has remained limited (ICC, 2012; Government of Kenya, 2013). Similarly, Nigeria experienced both pre- and post-election violence during the 2011 general elections. Ahead of the polls, politically motivated assassinations, communal clashes, and intimidation of voters were reported across several states (Amnesty International,

2011). After the announcement of Goodluck Jonathan's victory, post-election riots broke out in the northern regions, resulting in the deaths of more than 800 people and the displacement of tens of thousands (Human Rights Watch, 2011). The violence in Nigeria reflected deep-seated ethno-religious divisions and grievances over political representation. These cases illustrate how weak institutions, identity politics, and perceived electoral injustices can spark both pre- and post-election conflicts, undermining democratic stability and social cohesion. They also reveal that election-related violence in Africa often extends beyond the ballot period, encompassing the entire electoral cycle from campaigning and voting to the aftermath of disputed results posing serious challenges to peace, governance, and human security on the continent.
The respondent's remarks highlighted the urgent need for impartial conduct by security agencies, protection of political freedoms, and equal treatment of all parties. Strengthening human rights monitoring, promoting civic peace education, and holding security actors accountable are essential steps toward restoring public confidence and safeguarding electoral integrity.

These summative narratives were consistent with Collier and Vicente's (2012) argument that political violence depresses turnout, especially among opposition supporters. However, Boone (2019) found out that in some contexts, repression can provoke defiance and higher turnout a dynamic aspect absent in these Ugandan cases. These narratives further aligned with Collier and Vicente's (2012) findings from Nigeria, where electoral violence during gubernatorial elections reduced turnout by up to 8% in high-risk areas, particularly among opposition strongholds. Similar trends have been observed in Zimbabwe, where Bratton and Masunungure (2011) document how pre-election violence and intimidation by security forces suppressed participation in rural opposition areas. In Cambodia, Hughes (2018) reported that ruling party aligned security forces and militia presence at polling stations discouraged open dissent and reduced opposition voting.

Comparatively, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is a good example of how threats of violence and militia activity in eastern provinces deterred participation, as noted by Carter Center observers (2012), echoing the Ugandan respondents' experiences. These patterns are also consistent with Wilkinson's (2004) argument that

political elites may strategically allow or incite violence to influence electoral outcomes and demobilize rival constituencies.

However, there is also evidence that repression can produce the opposite effect. Boone (2019), while studying Kenya's 2013 elections, found that targeted intimidation in some opposition areas provoked community solidarity and increased mobilization, leading to unexpectedly high turnout. Similarly, Arriola and Johnson (2014) reported that in Ethiopia's 2005 elections, violent crackdowns in urban opposition areas galvanized voter defiance and mass participation, at least in the short term. This counter-dynamic, where repression backfires, was largely absent from the Ugandan cases described here, suggesting that the state's intimidation tactics were sufficiently pervasive to deter rather than energize participation.

Economic constraints also influenced participation. A District Registrar in Kampala (KI 1) observed,

*"On election day, some people choose to work rather than spend hours in queues. They say they can't waste the whole day waiting to vote when they could be earning something to feed their families. Others complain that even after voting, nothing changes in their lives."*

A female voter in Kampala (KI 9) said,

*"We are busy trying to survive; politics feels far from our daily needs. I even don't feel like participating in any way. My interest is daily survival and that is all for now.Nothing more, nothing less"*

The statement highlights the profound impact of economic hardship on political participation, a phenomenon well-documented in recent studies and global examples. For many citizens, especially those living in poverty, daily survival takes precedence over civic engagement, making politics and governance appear distant or irrelevant. Hassan (2024) found that individuals facing inflation and financial stress in the U.S. were significantly less likely to vote, as their focus shifted toward meeting basic needs. Similarly, Haseeba (2025) observed that in low-income communities across Uganda, political apathy was prevalent due to unmet promises and a lack of tangible improvements in livelihoods. This aligns with Gozálvez and Calandín's (2025)

analysis, which links economic inequality to declining democratic participation, particularly among marginalized groups who view political engagement as a luxury rather than a right. The respondent's emphasis on "nothing more, nothing less" reflects this resignation, underscoring the need for governance to deliver material benefits. Policies that connect political participation to employment creation, social protection, and community development—such as Uganda's Parish Development Model—can help restore trust and encourage engagement among economically disadvantaged populations (UNDP, 2024). Strengthening this link is essential for inclusive democracy and representative electoral outcomes.

