



PIVOTAL ELECTIONS IN AFRICA

The Specter of Politics as Usual in Kenya's 2022 Election

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Kenya's election season is now in its final stretch. On August 9, 2022, voters across the country and members of the diaspora will head to the polls for another general election. Nationally, two front-runners—Deputy President William Ruto and long-time opposition leader Raila Odinga—are facing off in a contentious race to succeed outgoing President Uhuru Kenyatta, who is completing his second and final term in office. This election cycle comes at a time of significant economic discontent, with many Kenyans concerned about rising costs of living, public debt, and pervasive corruption. Given that Kenyatta is not up for reelection and that the country's ruling coalition has splintered, Kenya will see a leadership change no matter what the outcome is.

Three important questions have dominated the country's election season. First, who will win the battle to succeed Kenyatta as president? This is a particularly pointed question since the incumbent has distanced himself from his current deputy (Ruto) and instead [endorsed](#) his long-standing rival, Odinga. Second, will the country's electoral institutions, particularly the

Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), have the capabilities and credibility to manage a potentially close election and prevent the [irregularities](#) that have tainted the previous two election cycles? Third, how will the country's current economic situation affect turnout and voting behavior?

This article takes these three questions as a starting point to illuminate several deep, recurring challenges facing Kenyan democracy. Over the past two decades, Kenya has teetered between democratic deepening and regression. On the one hand, the country has witnessed several transfers of power and significant institutional reforms, most importantly a new constitution that [devolved](#) power away from the central government to forty-seven [subnational governments](#) and created new mechanisms to promote women's political representation. Kenya has also largely avoided the trend of overt democratic backsliding that has characterized other parts of the continent and other countries around the world, where presidents have removed constitutional term limits or cracked down on opposition parties.



Instead, the judiciary in Kenya has repeatedly [asserted](#) its independence from the executive branch, most recently in rejecting Kenyatta's attempt to revise the country's 2010 constitution.

Yet the lead-up to Kenya's 2022 elections also highlights the limits of these positive trends. Weakly institutionalized and exclusionary elite coalitions, political interference in state institutions, and the failure of electoral politics to deliver better governance and political accountability paint a more sobering picture for Kenyan democracy. To prevent democratic stagnation and long-term disillusionment with electoral politics, especially among the country's youth, it will be crucial to focus on democratic performance and accountability beyond the August polls.

SHIFTING ELITE COALITIONS

First, the 2022 elections and the battle to succeed Kenyatta illustrate that Kenyan politics remains marked by unstable elite bargains that can reduce polarization in moments of crisis but also perpetuate inequality and weaken accountability for abuses of power.

In a stark reversal from the past two elections, long-time opposition leader Odinga is entering the electoral contest as the *de facto* establishment candidate, with the support of the outgoing president and many of the country's political heavyweights. In contrast, the deputy president Ruto—in power for the past ten years—has run a successful outsider campaign, presenting himself as the [only alternative](#) to the country's ruling "dynasties."

This unusual setup is the product of a significant political realignment. In 2013 and 2017, Kenyatta won the presidency by forging an alliance between his traditional base in Kenya's central region and Ruto's strongholds in the Rift Valley. Odinga, whose Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) led an opposition coalition of small parties based in Kenya's western and coastal regions,

contested the legitimacy of both elections, [alleging widespread irregularities](#). Following a court-ordered do-over of the disputed 2017 contest, Odinga called on his supporters to boycott the vote and refused to recognize Kenyatta's victory. The country found itself polarized along political, ethnic, and regional lines, triggering fears of violence reminiscent of the major electoral crisis that followed Kenya's 2007 elections.

In 2018, however, an informal "[handshake](#)" agreement between Kenyatta and Odinga put an end to the standoff, paving the way for the two rivals' political—and now electoral—cooperation. They jointly touted the Building Bridges Initiative, a series of proposed constitutional reforms framed as an attempt to prevent future electoral conflict. Critics, on the other hand, viewed the move as a transparent effort to expand the country's executive branch by creating new political positions. In May 2021, Kenya's High Court declared the initiative unconstitutional, a decision [upheld by the Supreme Court](#) in March 2022.

