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African Youth and the Future of Democracy: How Youth Bulge, Urbanization, and Social Media Shape Youth Political Attitudes and Participation

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Executive Summary

African youth will be key in shaping the future of African politics. Recent political events such as the Gen-Z protests in Kenya, and political transitions in Sudan, Ethiopia and elsewhere have demonstrated that young people are at the forefront of political protests. African democracies can only be consolidated if young African citizens are supportive of democracy and regularly engage in elections and other formal democratic processes. Yet, we still know little about the political attitudes and behaviour of African youth and the factors shaping young citizens' political outlooks. We propose a novel approach to address this gap by analysing how structural and individual-level factors independently and jointly influence the political attitudes and behaviour of African youth. More precisely, we explore to what extent youth bulge, urbanization and social media usage affect the political expression of African youth. Using Afrobarometer survey data for 41 countries gathered between 2016 and 2023, complemented by contextual data from international sources, we conduct a multilevel binary logistic regression analysis to explore how youth bulge, urbanization, and social media usage affect young Africans' support for democracy, the willingness to vote, and participation in protests. Our analysis suggests that, individually, youth bulge, urbanization, and social media usage significantly influence the political attitudes and behaviour of African youth. We also explore the interaction between those factors, but most of these effects are not significant. This might be related to the relatively short timeframe for which the data is available.

Content

Introduction

What is the role of African youth in shaping politics across the continent? As of 2022, the median age in African countries was 19 years, while 70 per cent of African citizens were 30 years old or younger. African youth will thus undoubtedly be a key segment of society when it comes to shaping the future of democracy across the continent. Citizens' political attitudes and political behaviour are key factors that influence the short- and longer-term prospects for democratization. Democracies are less likely to be eroded and more likely to become consolidated when the majority of citizens view a democracy as "the only game in town".[1][2] Democracy also heavily relies on citizens engaging in elections and participating in other formal democratic institutions. Low voter turnout, for instance, undermines a government's legitimacy. While political attitudes and behaviour of all citizens matter, the political attitudes and behaviours of young Africans are particularly important today, and in the future.

Despite their status as the future torchbearers of the democratic flame, only a few studies have analysed political attitudes and participation of young people in Africa. These studies observe that African youth – not too different from their European and North American peers – are generally supportive of democracy but less likely to vote compared to older generations.[3] To explain political attitudes and behaviour, previous studies have mostly focused on individual-level variables such as socio-economic status or level of education. While these variables arguably matter, they overlook that broader societal trends such as demographic changes, high urbanization rates, and social media usage shape African politics and societies in very fundamental ways. In many countries, young Africans are living in a youth bulge, which might have important political socialization effects as well as socio-economic implications in terms of job prospects – both potentially affecting the political attitudes and behaviour of the young. In many countries, African youth are moving to the cities or are born in cities, which might again have implications for political socialization and affect possibilities for political mobilization and collective action. Young people in Africa largely rely on social media for political information and expression. In this paper, we therefore seek to explore how both structural, as well as individual-level factors influence youth political expression.

The main question we are interested in is to what extent the youth bulge, urbanization and social media usage individually and jointly influence political attitudes and behaviour among African youth. Previous work has pointed to the importance of the demographic transition, urbanization and social media for the future of democracy in Africa and specifically for political attitudes and behaviours of African citizens.[4] We seek to expand this work by focusing on African youth and by empirically testing the relationship between youth bulge, urbanization and social media usage on the one hand and African youth attitudes and behaviour on the other. Our study contributes to research in political sociology by analysing attitudes and behaviour in African countries that are still largely overlooked. Furthermore, our study broadens the scope of political participation theories. Traditional frameworks often treat institutionalized participation (e.g. voting) and non-institutionalized actions (e.g. protests) as separate domains. Our study explores how youth bulge, urbanization and social media usage influence support for democracy as well as the willingness to

[1] Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, "Toward Consolidated Democracies," *Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 2 (1996): 15.
[2] Robert Mattes and Michael Bratton, "Learning about Democracy in Africa: Awareness, Performance, and Experience," *American Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 1 (2007): 192-217.
[3] Michelle Kuenzi and Gina M. S. Lambright, "Who Votes in Africa? An Examination of Electoral Participation in 10 African Countries," *Party Politics* 17, no. 6 (2011): 767-799; Danielle Resnick and Daniela Casale, "Young Populations in Young Democracies: Generational Voting Behaviour in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Democratization* 21, no. 6 (19 September 2014): 1172-1194; Elvis Bisong Tambe and Elizaveta Kopacheva, "Age and Political Participation in Africa's Electoral Regimes," *Representation* 60, no. 1 (2024): 97-115.
[4] Christine Hackenesch et al., "Megatrends and the Future of Democracy in Africa. How Do the Youth Bulge, Urbanization and Digitalization Shape African Politics?" Megatrends Working Paper 2025 16.

vote and protest and thereby offers novel insights into the evolving repertoires of political attitudes and behaviour among young people.

From a policy perspective, the findings of the study can inform strategies to engage youth more effectively in political processes. African governments and development partners alike can leverage insights into the intersections of demography, urbanization, and social media to design targeted initiatives addressing the distinct challenges and opportunities faced by African youth. This could include policies to enhance the inclusivity of democratic institutions and counteract barriers to formal participation, while recognizing the potential of social media as a mobilizing force for civic engagement.

We proceed as follows: Section 2 develops our theoretical framework and hypotheses. Section 3 describes our data and methods. Section 4 discusses our findings. Finally, in Section 5, we conclude with a brief discussion of implications for research and policymaking.

Theoretical Framework and Development of Hypotheses

Political Attitudes and Participation of African Youth

Young people's political attitudes and participation have come under scrutiny in recent decades. The consensus in academic research focusing on Europe and North America is that, compared to older generations, young people are relatively less supportive of democracy and also less engaged in institutionalized political behaviours such as voting and joining political parties.[5,6,7,8] By contrast, they demonstrate a penchant for non-institutionalized political activities such as protests and demonstrations,[9] as part of the evolution of democratic citizenship from allegiance-focused loyalties to the political system to more assertive and authority-challenging expressions of participation.[10,11]

The – still very limited – research on African contexts suggests, however, that African youth are fairly supportive of democracy but reluctant to engage in formal democratic institutions such as elections – in a way not too different from their European and North American peers.[12] Analyses of African youth's willingness to protest remain inconclusive. Some studies find that young people are similarly engaged in protests and demonstrations compared to the older generation.[13] Other studies conclude that the youth are more likely to protest,[14] which was very visible for instance in the Arab Spring and the "third wave of protests".[15,16]

Yet, are these political expressions influenced in significant ways by the interplay of young people's large cohort size in the population; their residency in urban (or rural) areas; and the proliferation of social media usage for political information? Below, we theorize how these structural transformations potentially influence political outcomes among young people and formulate four broad hypotheses for testing this in the empirical section of the paper.

[5] Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "The Danger of Deconsolidation: The Democratic Disconnect," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 3 (July 6, 2016): 5-17.
[6] Foa and Mounk, "The Danger of Deconsolidation."
[7] Richard H. Kimberlee, "Why Don't British Young People Vote at General Elections?," *Journal of Youth Studies* 5, no. 1 (March 2002): 85-98.
[8] Dieter Fuchs and Edeltraud Roller, "Globalization and Political Legitimacy in Western Europe," in *Democracy under Threat: A Crisis of Legitimacy?*, ed. Ursula van Beek, Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 221-251.
[9] Russell J. Dalton, *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation Is Reshaping American Politics*, Rev. ed (Washington: CQ Press, 2009).
[10] Russell J. Dalton and Christian Welzel, eds., *The Civic Culture Transformed: From Allegiant to Assertive Citizens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
[11] Pippa Norris, *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
[12] Michelle Kuenzi and Gina M. S. Lambright, "Who Votes in Africa? An Examination of Electoral Participation in 10 African Countries," *Party Politics* 17, no. 6 (2011): 767-799; Resnick and Casale, "Young Populations in Young Democracies", 1172-1194; Tambe and Kopacheva, "Age and Political Participation in Africa's Electoral Regimes," 97-115.
[13] Resnick and Casale, "Young Populations in Young Democracies." 1172-1194
[14] Tambe and Kopacheva, "Age and Political Participation in Africa's Electoral Regimes," 97-115.
[15] Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly, *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 2015).
[16] Zachariah Mampilly, "The Promise of Africa's 'Youth Bulge'," *Foreign Affairs*, Jul 7, 2021.

