

# What Uganda's elections mean for teens

For many young people, politics has acquired a negative image, often associated with conflict, corruption, or broken promises. While some teens were not eligible to cast a vote, the leaders chosen last week will shape the policies, systems, and national direction that young people will grow into.

BY PATRICK SSENTONGO

Last week, Uganda witnessed one of its most significant democratic moments as citizens across the country participated in the general parliamentary and presidential elections.

Polling stations filled with voters, and although social media was down due to an internet shutdown, political debates were very much alive in homes where people tuned in to radio and television for updates as results trickled in. For many adults, the election represented hope, anxiety, celebration, or disappointment. For thousands of you not eligible to vote, it may have felt like a distant national event, important, yet disconnected from your everyday lives.

But beneath the rallies, speeches, and ballot papers lies a deeper truth: no group will live longer with the outcomes of this election than you all today's teens. While most high school students were not eligible to cast a vote, the leaders chosen last week will shape the policies, systems, and national direction that young people will grow into.

## Watching democracy from the sidelines

For many of you, elections are something to observe rather than participate in. You watch your parents discuss politics at home, teachers caution against heated debates at school, and influencers argue online about national leadership. Some of you feel curious, others confused, and many simply feel that politics is an adult space—too complex, too tense, or too far removed from teenage life.

This distance is understandable, but it can also be misleading. Elections are not isolated political rituals. They are moments when national priorities are decided, resources allocated, and long-term plans set into motion. Even without voting, teenagers are affected by the results in ways that may not be immediately obvious.

When leadership changes or remains the same, it influences everything from education funding to youth employment strategies, from internet access to freedom of expression. In that sense, elections govern not just voters, but entire generations.

Beyond outcomes, elections are also powerful classrooms. They reveal how leadership is practiced, how power is pursued, and how citizens respond to authority. Teenagers watching this election cycle have been exposed to different leadership styles, political messages, and public reactions.

Some leaders spoke about unity, others about change, while some focused on stability, continuity and protecting the gains. The way candidates ad-



Youthful polling officials man Ntinda polling Primary School centre. PHOTO/STEVEN OTAGE

## What next?

**Uganda's future will be shaped by the generation currently watching from the sidelines. Whether they choose to engage thoughtfully or disengage entirely will influence the nation's direction for decades to come.**

**The recent election offered young people an opportunity—not to vote, but to observe, reflect, and begin forming their own vision of leadership and citizenship.**

ressed young people, acknowledged national challenges, or responded to criticism offered lessons both positive and negative about what leadership looks like in practice.

For students, these observations quietly shape values. They influence how young people think about honesty, accountability, service, and responsibility. Long before a teenager casts their first vote, they are already forming opinions about what kind of leader they would trust—or refuse to follow.

## Digital age, parliament and the classroom

To many students, parliament may seem far removed from school life. Yet the decisions made in parliamentary chambers directly affect what happens in classrooms across the country. Education budgets, curriculum reforms, teacher welfare, school infrastructure, and access to learning materials are all determined through political processes.

When Parliament debates national priorities, it is also debating the quality of education students receive. Whether schools are adequately funded, whether arts and sports are valued alongside sciences, and whether technology is integrated into learning are all political decisions.

This means that every election has long-term consequences for how young people learn, compete, and prepare for the future. Understanding this connection helps students see education not just as a personal journey, but as part of

a larger national system shaped by leadership.

One of the most striking aspects of this election was the role of digital platforms. Social media became a major space for political discussion, information sharing, and opinion formation. Teenagers, already fluent in digital spaces, were not excluded from these conversations.

However, the digital age presents both opportunity and risk. While young people can access information faster than ever before, they are also exposed to misinformation, propaganda, and emotionally charged content. The election highlighted the importance of critical thinking—being able to question sources, verify facts, and engage respectfully with differing opinions.

Even without voting, teenagers participate in national life through how they consume and share information. Responsible engagement strengthens democracy, while careless sharing can deepen division. The election served as a reminder that citizenship today begins long before the ballot box.

## Election shaping tomorrow's opportunities

For many young people, politics has acquired a negative image—associated with conflict, corruption, or broken promises. This perception is not without reason, but it is incomplete. Politics, at its core, is about governance and service. It is about organising society in ways that promote fairness, opportunity, and progress.

Teenagers should not be discouraged from engaging with national issues because of disillusionment. Instead, they should be encouraged to imagine better leadership. Every generation has the opportunity to redefine what public service looks like.

The leaders of tomorrow are currently sitting in classrooms, participating in debates, leading clubs, creating art, coding programs, and solving problems in small but meaningful ways. The values you develop now—integrity, empathy, responsibility—will determine how you lead in the future. After all, we are always told that we are the leaders of tomorrow, right?

The policies set by leaders elected last week will influence the economic and social environment that teenagers will enter as young adults. Job creation strategies will affect employment prospects. Investment in technology will determine access to digital opportunities. Cultural and creative policies will shape how young artists and innovators are supported or restricted.

For students with dreams in science, technology, arts, sports, business, or public service, leadership decisions matter. They affect whether talent is nurtured, whether innovation is encouraged, and whether young people are given space to thrive.

In this way, elections are not abstract political events. They are turning points that quietly shape personal futures. Voting is often seen as the ultimate act of citizenship, but it is only one part of a larger process. Citizenship begins with awareness, understanding, and responsibility. For you teenagers, this preparation starts now.

Learning how the government works, understanding rights and duties, practicing respectful dialogue, and rejecting misinformation are all part of becoming an engaged citizen. Schools, families, and media platforms play a role in creating spaces where young people can ask questions and form informed opinions without fear.

By the time you reach voting age, your attitudes toward leadership will already be shaped. The choices you make then will reflect the values you are developing now.

## Why teenagers matter in national conversations

It is easy to underestimate the role of teenagers in national life, but history shows that young people have often been at the heart of social change. Their ideas challenge the status quo, their energy drives innovation, and their courage pushes societies forward.

As the dust settles on the election and governance continues, the focus will return to daily life. Schools will resume routines, exams will approach, and teenage conversations will shift back to friendships, ambitions, and challenges.

Yet the impact of this election will remain. Laws will be passed, policies implemented, and national priorities pursued. You may not feel these effects immediately, but you will encounter them as they move through education, enter the workforce, and build your lives.

Paying attention now is an investment in the future. You may not have voted in this election, but you are not disconnected from it.



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