With Kenyatta formally backing his former opponent's presidential campaign and sidelining his own deputy, the ruling Jubilee Party has splintered. One faction is supporting Ruto, who is campaigning under the banner of a new political party, the United Democratic Alliance (UDA) and its broader Kenya Kwanza alliance; the other faction has aligned itself with Kenyatta and Odinga's Azimio La Umoja coalition.

This type of political realignment is a recurring feature of Kenyan politics (see table 1). Since the country's transition to multiparty democracy in the early 1990s, electoral competition has generally [revolved](#) around loose coalitions centered around individual political leaders, who [promise to deliver votes](#) from their respective ethno-regional strongholds in exchange for political positions and access to state resources. Given that no single ethnic group enjoys a nationwide electoral majority and that Kenyan political parties are organizationally weak, political leaders often

access power through personal bargains struck behind closed doors. These marriages of convenience tend to fragment once they have served their electoral purpose, as the recent breakup of the Jubilee Party demonstrates. At various moments of political crisis, this type of dealmaking has helped reduce polarization: the Jubilee-

led coalition that emerged in 2013, for instance, brought together the two rival communities at the center of the 2007–2008 electoral conflict, while the more recent understanding between Kenyatta and Odinga ended the rift created by the 2017 election.

Table 1. Kenya’s Shifting Political Coalitions

Election Cycle	Notable Political Coalitions	Description
1992	Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD)	An umbrella political outfit in which political pressure groups, civil society associations, and religious organizations coalesced to challenge the incumbent ruling party, the Kenya African National Union. The FORD coalition splintered into two factions before the election, namely FORD-Kenya and FORD-Asili.
2002	Kenya African National Union (KANU) and the National Development Party (NDP)	KANU had been the ruling party since Kenya gained independence. In the run-up to the 2002 elections, it briefly formed an alliance with the NDP, then led by Odinga, though this coalition splintered before votes were cast when it became clear that then president Daniel arap Moi planned to endorse a young Kenyatta, rather than Odinga, as his successor. Odinga and his supporters (including disgruntled KANU members) went on to join the Liberal Democratic Party and form the National Rainbow Coalition.
	National Rainbow Coalition (NARC)	NARC formed when the National Alliance Party of Kenya, a group of opposition parties led by Mwai Kibaki, allied itself with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) ahead of the 2002 elections. NARC won a landslide victory, with Kibaki as its presidential candidate.
2007	Party of National Unity	An alliance formed after the collapse of NARC, with Kibaki as its presidential candidate. It comprised several existing and new parties interested in Kibaki’s reelection as well as KANU (then the opposition party). Kibaki emerged victorious, though the elections were marked by widespread political violence.
	Orange Democratic Movement	Building on a movement that successfully opposed the 2005 constitutional referendum put forward by Kibaki’s government, ODM coalesced into a political party with Odinga as its presidential candidate. Other notable members at the time included Ruto, former deputy president Kalonzo Musyoka, and former deputy president Musalia Mudavadi (though Musyoka later split off to form his own ODM faction and run for the presidency on a separate ticket).