Potential Effects of a Youth Bulge

Research for other world regions suggests that it matters for young peoples' political attitudes and behaviour whether they live in a country where they are surrounded by a great many other young people. Some argue that a youth bulge has a positive effect on young peoples' support for democracy,[17] and their propensity to participate in protests.[18] Others are more sceptical and associate the experience of growing up within a large youth cohort size with the increased risk of developing anti-democratic and extremist attitudes,[19] and a higher likelihood of disengagement from electoral participation.[20]

The literature identifies two main mechanisms by which youth bulge affects the political attitudes and behaviours of young people. The first mechanism relates to the increased risk of socio-economic deprivation posed by the existence of a youth bulge. Richard Easterlin contends that, for any cohort of people within a population, the social and economic fortunes of the cohort decrease as their cohort size increases.[21,22] Consistent with this hypothesis, several studies have shown that a youth bulge is associated with fierce competition among young people and overcrowding in the labour market. The youth bulge thereby increases the risk of unemployment, underemployment and low wages for young people.[23,24,25] Such socio-economic deprivations can in turn lead to increased political engagement through critical and authority-challenging political actions and engagement to address the grievances of the youth.[26,27,28] At the same time, the lack of economic resources due to joblessness or poor wages can also disempower youth from politics, and divert their priorities to the biographical needs of their lives.[29,30,31]

The second theoretical mechanism on the relationship between youth bulge and political expression relates to the amplification effects of socialization among young people. Peers are ubiquitous and ever-present agents in the lives of young people,[32] and are important players in youth political socialization. Young

[17] Godfred Bonnah Nkansah and Attila Bartha, "Anti-Democratic Youth? The Influence of Youth Cohort Size and Quality of Democracy on Young People's Support for Democracy," *Contemporary Politics* 29, no. 5 (Oct 20, 2023): 553-575.
[18] Godfred Bonnah Nkansah, "Youth Cohort Size, Structural Socioeconomic Conditions, and Youth Protest Behaviour in Democratic Societies (1995-2014)," *SAGE Open* 12, no. 2 (Apr 1, 2022): 21582440221096146.
[19] Hannes Weber, "Demography and Democracy: The Impact of Youth Cohort Size on Democratic Stability in the World," *Democratization* 20, no. 2 (March 2013): 335-357.
[20] Godfred Bonnah Nkansah and Zsófia Papp, "Does Cohort Size Matter? Assessing the Effect of Youth Cohort Size and Peer Influence on Young People's Electoral Participation," *Journal of Youth Studies* 21, (March 2022), 1-19.
[21] Richard A. Easterlin, *Birth and Fortune: The Impact of Numbers on Personal Welfare*, second ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
[22] Diane J. Macunovich and Richard A. Easterlin, "Easterlin Hypothesis," in *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics:* Volume 1–8, ed. Steven N. Durlauf and Lawrence E. Blume (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2008), 1490-1494.
[23] Giorgio Brunello, "The Effects of Cohort Size on European Earnings," *Journal of Population Economics* 23, no. 1 (January 2010): 273-290.
[24] Thomas Apolte and Lena Gerling, "Youth Bulges, Insurrections and Labor-Market Restrictions," *Public Choice* 175, no. 1–2 (April 2018): 63-93.
[25] Sanders Korenman and David Neumark, "Cohort Crowding and Youth Labor Markets (A Cross-National Analysis)." In *Youth Employment and Joblessness in Advanced Countries*, ed. David Blanchflower and Richard Freeman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 57-106.
[26] Patrick O. Asingo, "Relative Deprivation, Protests and Voting in Kenya," *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 56, no. 1 (Jan 2, 2018): 65-83.
[27] Edward N. Muller, *Aggressive Political Participation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).
[28] Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, 1st print, Princeton Paperbacks (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).
[29] Ellen Quintelier, "Differences in Political Participation between Young and Old People," *Contemporary Politics* 13, no. 2 (June 2007): 165-180.
[30] Henry E. Brady, Sidney Verba, and Kay Lehman Schlozman, "Beyond SES: A Resource Model of Political Participation," *American Political Science Review* 89, no. 2 (June 1995): 271-294.
[31] Jan Teorell, "Political Participation and Three Theories of Democracy: A Research Inventory and Agenda," *European Journal of Political Research* 45, no. 5 (August 2006): 787-810.
[32] Ellen Quintelier, "Engaging Adolescents in Politics: The Longitudinal Effect of Political Socialization Agents," *Youth & Society* 47, no. 1 (January 2015): 51-69.

peoples' political influence on each other can sometimes be even more pronounced than political socialization through schools or families.[33,34] Previous evidence suggests that peer influence can play a crucial role in informing, inspiring, and mobilizing young people for political participation.[35,36] Following this line of argument, a youth bulge can amplify the effects of peer influence within a large reservoir of peer socializing agents. If we assume that African youth are more supportive of democracy but less willing to vote and more willing to protest, we would thus expect that the presence of a youth bulge would further amplify those effects. This leads us to our first hypothesis:

H1 African youth living in a country with a youth bulge are more likely to support democracy, less likely to vote in elections, and more likely to protest.

Potential Effects of Urbanization

Urbanization processes in African countries are not only marked by a very high pace, but also by large heterogeneities and inequalities. Africa boasts the highest urbanization rate globally, with urbanization contributing nearly one-third of the continent's annual per capita gross domestic product (GDP) growth between 2001 and 2020.[37] Most of African middle classes and the richest people live in cities while over half of Sub-Saharan Africa's urban population resides in informal settlements, lacking sufficient access to essential services.[38] Unlike earlier urbanization processes in Europe or Asia, urbanization in Africa does not go hand in hand with industrialization.

Young people dominate the demographic profile of urban areas across Africa. Estimates suggest that 60 per cent of the population of African cities is comprised of persons aged 24 years and below. Access to education and health services is often better in cities compared to rural areas. At the same time, many young people live in slums and locations lacking a sufficient supply of basic public services.[39] This implies that the socio-economic deprivations, which typically define a youth bulge, can either be ameliorated or exacerbated by urbanization.

The relationship between urbanization and the political attitudes and behaviour of African youth is underresearched and remains a blind spot in the literature on African politics. Previous studies on the role of urbanization in democratization processes in other world regions suggest a direct link between urbanization and protests.[40] The density of cities facilitates coordinated public action due to the presence of a critical mass of people, lower costs for organizing and mobilizing participants, and the higher visibility of urban protests.[41] This would lead us to expect that African urban youth are more likely to protest compared to their

[33] Eugénie Dostie-Goulet, "Social Networks and the Development of Political Interest," *Journal of Youth Studies* 12, no. 4 (August 2009): 405-421.
[34] Hilary Pilkington and Gary Pollock, "'Politics Are Bollocks': Youth, Politics and Activism in Contemporary Europe," *The Sociological Review* 63, no. 2_suppl (December 2015): 1-35.
[35] Daniel E. Bergan et al., "Promoting the Youth Vote: The Role of Informational Cues and Social Pressure," *Political Behaviour*, 23 February 2021.
[36] Casey A Klofstad, *Civic Talk: Peers, Politics, and the Future of Democracy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), http://site.ebrary.com/id/10436250.
[37] OECD, UN ECA, and AfDB, *Africa's Urbanization Dynamics 2022: The Economic Power of Africa's Cities* (Paris: West African Studies, OECD Publishing, 2022).
[38] World Bank Group, "DataBank World Development Indicators: Population Living in Slums (% of Urban Population) – Sub-Saharan Africa," 2020, accessed May 28, 2025.
[39] David Dodman et al., "African Urbanization and Urbanism: Implications for Risk Accumulation and Reduction," *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, Africa's Urban Risk and Resilience, 26 (December 1, 2017): 7-15.
[40] Massimiliano Andretta, Gianni Piazza, and Anna Subirats, "Urban Dynamics and Social Movements," in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements*, ed. Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 200-216.
[41] Edward L. Glaeser and Bryce Millett Steinberg, "Transforming Cities: Does Urbanization Promote Democratic Change?" *Regional Studies* 51, no. 1 (2017): 58-68.

rural counterparts. This expectation is also in line with previous studies on the 'third wave of protests' in Africa, which reported that protests are largely driven by young urbanites.[42]

Whereas the relation between urbanization and youth protests seems to be straightforward, theoretical expectations and empirical findings for other world regions on the relationship between urbanization and support for democracy and willingness to vote are less clear. Modernization theory suggests that urbanization might increase support of and demand for democracy. Urbanization stimulates the development of civic capital, which might then be leveraged by citizens to improve their institutions. For African countries, some have indeed argued that educated young urbanites would be politically more engaged, demand government accountability, and push for programmatic politics.[43] On the other hand, urban citizens might have a strong preference for political stability to protect their socio-economic status and, therefore, a dictator who promises to guarantee stability and the status quo might be preferred over an unstable democratic regime.[44] It thus seems to very much depend on the contextual conditions under which urbanization affects support for democracy and willingness to vote in one direction or the other. This leads us to our second hypotheses:

H2 Youth living in urban areas are more likely to protest compared to their rural counterparts. They are either more or less supportive of democracy and more or less willing to vote depending on context conditions.

