

Data & Elections in Africa: Can EMBs up their game?



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Data is increasingly playing a vital role in elections globally, and Africa is no exception. This research highlights the opportunities and challenges presented by data to African elections.

1. Why data and African elections?

Because it underpins electoral integrity! And electoral efficiency. It's key for accurate voter registration, effective election management, communication strategies, and voter education.

- Reliable data in an election facilitates transparency, accountability and credibility.
- It informs decision-making by political contenders, civil society organizations, journalists, researchers and others. And of course, voters make choices that rest on data-based understandings.

Improved access by EMBs to external data - and better access by the public to EMB's own data - can make elections work better. Not least in the age of AI, data access is key in monitoring and countering threats of electoral disinformation and the associated disruptive forces.

2. Who generates – and who uses – relevant data?

- National statistics agencies, EMB records, political actors and voters.
- Market research and advertising services, social media and AI companies.
- Civil society, observers and researchers who do factchecking and study trends.

This range of interests shows why it's important to unlock electoral-relevant data as a public good, balanced with privacy and data protection concerns.

EMBs can take more advantage of their own data - and share it more. Plus, they can also advance opportunities for access to data held by others. And at the same time, help ensure that society also addresses the challenges of quality and misuse that can threaten democratic processes.

3. EMBs rely on data for many critical tasks

- **Voter registration:** Managing voter registration and ensuring accurate voter rolls.
- **Election logistics:** Planning and organizing polling stations, and managing distribution of, and feedback about, electoral materials.
- **Results management:** Collecting, transmitting, and publishing election results.
- **Monitoring and regulation:** Overseeing campaign financing, media coverage, social media postings, and actor compliance with electoral regulations.

4. Five challenges of data access in African elections

1. Limited stakeholder awareness and understanding
2. A culture of official secrecy and a lack of transparency
3. Opacity by the social media platforms, and high costs of using data brokers
4. Tech and capacity limits across EMBs, parties and civil society
5. Social inequalities in internet connectivity and in digital literacy

Research also shows:

- Many EMBs have limited internal data sharing and poor external collaboration.
- Data silos and a lack of standardized formats hinder possibilities to combine data from different sources.

5. Data and social media platforms during elections

- **Good and bad:** Social media platforms provide channels for political communication, campaigning and voter education. But they also present challenges.
- **Disruptors** today can use generative AI tools to cheaply produce convincing fake content on an unprecedented scale. This then gets into public circulation, especially via online platforms, and can corrupt electoral integrity.
- **Algorithmic bias and manipulation:** Concerns exist about how platform algorithms may amplify content that can potentially harm an election, instead of boosting authoritative and accurate messages emanating from a national EMB.
- **Lack of data transparency:** The platforms provide selected people in the EU and North America with opportunities to access electoral data. But this isn't generally the case for interested African researchers, journalists and other stakeholders.

Recommendations to EMBs:

1. **Promote** data awareness and literacy for election integrity to all stakeholders.
2. **Enhance** relevant transparency and data access in both public and private sectors.
3. **Build** technical interfaces for access to EMB data, and deliver training to enhance election stakeholders' abilities to collect, analyze, and utilize data effectively.
4. **Foster** collaboration and partnerships for data sharing and collaboration among EMBs, other regulators (eg. data protection, advertising), political parties, civil society, academic researchers, and tech actors.

“African states should ensure that data held by public institutions and bodies receiving public funds, as well as that held by private actors where there is an overriding public interest in access, should be made publicly available by default, in alignment with the principle of maximum disclosure, except where justified by regional and international human rights standards.”

African Commission on Human and Peoples: Rights, Resolution 620, 2024.