2013	Jubilee Alliance	The Jubilee Alliance was set up to support the Kenyatta-Ruto presidential ticket. Kenyatta and Ruto had left KANU and ODM, respectively, and registered new political parties—the National Alliance and the United Republican Party. These parties then joined forces to form the Jubilee Alliance, along with what was left of NARC.
	Coalition for Reforms and Democracy (CORD)	The coalition comprised Odinga’s ODM, Musyoka’s new Wiper Democratic Movement-Kenya, and former minister of foreign affairs Moses Wetangula’s FORD-Kenya, among others. It fronted an Odinga-Musyoka presidential ticket.
	Amani Coalition	This coalition supported Mudavadi’s presidential candidacy (after he defected from the Jubilee Alliance). It comprised Mudavadi’s United Democratic Forum—formed after he defected from ODM—as well as KANU and the New FORD-Kenya party, which had splintered from FORD-Kenya.
2017	Jubilee Party of Kenya	Following a merger of twelve parties (including Kenyatta’s and Ruto’s parties, which had previously joined the Jubilee Alliance), the unified Jubilee Party fronted the Kenyatta and Ruto reelection bid.
	National Super Alliance (NASA)	The NASA coalition once again brought together the political parties led by Odinga, Mudavadi, Musyoka, and Wetangula, among others, to oppose the Kenyatta-Ruto 2017 reelection bid. NASA presented an Odinga-Musyoka ticket, like CORD in the 2013 election cycle.
2022	Azimio la Umoja-One Kenya Alliance	Azimio la Umoja-One Kenya brings together ODM, the Jubilee Party, and one faction of the One Kenya Alliance (which comprises Wiper, the National Rainbow Coalition-Kenya, and KANU). It has Odinga as its presidential flag-bearer, with Martha Karua as his running mate.
	Kenya Kwanza Alliance	The alliance consists of Ruto’s newly formed party, the UDA, and early defectors from the One Kenya Alliance (namely Mudavadi’s Amani National Congress [ANC] and Wetangula’s FORD-Kenya), among other parties. Ruto is the presidential candidate, with Rigathi Gachagua as his running mate.
	One Kenya Alliance (OKA)	OKA consists of key political players who initially intended to offer an alternative to the Odinga-Ruto contest. In its early formation, OKA included Musyoka’s Wiper Party, Mudavadi’s ANC, Wetangula’s FORD-Kenya, Martha Karua’s NARC-Kenya, and KANU, among others. It has since splintered.

Source: Denis Kadima and Felix Owuor, “Kenya’s Decade of Experiments With Political Party Alliances and Coalitions,” Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa, 2014, <https://www.eisa.org/pdf/JAE13.1Kadima2.pdf>

Yet the upcoming elections also highlight the limits of this logic of politics. First, weakly institutionalized coalition politics weaken democratic participation and inclusion. For example, political elites have repeatedly relied on insider negotiations to choose candidates for important elected positions and used tactics such as [zoning](#) to avoid having candidates compete with others from within their coalition. Although such decisions may make electoral sense, late and opaque decisionmaking by parties and perceptions of favoritism have fueled discontent among party candidate hopefuls. More than 7,000 aspirants are now [running](#) for office as independents, highlighting widespread mistrust of party nomination processes. Women and other marginalized groups particularly struggle to make headway in weakly institutionalized and personality-centered coalitions, in which insider ties and financial power often matter more than policy ideas or track record of community leadership. Odinga's nomination of the prominent female politician Karua as his deputy presidential candidate, while significant, does not change this broader pattern of political exclusion.

Moreover, as other [analysts have noted](#), a recurring pattern of dealmaking between political insiders also serves to protect the economic and political power of a narrow elite class, while undermining more meaningful forms of political accountability. Politicians have incentives to mobilize voters to secure their place in elite bargains; yet once those bargains are struck, the needs of communities tend to fall by the wayside at the expense of elite interests. This pattern helps explain why inequality in the country has spiraled: according to Oxfam, “the number of super-rich in Kenya is one of the fastest growing in the world,” with “less than 0.1 [percent] of the population . . . own[ing] more wealth than the bottom 99.9 [percent].”