Potential Effects of Social Media

The relationship between social media and political expression has been much more widely studied compared to the role of urbanization. Yet, findings from previous research for other world regions and for African countries remain inconclusive and suggest that more research is needed on the conditions under which social media contribute towards support for democracy and enhancing citizens' willingness to vote.[45,46]

Social media can facilitate access to political information and public discourse, potentially increasing demands for political change, but it can also be used to propagate misinformation and polarization, which may diminish support for democracy and trust in democratic institutions.[47] For instance, social media has been found to positively impact political engagements, particularly the expression of political views on social networking sites,[48,49] and political participation.[50,51] Social media has increased access to political

[42] Lisa Mueller, "Popular Protest and Accountability," in *Routledge Handbook of Democratization in Africa*, ed. Gabrielle Lynch and Peter VonDoepp, 1st ed. (London, New York: Routledge, 2020), 392-403.
[43] Amaka Anku and Tochi Eni-Kalu, "Africa's Slums Aren't Harbingers of Anarchy – They're Engines of Democracy: The Upside of Rapid Urbanization," *Foreign Affairs* (December 2019).
[44] Glaeser and Steinberg, "Transforming Cities."
[45] Hackenesch et al., "Megatrends and the Future of Democracy in Africa."
[46] Nathaniel Persily and Joshua A. Tucker, eds., *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field and Prospects for Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
[47] Sebastián Valenzuela et al., "The Paradox of Participation Versus Misinformation: Social Media, Political Engagement, and the Spread of Misinformation," *Digital Journalism* 7, no. 6 (Juni 2019), 802-823.
[48] Shelley Boulianne, "Revolution in the Making? Social Media Effects across the Globe," *Information, Communication & Society* 22, no. 1 (Jan 2, 2019): 39-54.
[49] Helen Margetts, Scott Hale, and Peter John, "Political Turbulance: How Social Media Shapes Political Participation and the Democratic Landscape," in *Society and the Internet: How Networks of Information and Communication Are Changing Our Lives*, ed. Mark Graham, William H. Dutton, and Manuel Castells, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 197-211.
[50] Marko M Skoric et al., "Social Media and Citizen Engagement: A Meta-Analytic Review," *New Media & Society* 18, no. 9 (October 2016): 1817-1839.
[51] Shelley Boulianne, "Twenty Years of Digital Media Effects on Civic and Political Participation," *Communication Research* 47, no. 7 (October 2020): 947-966.

information and stimulated political participation in many parts of Africa.[52,53,54] At the same time, its ability to democratize access to information can lead to the propagation of anti-democratic and illiberal values by political actors.[55] The case of Kenya highlights, for instance, how disinformation fosters apathy toward political systems, reducing individuals' motivation to engage politically.[56]

The role of social media in stimulating political protest in Africa has been quite clearly established. Research indicates that activists extensively leveraged social media during political uprisings against autocratic regimes in countries like Egypt,[57] Tunisia[58] and Sudan.[59] Social media emerged as a primary source of information and an essential tool for organizing and coordinating protests during these revolutions. The more recent Kenyan Gen-Z protests[60] or the ENDSARS demonstrations in Nigeria[61] are all reported to have extensively leveraged social media in activism campaigns with urban youth as protagonists. In sum, the effects of social media on political protests are quite clear whereas the effects of social media on political attitudes and voting are mixed, which leads us to our third hypotheses.

H3 African youth using social media frequently for political information are more likely to protest compared to African youth not using social media. They are either more or less supportive of democracy and more or less willing to vote depending on context conditions.

Interaction of Youth Bulge, Urbanization and Social Media Usage

Previous academic works mostly analysed the individual effects of youth bulge, urbanizations and social media on political attitudes and participation. Whereas the findings for the effects of youth bulges have been quite well established, research on the effects of urbanization is very limited, while research on the effects of social media is inconclusive. We follow the argument that these factors may not only individually but also jointly shape the political attitudes and behaviour of African youth as youth bulge, urbanization, and social media usage are empirically closely linked.[62]

We assume that particularly for political protests, the youth bulge, urbanization, and social media usage should have an amplification effect. We expect young Africans living in a youth bulge in urban areas and regularly using social media to be particularly likely to engage in political protests. Urban areas enhance the visibility of young people and their issues, offering public spaces that facilitate protest and collective action.

[52] Martin N. Ndlela and Winston Mano, eds., *Social Media and Elections in Africa, Volume 1: Theoretical Perspectives and Election Campaigns* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020).
[53] Martin N. Ndlela and Winston Mano, eds., *Social Media and Elections in Africa, Volume 2: Challenges and Opportunities* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020).
[54] Payidamoyo Nyoka and Mary Tembo, "Dimensions of Democracy and Digital Political Activism on Hopewell Chin'ono and Jacob Ngarivhume Twitter Accounts towards the July 31st Demonstrations in Zimbabwe," *Cogent Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (Dec, 31 2022): 2024350.
[55] Joshua A. Tucker et al., "From Liberation to Turmoil: Social Media and Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 4 (October 2017): 46-59.
[56] Fortune Agbele, "Disinformation and Misinformation During Kenya's 2022 Election. Implications for Voter Confidence in the Electoral Process," Megatrends Policy Brief 14, 2023.
[57] Mazen Hassan, Elisabeth Kendall, and Stephen Whitefield, "Media, Cultural Consumption and Support for Democracy in Post-Revolutionary Egypt," *Political Studies* 64, no. 3 (October 2016): 534-551.
[58] Anita Breuer, Todd Landman, and Dorothea Farquhar, "Social Media and Protest Mobilization: Evidence from the Tunisian Revolution," *Democratization* 22, no. 4 (Jun 7, 2015): 764-792.
[59] Saadia Izzeldin Malik, "Sudan's December Revolution of 2018: The Ecology of Youth Connective and Collective Activism," *Information, Communication & Society* 25, no. 10 (Jul 27, 2022): 1495-1510.
[60] Elizabeth Ngigi, "Gen Z Protests: A Revolution Aided by Technology" *Nation*, June 26, 2024.
[61] Oluwakemi E. Akerele-Popoola, Adesina Lukuman Azeez, and Abiodun Adeniyi, "Twitter, Civil Activisms and EndSARS Protest in Nigeria as a Developing Democracy," *Cogent Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (Dec 31, 2022): 2095744.
[62] Hackenesch et al., "Megatrends and the Future of Democracy in Africa."

[63,64] Young urban Africans living in a youth bulge are more likely to be influenced by their peers to engage in protest, not least because of the socio-economic deprivations that are a result of the youth bulge. Access to social media gives young people in urban areas the means to organize collective action.

Interaction effects of the youth bulge, urbanization, and social media usage on support for democracy and willingness to vote among young people might be more nuanced and dynamic. On the one hand, socio-economic deprivation within an urban youth bulge can create grievances and a sense of disenfranchisement, which may lead to further alienation from democratic values and institutional political processes. Socialization among peers via social media might further amplify this effect. On the other hand, better access to education and economic opportunities in cities might also lead towards opposite effects where social media usage could again have an amplification effect. From this perspective, we propose the following hypotheses regarding the effects of the interaction of youth bulge, urbanization, and social media on African youth:

H4: African youth living in a youth bulge, in urban areas and using social media for political information are more likely to protest. They are either more or less supportive of democracy and more or less willing to vote compared to African rural youth not living in a youth bulge and not using social media depending on context conditions.

The study's theoretical propositions underscore the nuanced influence of these megatrends and suggest that their combined effect shapes a distinct political behaviour pattern among urbanized, digitally connected youth in Africa. We tested these propositions empirically within the research design below.

[63] Patrick S. Sawyer et al., "Urbanization, the Youth, and Protest: A Cross-National Analysis," *Cross-Cultural Research* 56, no. 2-3 (Apr 2022): 125-149.
[64] Andrey Korotayev et al., "Urban Youth and Terrorism: A Quantitative Analysis (Are Youth Bulges Relevant Anymore?)," *Political Studies Review*, Feb 22, 2022.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

The study employed a large-N research design, involving data from 41 African countries across four rounds (R6–R9) of Afrobarometer surveys conducted in 2016, 2019, 2022, and 2023 respectively.[65] Rounds 1–5 were excluded from the analysis because one of the key explanatory variables, social media usage, was only measured in Round 6 (2016) for the first time. Given the relatively short timeframe of the study (2016–2023), we acknowledge the potential limitations in drawing causal inferences and reflect on these implications in our discussions and conclusions. The final list of countries for each round of the survey is contained in the Online Appendix.

Data Collection

The Afrobarometer survey provided pooled individual-level data on young people's (15-29 years) political values, attitudes, and participation, along with information on their socio-demographic and socio-economic status, rural/urban residency, and social media usage. We found the Afrobarometer survey an appropriate choice for the research design because it is nationally representative, covers 75 per cent of African countries (41 out of 54 territories), provides pooled time-series cross-sectional data spanning nearly 20 years (2004–2023 for Rounds 2–9), and includes different political regimes – both democratic and non-democratic countries. These data characteristics make it well suited for testing the study's hypothetical causal relationships. Such datasets combine information across both time and units (such as individuals and countries) and provide richer datasets than purely cross-sectional or time-series data alone[66]. The pooled data from the Afrobarometer survey, combined with complementary country-level data, thus serves as a suitable dataset for causal investigations. We collected country-level data from the World Bank,[67] the UN Population Bureau,[68] and the V-Dem liberal democracy index.[69] The World Bank contributed contextual variables such as GDP per capita in purchasing power parities, individuals using the Internet (percentage of the population), and Labour force participation rate for ages 15-24 (percentage of the total labour force). The UN Population Bureau supplied data on the youth bulge in each country, while the V-Dem liberal democracy index provided data on the quality of democracy across the sampled countries.

