



The Unseen Electorate

How Social Media Algorithms
Affect Voting in Africa

POLICY BRIEF

Overview of the Policy Brief

- Social media algorithms increasingly determine which political messages African voters see online. Yet electoral laws and election monitoring frameworks across the continent rarely account for their influence.
- Political content receives 2–3 times more algorithmic visibility than non-political content.
- Negative political narratives travel further than neutral or constructive civic messaging.
- Substantive policy discussions on social media face visibility penalties of up to 66%.
- Political attention on social platforms is extremely concentrated, with a small number of accounts capturing most engagement.
- Electoral governance frameworks should recognise social media algorithms as electoral infrastructure and introduce transparency and oversight mechanisms during election periods.

Summary: African elections are entering an algorithmic era, but election oversight frameworks remain analogue. Social media algorithms are quietly becoming a powerful actor in African elections. By **determining which messages millions of voters see or do not see, these systems shape public perception, political mobilisation, and potentially electoral outcomes.** Yet African electoral laws and election monitoring frameworks remain largely blind to their influence.

Key Findings

- Social Media is now a core news source in Africa: One-third (33%) of Africans consume political news daily on social media, a figure rapidly approaching daily consumption on TV (39%) and radio (41%).
- Digital divide persists in political news consumption: Access to digital news is highly unequal. For instance, in 2023, over 70% of Africans consumed news on social media and other digital platforms in countries like South Africa and Morocco, while this figure remained below 20% in Ethiopia and Uganda. Algorithmic influence is therefore concentrated among urbanised, youth, and better-connected populations.
- Digital political attention is extremely concentrated across a few elite accounts: Africa's digital public square suffers from extreme concentration, effectively silencing most users. Political visibility inequality is severe, with a few elite accounts capturing most of the public's attention, leaving many civic voices largely invisible. This is primarily driven by a massive dynamic of "engagement multiplier" that prioritises virality over all other content traits.
- Negative and polarising political content receives greater visibility: While algorithms actively suppress high-quality, substantive political discourse. Informative posts suffer a significant "visibility drop" (up to 66.8% in Uganda). While political content gets a modest "visibility boost" for negative or neutral signalling (peaking at 16.88% in Nigeria), this reach is rarely extended to nuanced or constructive civic information.

- Social media algorithms amplify political content disproportionately: In effect, the algorithm functions as a partisan amplifier, rewarding viral friction and elite popularity while systematically suppressing the localised, deep-dive content essential for informed public decision-making in electoral processes.

Policy Priority for African Democracies

Algorithmic transparency rules and election platform reporting: Electoral Management Bodies should urgently recognise social media algorithms as electoral infrastructure and require all social media platforms to:

- Submit compulsory pre-election algorithmic risk disclosures as part of election preparedness, observation, and audits.
- Disclose content recommendation logic during election campaigns
- Disclose paid political amplification information to users
- Demonstrate capacity in moderating African languages and indigenous cultural nuances.

Civic data access for researchers and human rights defenders: African governments should mandate compulsory access to algorithmic data held by Digital Platforms. This will enable researchers, civil society actors and lobby groups to move beyond literacy-only responses toward structural accountability, addressing algorithmic incentives and paid influence markets.

Regional Regulatory Coordination: African States should collectively strengthen regional coordination through AU and REC-level frameworks to rebalance power asymmetries between individual African nations and global digital platform owners.

Address Private Chat Tools Lacuna: Digital Platform owners, especially META and Telegram, should address the private-platform blind spot across WhatsApp and Telegram apps through trusted civic reporting and non-intrusive oversight mechanisms.

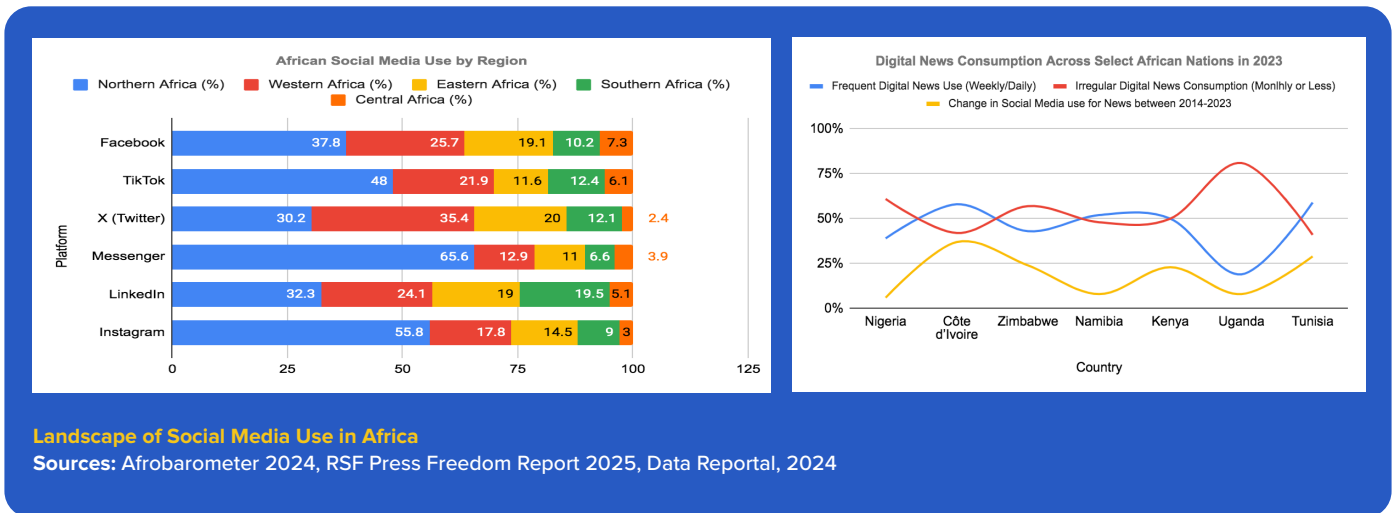
African-language moderation investment: African Governments should mandate digital platform owners to invest in African-centred moderation and language capacity, particularly during election periods.