Against this backdrop, politicians' promises to tackle corruption ring somewhat hollow. For instance, despite Kenyatta's repeated anticorruption pledges, his own

family's [hidden fortune](#) has only grown during his two terms in office, sheltered from public scrutiny in offshore companies. Both of his potential successors are [billionaires](#) themselves, backed by networks of influential business elites. Given Odinga's political alliance with Kenyatta, it is unlikely that an Azimio La Umoja–led government would seriously investigate [allegations of graft](#) surrounding the Jubilee Party–led administration. Ruto, meanwhile, has anointed Gachagua (a member of parliament and Kenyatta's former personal assistant) as his deputy, despite the latter being implicated in an [ongoing corruption investigation](#). In sum, although devolution has opened new spaces for citizens to exercise political agency and vote out local leaders who fail to perform, deeper reforms—such as tackling pervasive graft, rising economic inequality, and entrenched regional inequities—remain difficult in a system in which the same group of senior (mostly male) politicians governs to protect their own interests.

RECURRING ELECTORAL CONCERNS

Widespread mistrust in Kenya's electoral institutions reinforces the uncertainty created by shifting elite alliances, as the problems that have plagued past elections have not been fully resolved. Yet weaknesses in electoral preparedness are not simply capacity problems. Instead, they are emblematic of a broader pattern of political meddling with state institutions designed to check the power of the executive branch.

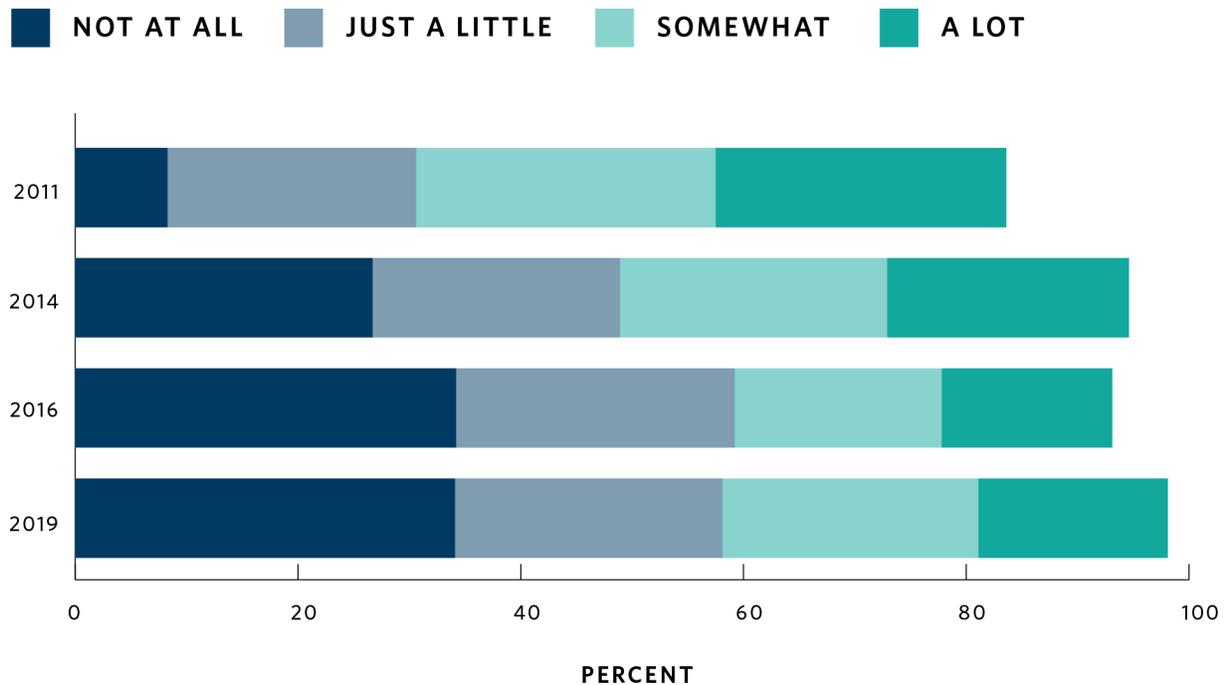
In the lead-up to the 2017 polls, the IEBC adopted a new electronic voting system—the Kenyan Integrated Election Management System—that was meant to facilitate biometric voter registration and identification, candidate registration, and the transmission of election results. Yet procurement issues, rushed preparations, and a lack of systematic testing of the voting system ultimately led to [widespread problems](#) in transmitting the results