This observation highlighted the economic pressures and opportunity costs that influence voter participation, especially among low-income earners and daily wage workers. For many citizens, the need to sustain their livelihoods takes precedence over political engagement. The respondent's remarks revealed how poverty and economic survival can become barriers to exercising one's democratic rights.

The statement also suggested a sense of disillusionment and frustration with the political system voters who have repeatedly participated in elections but see little tangible improvement in their living conditions may begin to view voting as futile or symbolic. Consequently, they prioritized immediate needs over long-term democratic outcomes. This trend contributed to low voter turnout and weakens the representativeness of electoral outcomes, particularly among marginalized populations. It underscores the importance of linking political participation to socio-economic empowerment, such as through civic education, social protection programs, and fair employment policies, to ensure that citizens see a real connection between governance and everyday well-being. Ultimately, the respondent's insight reflects how economic hardship and political apathy intersect to shape citizens' decisions on whether to participate in elections, an issue that demands both policy attention and public sensitization to strengthen democratic participation.

These narratives mirrored Kasara and Suryanarayan's (2015) argument that poverty shifts citizens' focus from political participation to immediate survival needs, as the opportunity cost of voting becomes prohibitively high. For instance, in Kenya's 2013 elections, the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC, 2013) noted lower turnout in informal urban settlements such as Kibera, where many residents depend on daily wage labor and could not afford to forgo income to queue for hours.

Comparable dynamics have been observed in Latin America: In Brazil's 2010 presidential elections, Brollo et al. (2013) found that among low-income informal workers, turnout dropped significantly when election days coincided with peak seasonal work periods, especially in rural areas. In India, Krishnan (2018) reported that among the poorest 20% of voters, participation in state assembly elections was 12 percentage points lower when polling fell during agricultural harvesting, as labor demands outweighed political engagement. In the Philippines, Coronel (2019) highlighted that in rural Mindanao, some voters walked over 10 km to polling stations, a journey requiring them to lose a full day's income and this resulted in reduced turnout in poorer communities compared to urban centers.

These findings were consistent with Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's (1995) resource model of political participation, which posits that time and money are essential resources for engagement, and their scarcity disproportionately affects the poor. However, counterexamples exist that alter this explanation. In Ghana's 2008 elections, Weghorst and Lindberg (2013) found that despite high poverty levels, voter turnout reached 85% nationally, suggesting that where electoral stakes are perceived as extremely high, such as in close contests, citizens may prioritize voting even at significant economic cost. Similarly, in South Africa's 1994 democratic transition elections, Mattes and Piombo (2001) documented exceptionally high turnout among poor communities, driven by the historic significance of the vote, despite widespread economic hardship.

Finally, many respondents expressed disappointment with the multi-party system itself. A mobiliser in Kampala (KI 7) claimed,

*"Multi-partism has become a platform for personal gain, not national service. Many politicians join parties not because they believe in their ideologies, but because they see opportunities for money, jobs, or influence. Once they get what they want, they forget the people who voted for them."*

The respondent's observation that "multi-partism has become a platform for personal gain, not national service" reflects a widely documented pattern in African politics, particularly in contexts like Uganda where party systems are weakly institutionalized. Many scholars argue that political parties often serve as vehicles for patronage,

personal enrichment, and access to power rather than platforms for representing citizens or delivering public goods (van de Walle, 2003; Khisa & Rwengabo, 2024). Studies in Sub-Saharan Africa, such as Wantchekon (2003), further show that politicians frequently provide material benefits, jobs, or favors to supporters, reinforcing clientelistic dynamics over national service. This aligns closely with the respondent's view that leaders forget the electorate once their personal objectives are met. However, some literature offers nuance, noting that voters in certain contexts do respond to public goods and service-oriented policies rather than purely personalist incentives (Young, 2010). Similarly, strong institutional checks, active civil society, and media oversight can encourage parties to serve national interests. Overall, the respondent's perspective is justified in contexts where multiparty politics is highly personalized and dominated by clientelist networks, but it is not universally applicable. It highlighted a broader concern about political cynicism, diminished public trust, and weakened democratic accountability, while also pointing to the potential for reforms that strengthen party ideology, transparency, and service delivery.