[65] Due to inconsistencies in country naming across survey rounds, and inadequate survey data on some countries, we excluded four affected countries from specific rounds to maintain data integrity. These included: Angola, misspelled as Anloga in Round 7, Eswatini, listed as Swaziland in Round 7 and Cabo Verde, referred to as Cape Verde in Round 6. Since our data analysis software, Stata, recognized these as separate entities – artificially inflating the number of unique countries from 41 to 45 and introducing inconsistencies in the merged dataset – we excluded these cases (Angola (due to misspelling as Anloga), Swaziland, and Cape Verde), as well as Seychelles, from the final analysis (Afrobarometer, "Merged Data," accessed Aug 20, 2024, https://www.afrobarometer.org/data/merged-data/).
[66] Jeffrey M. Wooldridge, *Econometric Analysis of Cross Section and Panel Data*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2010).
[67] World Bank Group, "DataBank World Development Indicators," 2024, accessed Nov 21, 2024.
[68] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "World Population Prospects 2024," accessed Nov 21, 2024.
[69] Varieties of Democracy, "The V-Dem Dataset," 2023, accessed Nov 21, 2024.

Variable Operationalization: Dependent Variables

We selected three dependent variables as proxies for the three concepts of political expression examined in the study:

Political attitudes: *measured by support for democracy.*

Institutionalized political behaviours/participation: *measured by voting in national elections.*

Non-institutionalized political behaviours/participation: *measured by attending demonstrations or protest marches.*

The Afrobarometer survey includes questions that generate categorical responses for each dependent variable. For analysis, all responses were recoded into binary categories: the target category of each dependent variable was assigned a value of 1, representing the likelihood of a young person engaging in the given attitude or behaviour, while the reference category was assigned 0, indicating non-engagement (Table 1). The Online Appendix provides further details on the operationalization of the three dependent variables and all other variables. The table and figures below show the mean distribution of the three dependent variables across countries.

Table 1: Operationalization and distribution of the political attitudes and behaviour of African youth

Dependent variable	*Original category of responses*	*Recoding approach*	*New categories*	*Mean Proportions of African youth within the sample (%)*
Support for democracy	Doesn't matter Sometimes non-democratic is preferable Democracy preferable	We categorized responses that explicitly favoured democracy against those that preferred non-democratic systems, excluding undecided responses (i.e. Doesn't matter) from the analysis.	Non-democracy preferred =0 Democracy preferable =1	0= 17.53 1 = 82.47
Voting in national elections	You voted in the elections You decided not to vote You could not find the polling station You were prevented from voting You did not have time to vote You did not vote for some other reason You were not registered	We categorized respondents into two groups: those who voted in the election and those who did not, regardless of their reason for not voting.	No (all other categories) =0 Yes (voted) =1	0 = 40.65 1= 59.35
Attend demonstrations	No, would never do this No, but would do it if had the chance Yes, once or twice Yes, several times Yes, often	We categorized responses into two groups: the "No" group versus the "Yes" group.	No=0 Yes=1	0= 87.12 1=12.88