on Election Day. In a surprising move, the Supreme Court decided to **nullify** that year's initial presidential election results and ordered that a do-over vote be held, arguing that the IEBC had "failed, neglected or refused to conduct the Presidential Election in a manner consistent with the dictates of the Constitution." The crisis severely undermined public confidence in the electoral process, particularly after Odinga and his supporters **boycotted** the do-over election. Electoral disputes also **lingered** at the subnational level, with some court cases **dragging on** beyond the election year. Not surprisingly, Afrobarometer data from 2019 therefore show a significant trust deficit in the IEBC, with more than half of Kenyan respondents **saying** that they trust the IEBC "just a little" or "not at all" (see figure 1).

Yet, despite these issues, many of the shortcomings identified in 2017 have yet to be addressed, a failure that raises red flags about political leaders' commitment to ensuring a smooth election process. For one thing, the government initially **dragged its feet** in fully funding the budget of 40.9 billion Kenyan shillings that the IEBC had requested; the commission in turn blamed funding shortfalls for delays in starting its national voter registration campaign. The National Assembly further **blocked** campaign finance regulations drafted by the IEBC, and the commission's rules against early campaigning were **widely ignored**. Most recently, **legal action** successfully hindered the IEBC's attempt to enforce a constitutionally mandated gender quota on parties' candidate lists. Delays in important IEBC

Figure 1. Kenyans' Trust in the National Electoral Commission

Survey Question: "How much do you trust [the Independent Electoral Commission or IEC], or haven't you heard enough about them to say?"



Source: Afrobarometer, "Trust National Electoral Commission," Afrobarometer, 2011-2019, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis/>.

appointments, last-minute attempts to amend electoral laws, and a lack of action to enforce integrity standards for candidates have further [alarmed](#) civil society groups that are monitoring the elections. Mere weeks before the elections, the plan for [securely transmitting](#) electoral results on Election Day remains unclear, as the [connectivity issues](#) that led to widespread disruptions in 2017 persist.

Low levels of trust in the IEBC do not necessarily mean that large portions of Kenyans will not show up to vote, particularly since voters will choose not only a new president but also their local representatives. Yet, as the example of the 2020 U.S. election [shows](#), mistrust in the electoral process can heighten polarization and discontent if the elections end up being close or contested. In the long run, such mistrust can also fuel cynicism about democratic institutions and apathy toward reform, which can enable further abuses of power by those seeking to advance their own agenda.

Moreover, recurring weaknesses in electoral preparedness—and last-minute changes to electoral rules—mirror a broader pattern of underinvestment and political interference in Kenya’s oversight bodies. Leaders who stand to benefit from the continued centralization of political power have repeatedly [tried to weaken](#) the institutional checks and balances put in place by the 2010 constitution—such as the [judiciary](#), the [parliament](#), and the [Office of the Auditor-General](#). Under Kenyatta’s leadership, for instance, the government has routinely [disregarded](#) court orders, delayed the appointment of new judges, and reduced the budget of the judiciary. For example, he refused to swear in forty-one [new judges](#) recommended by the Judicial Service Commission, despite two court orders asking him to do so.

Of course, one could argue that ongoing power struggles between the judiciary and the executive are a sign of democratic deepening, with the judiciary [pushing back](#) against executive overreach rather than simply being cowed by presidential interference. To strengthen

Kenya’s democracy beyond episodic elections, it will be crucial to further reinforce institutions that serve as bulwarks against executive dominance.