A voter in Mbale (KI 9) lamented,

*"Parties promise a lot but forget us after elections. During campaigns, they come to our villages, give out small items like soap, sugar, etc and assure us of better roads, schools, and jobs. But once they win, we never see them again. They disappear until the next election season. ."*

The respondent's statement encapsulated a growing sense of public disillusionment regarding the motives and integrity of political leaders within Uganda's multiparty political system. The view expressed indicated a prevailing perception that political participation has increasingly become self-serving rather than service-oriented, with political parties perceived as vehicles for personal gain and social advancement rather than as platforms for collective national development. This perception reflected the erosion of ideological commitment and the increasing commercialization of politics, where political allegiance is often secured through material inducements instead of being guided by shared values or policy-driven objectives. Consequently, this dynamic undermines democratic accountability, as leaders tend to prioritize personal and partisan interests at the expense of citizens' welfare. It also contributes to a

decline in public trust toward political institutions, manifesting in growing voter apathy and widespread cynicism about governance.

The respondent's remarks showed the urgent need for comprehensive political reforms aimed at enhancing transparency, fostering internal party democracy, and promoting ethical leadership. These concerns are echoed in Kumar's (2019) analysis, which warns that without ideological grounding, political parties risk becoming vehicles for personal enrichment rather than instruments of public service. Similarly, the National Democratic Institute (NDI, 2023) emphasized that civic education is essential for cultivating democratic values and empowering citizens to hold leaders accountable. Gozálvez and Calandín (2025) argued that the rise of populism and democratic authoritarianism threatens liberal democracy, reinforcing the need for dialogic civic education and cooperative leadership models that prioritize national service over personal gain. The respondent's observation thus reflected a broader societal concern that multi-partism devoid of integrity and ideological clarity can devolve into a contest for privilege, undermining citizen representation and national progress. However, scholars like Carothers (2022) cautioned that reform efforts must be context-sensitive and inclusive, warning against top-down approaches that may entrench elite dominance or alienate grassroots actors. Overall, the consensus affirms that strengthening civic education and embedding value-based leadership principles are critical for reorienting multiparty politics toward inclusive, development-oriented governance.

These views also paralleled Rakner and Svasand's (2013) findings that when internal party democracy is weak and clientelism dominates, multiparty politics loses its mobilising power. Similar disillusionment has been observed elsewhere in Africa. In Nigeria, Bratton (2013) found that public trust in political parties fell to 15% in Afrobarometer surveys following the 2011 general elections, with many citizens perceiving parties as vehicles for elite enrichment rather than public service. In Kenya, Cheeseman, Lynch, and Willis (2016) documented how coalition politics and ethnic patronage networks eroded the legitimacy of multiparty competition, leading to voter apathy in urban areas such as Nairobi and Kisumu, where turnout declined by over 6% between 2007 and 2013. In Malawi, Patel and Wahman (2015) reported that weak intra-party democracy and frequent floor-crossing by MPs reduced citizen confidence, with 62% of respondents agreeing that "parties look after themselves, not the people."

Comparable patterns emerge outside Africa. In Eastern Europe, Rose and Munro (2009) found that in post-communist countries like Bulgaria and Romania, voter turnout dropped sharply after initial democratic transitions, largely due to perceptions that party elites pursued personal enrichment rather than representing citizens' needs. In India, Chhibber and Nooruddin (2004) argued that the dominance of patronage-based politics in certain states has diminished ideological distinctions between parties, reducing their mobilising appeal. Latin America offers another parallel: in Peru's 2001–2016 electoral cycles, Levitsky and Cameron (2003) documented the collapse of established parties due to corruption scandals, which fostered widespread political disengagement, with turnout in Lima falling from 84% to 73% over a decade despite compulsory voting laws.

However, not all contexts showed a direct link between weak party credibility and reduced participation. In South Korea, Dalton and Shin (2014) found that even when trust in political parties fell below 25%, voter turnout remained above 75% in national elections, suggesting that in highly institutionalised democracies, habitual voting and strong civic duty norms can counteract disillusionment. Similarly, in Ghana's 2016 elections, Bob-Milliar (2012) observed that while voters widely criticised clientelism within parties, high electoral competitiveness still drove participation rates of over 68%.

This implied therefore that the convergence between respondent testimony and scholarly literature reinforced the conclusion that voter apathy in Uganda's multi-party system is not driven by a single cause but is instead the product of intertwined structural, socio-economic, and psychological barriers. While much of the existing literature supported these findings, counterarguments remind us that some disengagement reflects strategic choices, satisfaction with incumbents, or identity-based political participation possibilities warranting further exploration.

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