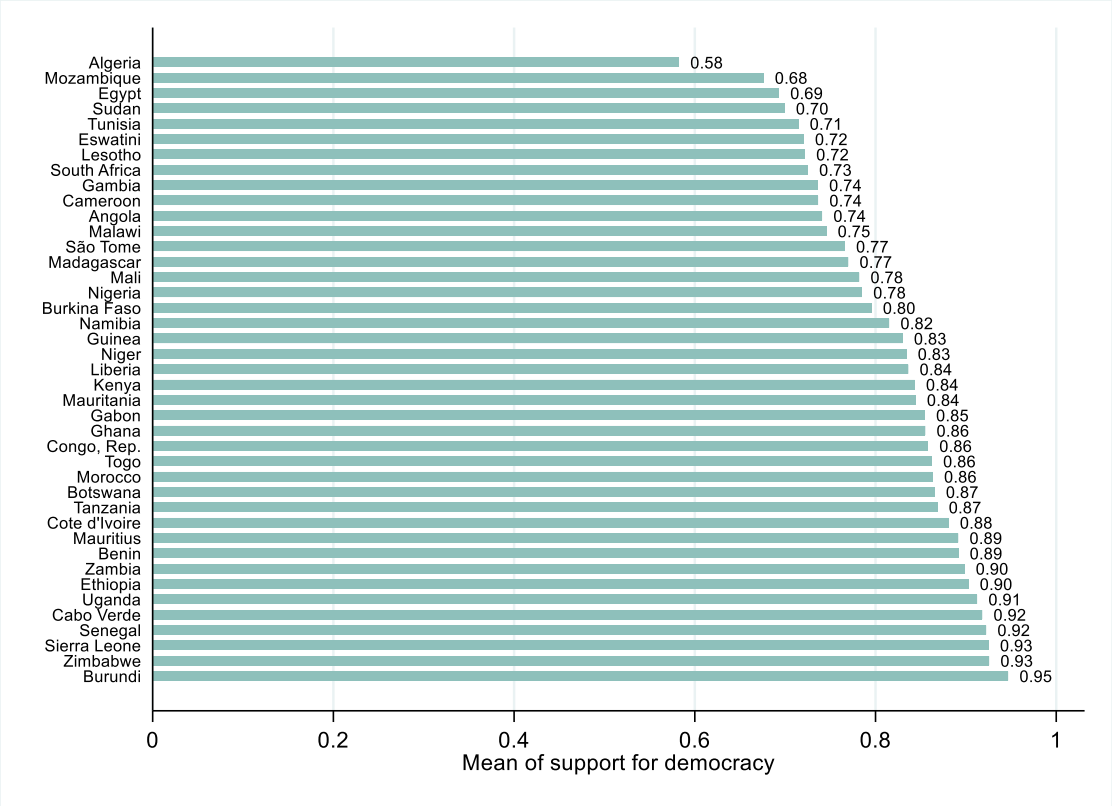

Figure 1: Proportion of Youth Who Support Democracy

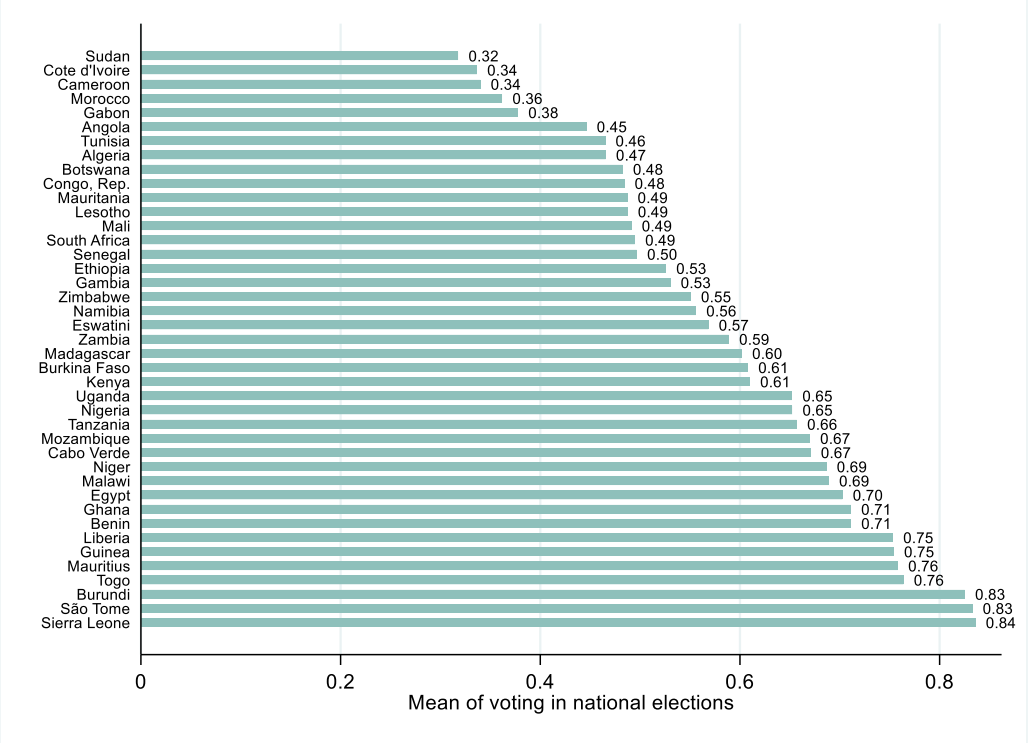

Figure 2: Proportion of Persons Who Voted in the Last National Elections

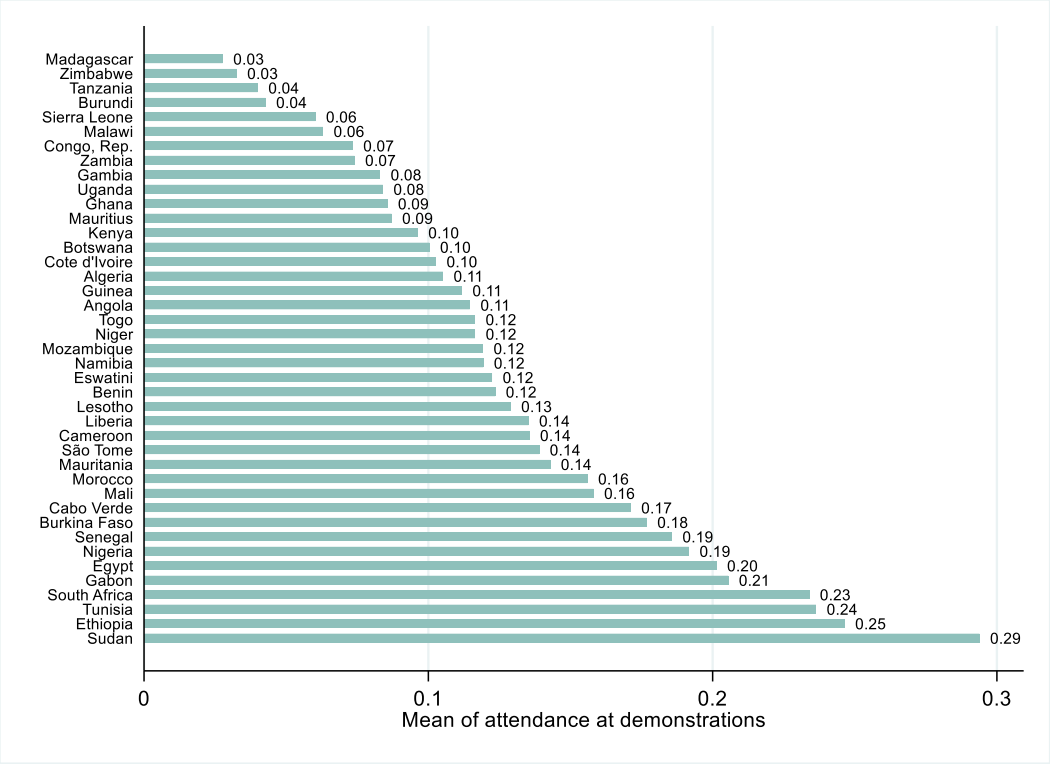

Figure 3: Proportion of Youth Who Have Ever Attended a Demonstration

Variable Operationalization: Explanatory Variables

The main explanatory variables for the study were *youth bulge*, *rural/urban residence of youth*, and *social media usage* by youth. Youth bulge was operationalized as a ratio of the total number of 15- to 29-year-olds to the total adult population of a country [15 years and above])[70], expressed as a percentage. This measure of youth bulge has been extensively utilized in prior studies and is considered more effective in capturing the complexities within this age group than alternative measures with lower cut-off points, such as 15 to 24.[71, 72,73] For each country and survey round, youth bulge was calculated and assigned to each respondent within the country. The mean youth bulge across countries was 46 per cent, with a standard deviation of 5.49. The minimum youth bulge was 26 per cent for Mauritius, while Zimbabwe had the maximum youth bulge of 56 per cent. Mauritius reported the lowest overall mean youth bulge across all the Rounds (27 %), while Uganda had the highest mean youth bulge across all the Rounds (55 %). Figure 4 shows the mean youth bulge across all Rounds for all 41 countries.

[70] Hannes Weber, "Age Structure and Political Violence: A Re-Assessment of the 'Youth Bulge' Hypothesis," *International Interactions* 45, no. 1 (October 2018), 90-112.
[71] Andrey Korotayev et al., "Urban Youth and Terrorism: A Quantitative Analysis (Are Youth Bulges Relevant Anymore?)," *Political Studies Review* 22 (2022).
[72] Nkansah and Bartha, "Anti-Democratic Youth?"
[73] Weber, "Age Structure and Political Violence."

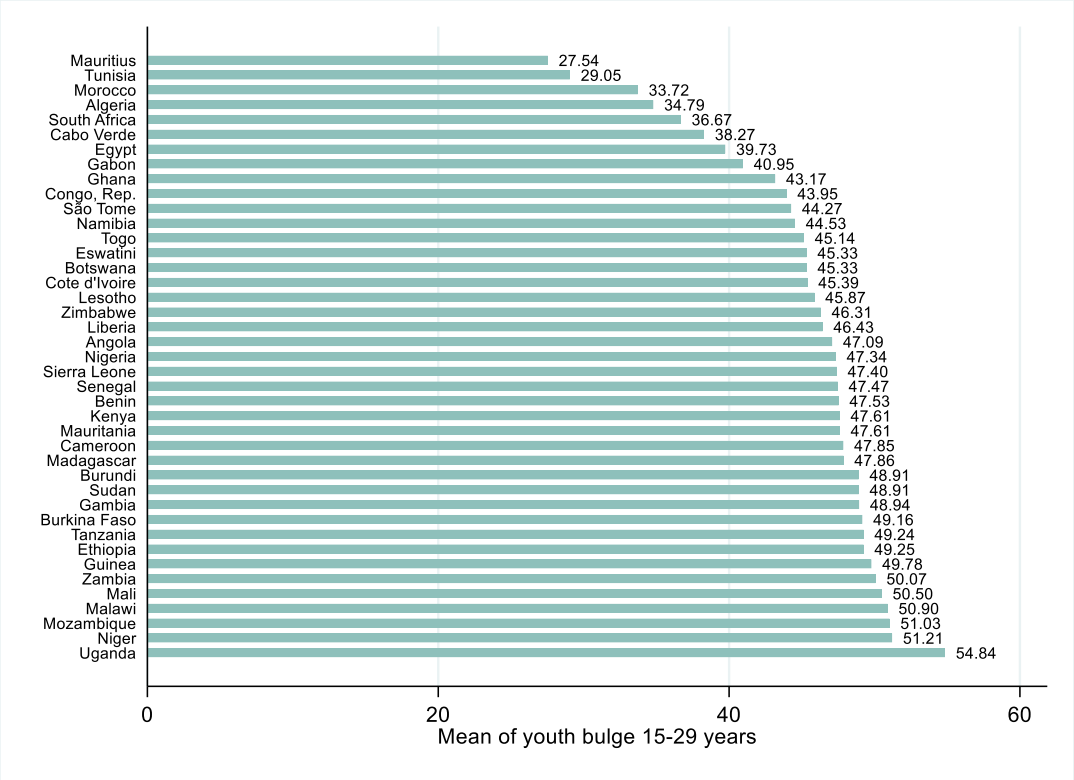

Figure 4: Mean Youth Bulge across Countries.

Rural/urban residence was operationalized as a binary variable, where respondents who identified as living in an urban or peri-urban area were assigned a value of 1, and those who identified as residing in a rural area were assigned a value of 0. A total of 53 per cent of respondents self-identified as rural dwellers, while 47 per cent reported living in urban areas.

Social media usage was recoded into a three-category variable, representing three groups: 0 for those who never use social media; 1 for those who use it sometimes oroccasionally; and 2 for those who use it every day. A total of 48 per cent of respondents reported never using social media, while 20 per cent use it sometimes, and 30 per cent use it every day.

Control Variables

Our analysis accounted for the variables evidenced to strongly predict support for democracy, voting, and participation in demonstrations. Individual-level socio-demographic variables such as age, education, and gender have all been reported in previous research to significantly influence political attitudes and participation.[74,75] A person's religion is also believed to significantly influence political engagement such as voting.[76,77] Well-documented predictors of political attitudes and behaviours, such as employment status, civic engagements, such as participation in community groups and meetings, and interest in political issues, all

[74] Michael Bratton, Robert Mattes, and Emmanuel Gyimah-Boadi, *Public Opinion, Democracy, and Market Reform in Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[75] Magdelina Kitanova, "Youth Political Participation in the EU: Evidence from a Cross-national Analysis," *Journal of Youth Studies* 23, no. 7 (2020): 819-836.

[76] Lawrence Kotler-Berkowitz, "Religion and Voting Behaviour in Great Britain: A Reassessment," *British Journal of Political Science* 31, no. 3 (2001): 523.

[77] Sung Joon Jang et al., "Explaining the Relationship between Religiosity and Political Participation: The Mediating Roles of Transcendent Accountability and Religiopolitical Awareness," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 62, no. 3 (2023): 549-579.

of which are cardinal components of the Civic Voluntarism Model of political participation, were duly controlled for.[78,79,80] The study also accounted for a person's satisfaction with democracy, given the long-standing debate on the influence of the phenomenon on people's commitment or otherwise to democratic values and political participation.[81,82,83] Given that social media usage is a key explanatory variable and is inherently linked to internet access and infrastructure, we also controlled for internet use, as self-reported by respondents in the Afrobarometer survey. This ensured that our analysis properly accounted for the usage of internet services, which could influence the relationship between social media and political behaviour. Overall, our approach aimed to isolate the net effects of the key explanatory variables on the dependent variables while controlling for individual-level confounding factors. To enhance interpretability, all categorical variables were recoded appropriately. The Online Appendix provides a detailed breakdown of the recoding process for all variables included in the analysis.

At the country level, the analysis accounted for the quality of democracy using the V-Dem liberal democracy index as a proxy for the political context of countries.[84] We also accounted for economic development, measured by GDP per capita at purchasing power parity (log-transformed to reduce residual variance), and the employment rate for the youth, estimated as the percentage of labour force participation rate for ages 15-24,[85,86,87] given the relevance of the economic context to political participation. As an innovative addition, we also controlled for internet coverage at the country level, measured by the proportion of the population using the internet. This variable was considered theoretically relevant due to its connection to urbanization trends and, more importantly, its role in shaping social media usage among youth across Africa. By incorporating this measure, we aimed to capture the broader structural factors that influence digital access and engagement. Further details on the nature and distribution of all country-level variables are available in the Online Appendix[88].