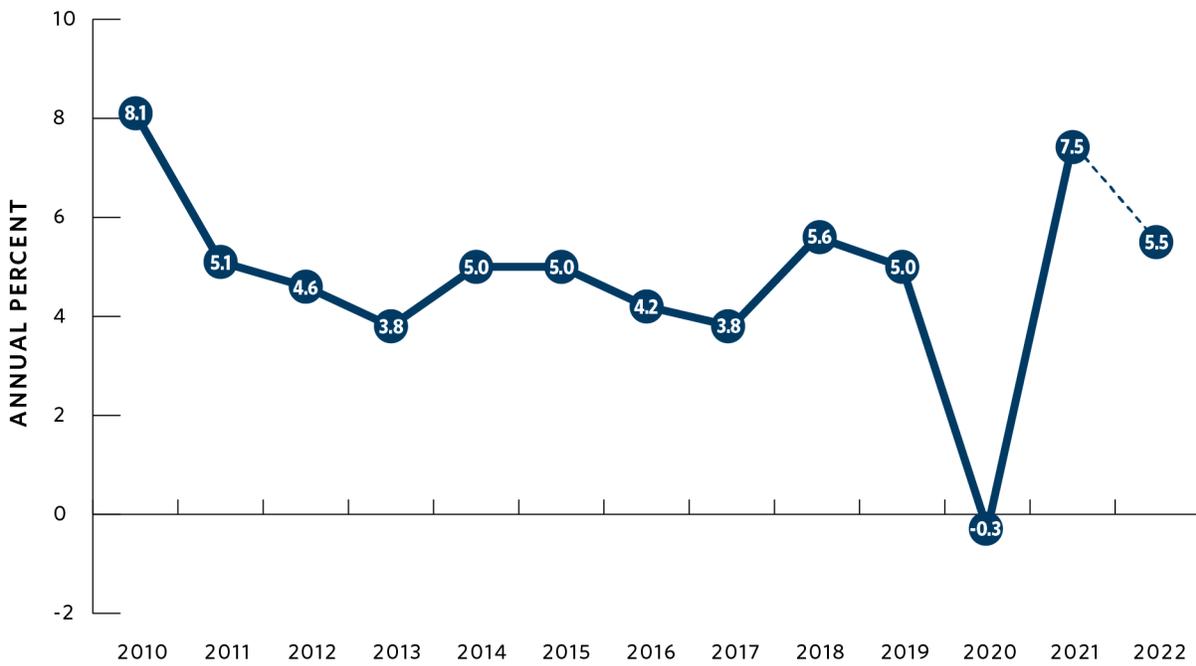
HEIGHTENED ECONOMIC DISCONTENT

Lastly, the August 2022 elections are taking place amid widespread economic discontent, with many Kenyans worried about food insecurity, unemployment, and the rising cost of living. Economic concerns have dominated the election agenda. At the same time, there are also signs of disillusionment among Kenyans who doubt that campaign promises will produce tangible change, with young people in particular disengaging from the electoral process.

On the surface, Kenya’s economic prospects may not look particularly alarming. Although many Kenyans lost their jobs during the coronavirus pandemic, the World Bank [expects](#) Kenya’s economic performance to recover to pre-pandemic levels in 2022 (see figure 2). Yet not all Kenyans have felt this recovery. Poverty remains above pre-pandemic levels, reinforced by severe drought in several regions of the country. Moreover, several worrisome economic trends predate the recent crisis. The large-scale infrastructure projects the government has pursued over the past ten years have not produced significant numbers of well-paying jobs, especially for Kenya’s young population. Census data [released](#) at the beginning of 2020 showed that 38.9 percent of young Kenyans were jobless, including many university graduates. At the same time, the country’s public debt has [increased dramatically](#) over the past decade, from around \$16 billion in 2013 to about \$71 billion in late 2021.