Data Analysis

Given the hierarchical structure of the dataset, where individuals are nested within countries, the inclusion of country-level variables, and the binary nature of the dependent variables, the study employed a random-intercept multilevel binary logistic regression model with country-fixed effects and country-clustered stand-

[78] Brady, Verba, and Schlozman, "Beyond SES," 27.
[79] Sidney Verba, Key Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).
[80] Dalton, *The Good Citizen*, 1.
[81] Christopher Claassen and Pedro C. Magalhães, "Effective Government and Evaluations of Democracy," *Comparative Political Studies* 55, no. 5 (2022): 869.
[82] Renske Doorenspleet, "Critical Citizens, Democratic Support and Satisfaction in African Democracies," *International Political Science Review* 33, no. 3 (2012): 279.
[83] Pedro C. Magalhães, "Government Effectiveness and Support for Democracy: Government Effectiveness and Support for Democracy," *European Journal of Political Research* 53, no. 1 (2014): 77-97.
[84] Magdelina Kitanova, "Youth Political Participation in the EU: Evidence from a Cross-National Analysis," *Journal of Youth Studies*, July 3, 2019, 1-18.
[85] Russel J. Dalton and Alix van Sickle, "The Resource, Structural, and Cultural Bases of Protest," in *CDS Working Papers* 23 (Irvine: UC Irvine, Center for the Study of Democracy, 2005).
[86] Russel J. Dalton and Christian Welzel, eds., *The Civic Culture Transformed: From Allegiant to Assertive Citizens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
[87] Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *The American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (March 1959), 69-105.
[88] Godfred Bonnah Nkansah and Christine Hackenesch, Data and Code: African youth and the future of democracy - How youth bulge, urbanization, and social media shape youth political attitudes and participation (1.0.0, July 18, 2025) [Data set]. German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), Kiel Institute for the World Economy (IfW).

ard errors. Both likelihood ratio tests (LRTs) and intraclass correlation (ICC) tests confirmed that the multilevel approach provided a better fit for the data. However, the ICC values across models were relatively low – 4.7 per cent for support for democracy, 8 per cent for voting, and 3 per cent for participation in demonstrations. This indicates that, while the hierarchical structure accounts for some variation in the dependent variables, differences across countries are modest compared to variations within countries. In other words, individual-level attributes play a more substantial role in explaining these behaviours than country-level characteristics. Consequently, our interpretation of the results carefully considers the potentially limited influence of youth bulge and other country-level variables in the estimations.

For the interaction hypotheses, the analysis compared results from both standard interaction plots and non-linear marginal effects estimations using the kernel estimation technique.[89] This approach ensures more reliable predicted probability plots for significant interactions. We, however, used the standard predicted probability plots, as they provided more intelligible predicted plots than the kernel estimations. It seemed that the kernel estimation shows deficiencies when one of the explanatory variables is categorical with only one class, as in the case of this study. For example, the kernel estimation for the interaction of youth bulge and one category of social media usage – everyday use – produced a largely unintelligible plot. We therefore present the results of the standard interaction plots in this paper.

Our modelling followed a sequential approach, beginning with an Additive Model and progressively incorporating interaction terms to assess their effects on the three dependent variables. The sequence is as follows:

Model 1 (Additive model): The dependent variables were regressed on all independent variables to estimate their individual effects.

Model 2 (2-way interaction model): The model included interaction terms for youth bulge × urbanization, youth bulge × social media, and urbanization × social media to examine their combined effects.

Model 3 (3-way interaction model): The final model introduced a 3-way interaction term, assessing the joint effects of youth bulge, urbanization, and social media on the dependent variables.

This stepwise approach allowed for a systematic evaluation of how interactions between key predictors influenced political attitudes and participation.

[89] Jens Hainmueller, Jonathan Mummolo, and Yiqing Xu, "How Much Should We Trust Estimates from Multiplicative Interaction Models? Simple Tools to Improve Empirical Practice," *Political Analysis* 27, no. 2 (December 2019): 163-192.

Results

High Preference for Democracy, Moderate Participation in Institutionalized Politics, and Low Participation in Non-Institutionalized Politics

The descriptive statistics on respondents' political attitudes and behaviours indicate strong support for democracy among African youth and a declining participation in voting (Table 2). Support for democracy has been very high among African youth (82 % on average over the period), which is higher than the average for African citizens (about 70 %). Willingness to vote was very high in 2014/15 (71 %) but sharply dropped (50 %) by 2023. The mean youth voter participation of 60 per cent over the study period suggests that, despite the decline over the years, the majority of African youth are engaged in electoral participation, contrary to the conventional findings in the literature. Participation in demonstrations, however, remains constant around 11 per cent with a spike in 2022. We reflect on these findings in our discussions.

Table 2: Proportion of youth engagements across all three dependent variables

Proportion of respondents (% Yes)	*2016 Round 6*	*2019 Round 7*	*2022 Round 8*	*2023 Round 9*	*Mean (2016-2023)*
Support for democracy	84.41	82.63	81.97	80.70	82.46
Voting in elections	70.87	71.64	50.18	50.26	59.33
Attending protests	11.00	12.12	18.47	10.36	12.89

Additive Models: Direct Effect of Youth Bulge, Residence, and Social Media Usage on Political Attitudes

The three main explanatory variables demonstrated significant nuances in their direct effects on the three dependent variables (see Table 3).

Youth bulge had a small but significant positive effect on support for democracy ($\beta = 0.031$, $p < 0.05$), in line with our expectation. Yet, contrary to our expectation it also had a positive significant effect on voting ($\beta = 0.077$, $p < 0.001$), but it did not significantly influence young people's likelihood of attending demonstrations. We thus only find partial support for hypothesis 1.

Urban residency was clearly associated with a greater likelihood of urban youth participating in demonstrations ($\beta = 0.126$, $p < 0.001$), in line with our expectation. At the same time, urban residency was associated with a lower likelihood of young urban dwellers voting in elections ($\beta = -0.212$, $p < 0.001$). These effects were moderate in size. We did not find a significant difference between rural youth and young urbanites in terms of young people's support for democracy.

Social media usage is clearly associated with the political attitudes and behaviour of young Africans. The *occasional use of social media* has significant but moderate effects across all three dependent variables. Young Africans who use social media occasionally were less likely to support democracy ($\beta = -0.079$, $p < 0.05$) and less likely to vote in elections ($\beta = -0.209$, $p < 0.001$), yet more likely to join protests or demonstrations ($\beta = 0.241$, $p < 0.001$), compared to their counterparts who do not use social media.
Similarly, *using social media every day* was linked to a lower likelihood of voting ($\beta = -0.167$, $p < 0.001$) but a higher likelihood of protesting ($\beta = 0.219$, $p < 0.001$), compared to their peers who do not use social media.

In summary, living in an urban area and using social media increases the likelihood of young Africans engaging in protests and demonstrations, while simultaneously reducing their likelihood of voting in elections. Conversely, being part of a large youth cohort increases the likelihood of supporting democratic values and electoral participation. Periodic social media use appears to have a negative effect on young people's preference for democracy.

Additive Models: Direct Effects of Control Variables

Similar to the main explanatory variables, the control variables in the models exhibited nuanced effects on the dependent variables. Older youth were significantly more likely than younger cohorts to support democracy and vote in national elections. In contrast, younger individuals were more inclined to participate in protests or demonstrations compared to their older counterparts. Gender also played a role, with females being significantly less likely than males to vote or engage in protests. Education level had a notable impact, with secondary education being the most consistent predictor of support for democracy and political participation. Employment status showed no significant difference in predicting support for democracy or participation in demonstrations. However, employed youth were more likely to vote in elections than their unemployed counterparts. Additionally, discussing politics increased the likelihood of youth participating in both voting and protests, but did not significantly influence young people's pro-democracy attitudes.

Moreover, both daily and occasional use of the internet by young people did not significantly affect their support for democracy or their likelihood of joining a demonstration. However, young individuals who use the internet daily were significantly less likely to vote in elections compared to their peers who do not use the internet. Additionally, attending community meetings considerably increased the chances of a young person voting in elections and, even more notably, participating in protests. Nonetheless, this attendance did not significantly impact their support for democracy. Religion played a minimal role in shaping political attitudes and behaviours, with Islam being the only faith that significantly fostered positive attitudes towards democracy, while Christianity enhanced the likelihood of voting. Importantly, young people who were dissatisfied with democracy were more inclined to vote in elections, whereas those who were satisfied with democracy were more likely to both vote and show support for democracy.
At the country level, internet access and the quality of a country's democracy emerged as the most consistent predictors of support for democracy and political participation. Expanding internet access within a country fosters an environment that encourages youth participation in demonstrations. However, it simultaneously discourages positive attitudes toward democracy and reduces electoral participation among young people. The quality of a country's democracy was the strongest predictor of democratic attitudes and political engagement in terms of effect size. In more democratic countries, young people were more likely to support democracy and participate in protests but less likely to vote in elections. Additionally, higher youth employment rates or a growing youth presence in the national labour force increased the likelihood of vot-

ing while decreasing the likelihood of protest participation. Similarly, in more economically advanced African countries, young people were more inclined to vote in elections and less likely to engage in demonstrations. Table 3 provides the summary findings for our additive model, testing the direct effects of all independent variables on the dependent variables.