The [cost of living](#) for many Kenyans also continues to rise. Last year, the government [imposed](#) tax hikes on basic commodities such as cooking oil and gas as well as on mobile phone and data usage. Since then, the prices of various food items have continued to soar, a trend

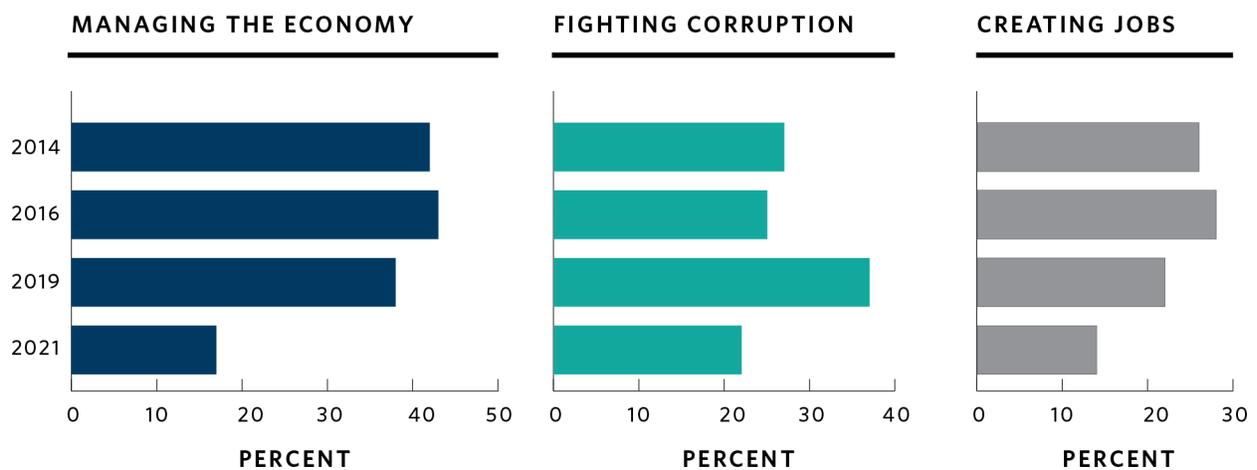
Figure 2. Kenya's GDP Growth



NOTE: The 2022 GDP figure is a projection.

SOURCE: Sources: World Bank, "GDP Growth (Annual %) - Kenya," World Bank, 2020, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=KE>.

Figure 3. Kenyans' Perceptions of the Government's Performance



NOTE: These percentages represent the respondents who positively rated the government's performance in these policy areas.

SOURCE: Afrobarometer, "Kenyans See Government Failing on Their Top Priorities - the Economy and Corruption, Afrobarometer Survey Shows," Afrobarometer, March 25, 2022, https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/news_release-kenyans_see_government_failing_on_the_economy_and_corruption-afrobarometer-25march22.pdf.

that is particularly [affecting](#) low-income households. The conflict in Ukraine has exacerbated the problem, as Kenya imports about [one-third](#) of its wheat from Russia and Ukraine. In addition, Kenyans are now also grappling with [record-high fuel prices](#) and intermittent fuel shortages. Recent [Afrobarometer polling data](#) reflect these trends (see figure 3). The economy is now the number one priority that citizens want their government to address; by contrast, back between 2014 and 2019, it was sixth on citizens' priority list. Notably, only a small minority of Kenyans say that the government is doing "fairly well" or "very well" at "job creation" (14 percent), "improving living standards of the poor" (16 percent), or "managing the economy" (17 percent).

As a result, economic concerns are shaping the election agenda more than in previous years, with each camp seeking to outline a plan for change. In some ways, the election is therefore testing the narrative that Kenyan elections are only shaped by ethnopolitical interests and affiliations. At the subnational level, past elections show that [citizen assessments](#) of [government performance](#) do play an important role in election outcomes; politicians who fail to deliver direct services to their constituents are often voted out. But even at the national level, it is likely that greater numbers of Kenyan voters, especially young ones, will consider their personal and the country's economic outlook to determine if and for whom they will vote.