Table 3: Results of the multilevel logistic regression for additive model

Independent variables	*Support for democracy [likelihood to prefer democracy over non-democratic alternatives]*	*Vote in national elections [likelihood to vote in elections]*	*Attend demonstrations [likelihood to attend demonstrations]*
Main explanatory variables			
Youth bulge ratio	**0.031* (0.014)**	**0.077***(0.013)**	-0.003(0.014)
Rural-urban residence (urban)[1]	0.022 (0.027)	**-0.212***(0.022)**	**0.126***(0.028)**
Social media use[2]			
Sometimes	**-0.079* (0.040)**	**-0.209***(0.034)**	**0.241***(0.043)**
Everyday	0.005 (0.045)	**-0.167***(0.038)**	**0.219***(0.047)**
Individual-level control variables			
Age	0.013***(0.004)	0.158***(0.003)	-0.019***(0.004)
Gender (female)[3]	-0.011 (0.024)	-0.080***(0.020)	-0.240***(0.025)
Education[4]			
Primary	-0.015 (0.047)	-0.061(0.038)	0.046(0.052)
Secondary	0.126** (0.046)	-0.109**(0.037)	0.157**(0.050)
Post-secondary	0.146**(0.053)	-0.007 (0.044)	0.286***(0.056)
Employment (employed)[5]	-0.021 (0.028)	0.170***(0.023)	0.008(0.029)
Discuss politics (Yes)[6]	-0.008 (0.031)	0.245*** (0.026)	0.519*** (0.029)
Internet use[7]			
Sometimes	-0.072 (0.040)	-0.012 (0.033)	0.016 (0.042)
Everyday	-0.057 (0.048)	0.093* (0.040)	0.052 (0.050)
Attend community meetings (Yes)[8]	-0.016 (0.025)	0.595*** (0.020)	1.036*** (0.027)
Religion[9]			
Islam	0.165* (0.064)	0.044 (0.052)	-0.046 (0.065)
Christian	0.111 (0.060)	0.148** (0.049)	-0.094 (0.060)
Other	0.130 (0.076)	0.107 (0.063)	-0.106 (0.082)
Satisfaction with democracy[10]			

Not satisfied	0.127 (0.087)	0.294*** (0.073)	-0.027 (0.092)
Satisfied	0.419*** (0.088)	0.490*** (0.074)	-0.179 (0.093)
Country-level variables			
% of individuals using the internet	-0.007*** (0.002)	-0.025*** (0.001)	0.008*** (0.002)
Quality of democracy (V-Dem score)	0.955*** (0.225)	-0.613** (0.208)	0.737** (0.230)
% labour force participation rate for ages 15-24	-0.008 (0.006)	0.019** (0.007)	-0.030*** (0.007)
GDP per capita	-0.043 (0.119)	0.896*** (0.133)	-0.513*** (0.144)
Model characteristics			
Constant	-0.165 (1.415)	14.649*** (1.485)	-2.890 (1.580)
Country level σ^2	0.340*** (0.080)	0.838*** (0.204)	0.405*** (0.108)
No. of observations	52907	54820	63126
No. of countries	41	41	41
chi^2	308.636	5487.908	2573.863
Log-likelihood	-23487.743	-31666.568	-22473.438
Mean VIF	1.80	1.80	1.80

Note: Entries are the logistic regression coefficients and standard errors clustered at the country level (in parentheses) for multilevel binary logistic models. Models were estimated using individual-level data on young people's political attitudes and participation, drawn from Afrobarometer Rounds 6-9. Reference category: (1) = Rural; (2) =Never use social media; (3) =Male; (4) = No education; (5) = Unemployed; (6) = No, does not discuss politics; (7)=Never use internet; (8)=Does not attend community meetings; (9) =No religion; (10)=Country is not democratic $***p \leq 0.001$, $**p \leq 0.01$, $*p \leq 0.05$.

Interaction Effects of Youth Bulge, Urbanization, Social Media and Political Attitudes

Following our theoretical expectations in H4, we tested both 2-way and 3-way interaction effects among the three explanatory variables: youth bulge, social media use, and urbanization. These interaction models assessed whether their combination produces unique or amplified effects on the dependent variables. We hypothesized that the three megatrends jointly shape young people's political attitudes and behaviours. Specifically, we examined whether young urbanites experiencing a youth bulge and using social media differ significantly from their rural, offline peers. Table 4 presents the results.

For the 2-way interactions, we found a statistically significant effect for the relation between social media usage and youth bulge. Our analysis shows that young people who live in a country with a youth bulge and who use social media are less likely to vote in elections ($\beta = -0.015$, $p < 0.05$) and are more likely to participate in demonstrations ($\beta = 0.027$, $p < 0.05$). All the other 2-way interactions do not show statistically significant results. The interaction between youth bulge and urban residency is not statistically significant for any of the three dependent variables. In other words, the size of the youth population does not meaningfully change the political attitudes and behaviour of urban youth compared to rural youth. Similarly, the interaction between urban residency and social media usage as such does not significantly predict support for democracy, voting in elections, or participation in demonstrations, implying that young urbanites who use social media are not significantly different in their political attitudes and engagements from those rural youth who also use social media.

For the 3-way interaction, we also did not find statistically significant results for any of the three dependent variables. The combined influence of youth bulge, urbanization and social media use does not produce any additional predictive power in shaping the political attitudes and participation of young Africans. The lack of significant 3-way interaction effects implies, therefore, that for the relatively short time frame under investigation here – 2016 to 2021 – youth bulge, social media use, and urbanization operated mostly as independent factors rather than reinforcing one another in shaping youth political participation.

The figures below show the interaction plot for the combined effects of youth bulge and occasional use of social media on participation in demonstrations, and youth bulge and social media use always on voting. Figure 5 shows that, as youth bulge increases, the marginal effect of occasional use of social media on the likelihood of attending demonstrations becomes more positive. This suggests that, in countries with a higher proportion of young people, their occasional use of social media increases the probability that they will participate in demonstrations. By contrast, Figure 6 shows that, as youth bulge increases, the marginal effect of using social media every day on the likelihood of voting becomes more negative. Thus, in countries with large youth cohorts, daily use of social media negatively affects young people's propensity to participate in elections. In both cases, the nature of the predicted probability plots suggests that the effects of the interactions on the two dependent variables are consistent.

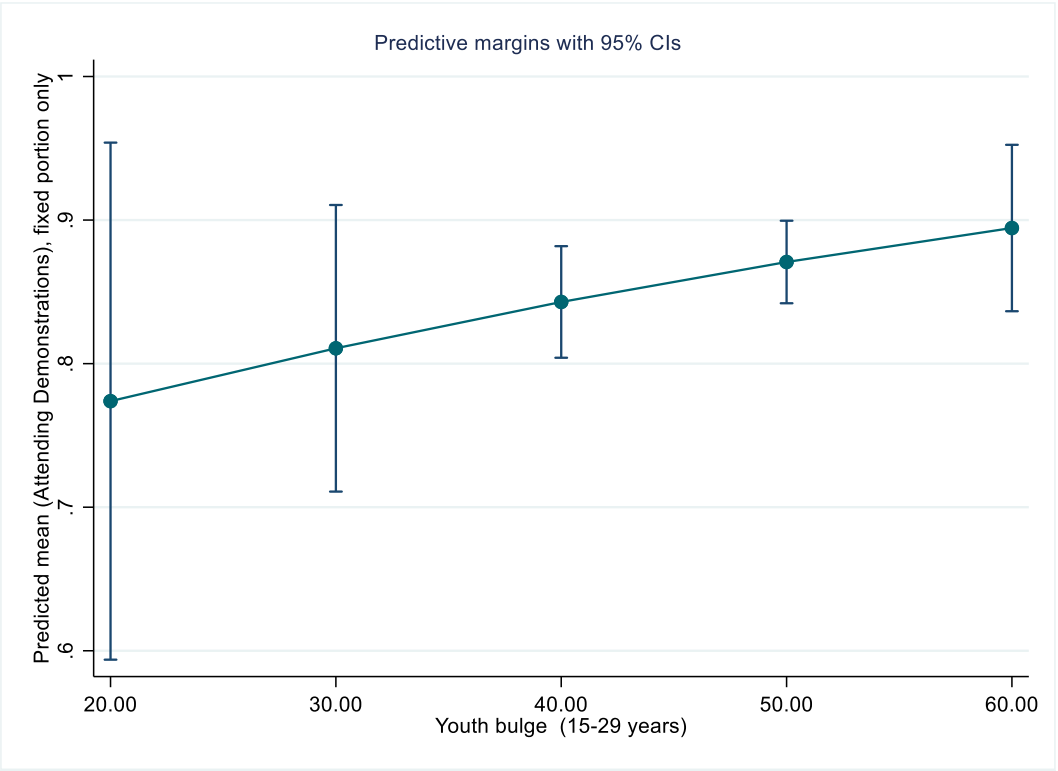

Figure 5: Predicted probability plot of the interaction between youth bulge and use of social media every day on the likelihood of young people participating in demonstrations.