For example, even though recent [polling data](#) shows Odinga building a narrow lead, Ruto appears to have benefited from widespread popular discontent. By casting the vote as a battle between "hustlers" and Kenya's political "dynasties" and contrasting his humble origins with Kenyatta's and Odinga's elite upbringings, Ruto's campaign has [gained traction](#) with many young voters, even though Ruto himself is hardly a political outsider. He has centered his campaign around a bottom-up economic model grounded in investments in small businesses, farmers, and informal workers. Odinga's alliance with Kenyatta, on the other hand, has (ironically)

made it more difficult for the former opposition leader to distance himself from the incumbent's track record. He [has countered](#) Ruto's messaging by promising to bolster Kenya's manufacturing sector, expand social protections (through monthly direct cash transfers to needy households), and launch new job creation programs, among other priorities. However, neither campaign so far has offered detailed proposals that could realistically be financed and implemented, particularly in light of Kenya's debt burden. Many of the policy areas highlighted in public statements, such as skills development or an end to corruption, have also been featured prominently in past campaigns, with little to no substantial follow-up.

This pattern speaks to a broader challenge, namely a persistent disconnect between electoral democracy and the lived reality of many citizens. Many young people in particular have [grown wary of unfulfilled campaign promises](#)—such as those Kenyatta and Ruto made in 2013 and 2017—even as corruption festers and the cost of living continues to increase. The argument that voting counts, one typically made by older generations to the young—is becoming less convincing to those who have voted but seen little change. A growing sense of disillusion with electoral politics may help explain why mass voter registration campaigns launched in October 2021 and again in January 2022 failed to meet their targets, with the IEBC registering only [12 percent](#) of the estimated 4.5 million potential young voters. Although these problems [were partly driven by poor planning](#), they also suggest a broader pattern of disengagement among the country's youth, who do not identify with any of the leading candidates or are unconvinced that the election will bring about meaningful change.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR KENYAN DEMOCRACY?

There are different ways of assessing Kenya's democratic trajectory. An optimist can point to a trend of gradual institutionalization, continued citizen demands for

accountability and better governance, and the judiciary's pushback against executive overreach. At the same time, the country is still grappling with real democratic challenges. Transactional elite bargains are weakening democratic participation in the political process, while electoral institutions are still struggling to assert their credibility and power vis-à-vis politicians and political parties, which may pose challenges in a close election. Electoral competition has not ensured meaningful accountability for abuses of power, an issue that risks feeding disillusionment with the democratic politics.

Most Kenyans are nevertheless desperate to ensure minimal disruptions to the electoral process, regardless of the outcome of the August 2022 vote. Many voters *feel wary* of renewed bouts of violence and instability that would further weaken the country's economy and are unlikely to result in political change. Instead, socioeconomic concerns and demands for solutions are likely to dominate the elections. As a result, there may be a widespread voting out of leaders whom citizens feel have not delivered on their promises, even as institutionalized means of holding elected leaders accountable have been weakened. Yet although economic issues have been more prominent during this campaign season than they have in the recent past, the very real and urgent problems beleaguering voters are hardly in focus, beyond campaign slogans and promises. This will present a major challenge for whichever candidate or coalition clinches power, as different socioeconomic crises compound in the country.

International actors invested in Kenya's political trajectory have tended to focus on the prevention of renewed electoral conflict, sometimes at the expense of other democratic challenges. The fact that the Supreme Court nullified the 2017 presidential elections, which had been *deemed* free and fair by international observers, undermined the international community's

credibility among Kenyan voters, who had experienced an election *fraught* with problems and irregularities. Kenya's current political environment highlights once again that elections alone are an important, but not a sufficient, indicator of democratic progress. Instead, no matter the outcome of the August election, it will be crucial to focus on bolstering democratic and institutional performance, political accountability, and citizen participation beyond Election Day. Subsequent events in Kenya may very well showcase just how important this insight is the world over.

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