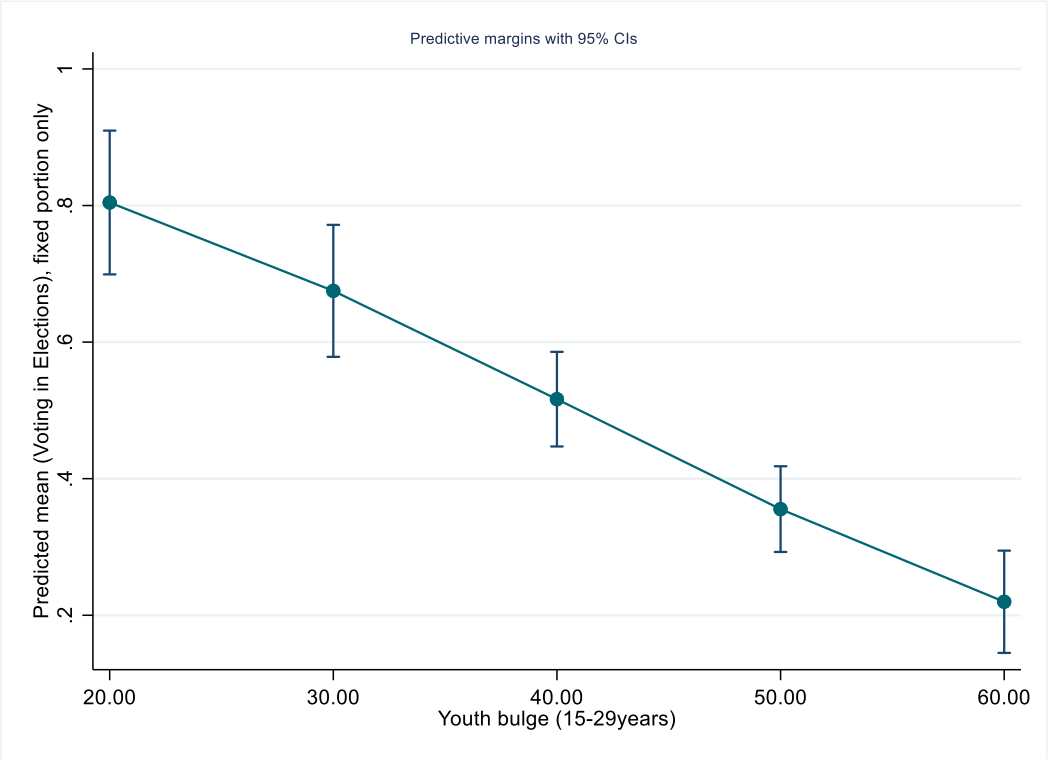

Figure 6: Predicted probability plot of the interaction between youth bulge and use of social media sometimes, on the likelihood of young people voting in elections.

Robustness Checks for Additive and Interaction Models

To assess the robustness of both the additive and interaction models, we re-estimated all models by incorporating country-fixed effects (CFE). This approach allowed us to control for unobserved, time-invariant, country-specific characteristics. Our focus was to determine whether the primary explanatory variables – youth bulge ratio, social media use, and urban residency – retain their effects under these stricter conditions. The results indicate that the direct effects of the three explanatory variables, as well as their interaction effects, remain robust across all models when controlling for CFE. These findings are presented in Tables 7–13 of the Appendix of the paper.

Additionally, we conducted robustness tests using parsimonious models to examine the sensitivity of the interaction results when fewer control variables are included (see Tables 8–19 of Appendix). Two sets of parsimonious models were tested:

First, we included only the three main explanatory variables and individual-level control variables in the interaction models across all three dependent variables. Results remained robust in all cases except for the model predicting participation in demonstrations. Here, the interaction between youth bulge ratio and daily social media use lost statistical significance. This stands in contrast to the full model, where the interaction remained significant – even when CFE was applied.

Second, we augmented the parsimonious interaction models by adding the two country-level variables that exhibited the strongest effects in the full model: V-DEM scores and internet coverage. Under this specification, all interaction effects – including the previously non-significant interaction between youth bulge ratio and daily social media use on demonstration attendance – regained their significance, consistent with the results from the full model.

Further analysis revealed that the omission of internet coverage in the first parsimonious model likely explains the lack of significance in the interaction term. When we included internet coverage as the sole country-level control variable, the interaction effect between daily social media use and youth bulge ratio regained its statistical significance and exhibited an effect size nearly identical to that of the full interaction model (see Table 19 of the Appendix). Given that internet coverage shapes the context for individual social media use, we consider these findings both plausible and substantively important.

Table 4: Interaction of youth bulge, social media use, and urbanization on political attitudes and participation

Independent variables	*Support for democracy [likelihood to prefer democracy over non-democratic alternatives]*	*Vote in national elections [likelihood to vote in elections]*	*Attend demonstrations [likelihood to attend demonstrations]*
Main explanatory variables			
Youth bulge ratio x urban	-0.005 (0.010)	0.009 (0.008)	0.009 (0.103)
Urban x social media use sometimes	0.579 (0.667)	0.155 (0.566)	0.742 (0.689)
Urban x social media use always	0.531 (0.560)	0.710 (0.464)	0.482 (0.562)
Youth bulge ratio x social media use sometimes	0.010 (0.010)	-0.009 (0.009)	**0.027* (0.011)**
Youth bulge ratio x social media use always	-0.001 (0.009)	**-0.015* (0.008)**	0.009 (0.009)
Youth bulge ratio x urban x social media use sometimes	-0.011 (0.014)	-0.003 (0.012)	-0.019 (0.015)
Youth bulge ratio x urban x social media use always	-0.012 (0.012)	-0.015 (0.010)	-0.014 (0.012)
All control variables included			

Discussion and Conclusions

Young Africans will play a key role in shaping politics across the continent in one way or another in the years to come. However, we still know very little about the factors that shape young African citizens' political attitudes and behaviours. Despite its political relevance, only few studies have analysed African youth's political attitudes and behaviour. Complementing earlier works that studied mostly individual-level factors, we have now explored how structural and individual-level factors individually and jointly affect young citizens' political expression.

First of all, the good news is that African youth is very supportive of democracy (83 % support rate). But many young citizens do not vote (only 59 % voted) and engage in political protest (13 %). If young people disengage from formal democratic institutions because they feel that these institutions do not deliver a socio-economic dividend or because they do not feel that their vote will contribute to political change, this raises serious concerns for the longer-term democratic stability and democratic legitimacy of political systems.

Our study demonstrates that youth bulge, urbanization, and social media individually all affect the political behaviour and attitudes of African youth, but not always in line with our expectations. Urbanization and social media have a similar effect on African youth political participation. Young African citizens living in urban areas and young citizens regularly relying on social media for political information are less likely to vote and instead more likely to engage in political protests to raise their political concerns. This observation supports the theory of a "protest generation" where African youth prefer to engage directly and vividly instead of relying on formal democratic institutions. Our study suggests that youth bulge has a different effect, which is also unexpected in light of previous studies on the youth bulge: it increases youth willingness to vote and has little effect on youth willingness to protest. We assume that the inclusion of new confounders such as internet coverage at the individual and national levels, and social media usage into our models may have affected the net effect of youth bulge on voting behaviour and the inclinations to protest. Earlier studies did not control for these confounders. Additionally, the relatively short timeframe of this study (2016-2023) compared with the much longer timeframes of earlier studies could also have accounted for the differential outcomes for the youth bulge.

Compared to how youth political behaviour is affected by the youth bulge, urbanization and social media, our findings are less clear on how these factors shape support for democracy. The youth bulge has an amplification effect, increasing African youth support for democracy, much in line with our expectation. Social media usage, on the contrary, reduces support for democracy, whereas urbanization has no significant effect. While our results for political participation are relatively straightforward, they are more nuanced with regard to the political attitudes of African youth.

Our findings provide very first evidence of the relationship between urbanization and youth political expression. Contrary to modernization theory, which would lead us to expect that urban youth might be more supportive of democracy and more willing to vote, our study suggests that urbanization processes in Africa might indeed affect political participation in more nuanced and very different ways compared to experiences from other world regions. In light of huge inequality within African cities and the diversity of urbanization processes across African countries, African urban youth are apparently frustrated with formal political institutions and choose to engage in political protests rather than vote.

In terms of policy implications, our analysis suggests that the attitudes and political participation of young Africans should be at the centre of African governments' and international actors' engagement strategies. Civic education targeting African youth will be crucial to emphasize the role of elections and other formal democratic institutions in democratic stability. Social media should be leveraged to promote civic education and counter disinformation and misinformation. While all youth should be addressed, specific emphasis will need to be given to urban youth who are particularly disengaged from formal democratic institutions and instead rely on protests as a key means of political expression. Perhaps most importantly, African democratic governments will need to improve the quality of democratic institutions to show that political change can be propelled through elections and to demonstrate that democracy delivers a socio-economic dividend specifically for young people.

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