Our study empirically locates the influence of social media algorithms on elections across ten African countries by integrating expert insights, secondary sources, and a 75-day experimental social media listening study.¹ The generalisability of these findings should be considered in light of two primary limitations: the experimental social media listening research was confined to four English-speaking countries, and some observations occurred outside active election cycles.

¹ Conducted exclusively in Kenya, Nigeria, Namibia and Uganda.

The Algorithmic Transformation of Political Communication in Africa

Africa's social media uptake is dynamic, with 384 million social media users, or 67.8% of all internet users on the continent in 2022.² Platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, X, TikTok, Instagram and YouTube now rival radio and television as channels for political information and mobilisation.³



However, unlike traditional media, political exposure on social media platforms is governed by opaque, engagement-optimised algorithmic systems, largely designed and controlled outside African contexts. This makes algorithms legitimate contenders for electoral decision-making in Africa.⁴ Therefore, as "unseen electorates," algorithms shape political perceptions and influence voter behaviour and voting patterns. Social media algorithmic curation, amplification, and suppression of content could determine certain electoral outcomes without the knowledge of real voters, raising a critical question about the perceived agency of voters.⁵

Social media is a primary gateway to political information for large segments of the African electorate, although socioeconomic inequities persist

The reliance on social media for news by 33% of Africans in 2023 is closer to traditional media news consumption than often imagined (39% TV, 41% radio). However, digital platform algorithms unevenly impact political exposure. For instance, in digitally advanced countries such as Mauritius, Gabon, Morocco, and South Africa, access was near or above 70% in 2022, while less connected countries such as Uganda and Ethiopia had less than 20% access. Similarly, social media platforms shape political discourse more prominently among urban, young, and connected populations. This suggests digital platforms have a targeted, rather than universal, influence on continental political and election dynamics.^{6 7}

² Statista. 2022. Social Media use in Africa. Available [here](#)
³ Amakah, K., Conroy-Krutz, J., Amewunou K. (2024). Africa's shifting media landscapes: Digital media use grows, but so do demographic divides. Afrobarometer Dispatch No.800. Available [here](#)
⁴ Bakshy, E., Messing, S., & Adamic, L. A. (2015), and Pariser, E. (2011).
⁵ Bakshy et al. (2015) and Aral (2020)
⁶ Ibid
⁷ Ibid

Evidence of Algorithmic Influence in African Elections

A 75-day social media listening experiment conducted across Kenya, Nigeria, Namibia, and Uganda provides empirical insight into how algorithms shape exposure to political information.

Political Content Receives Systematic Amplification

Across the four study countries, political posts achieved 2.5 to 3.6 times the visibility of non-political posts, with Namibia showing the sharpest distortion: political posts reached 4.03% visibility efficiency compared to just 1.6% for non-political content, about 2.5 times more visibility, despite far lower overall volume.

Similarly, analysis of content feeds on the “For You” tab⁸ on X shows that even accounts explicitly created for non-political purposes seem to be routinely exposed to substantial political content. In Namibia and Kenya, such accounts received political content density of 47.6% and 46.1%, just slightly below 55.7% and 46.6% concentration levels of political-leaning accounts, demonstrating that algorithms typically inject political content on feeds in spite of users' preferences.⁹



X algorithms consistently push political content to all X users in African nations, irrespective of their stated interests upon sign-up. Crucially, this means that every social media user in Africa is heavily exposed to political content online, whether it is their preference or not.

Negative Political Narratives Travel Much Further and Faster

Political content with high negative sentiments outperforms neutral or positive posts. For instance, in Kenya, negative political posts generated an average of 70,000 impressions, surpassing the 56,000 for all non-political content, despite political content being half the volume of non-political content. In Namibia, negative political discourse generated 263,000 impressions, the steepest share in the study countries. As such, across all four countries, the presence of political content in user feeds tripled when sentiment shifted from positive to negative, confirming that algorithms reward polarisation, alarm, and emotional friction.

Substantive Civic Information receives less visibility

Political posts containing detailed policy discussion or substantive civic information experienced a substantial decline in reach. This “depth penalty” ranges from 46.8% in Kenya, 53.6% in Namibia,

⁸ “For You” tab is the exclusive a user’s tab on X and Tik Tok account where content is largely directed by algorithms and consumed
⁹ CcHUB Social Media Experimental Study, conducted over 75 days across Kenya, Nigeria, Namibia and Uganda.

55.4% in Nigeria, and 66.8% in Uganda. These dynamics create structural incentives for simplistic or shallow conversations and for polarising messaging on social media, while discouraging policy-focused engagement.

“ Social media algorithms function as systemic political amplifiers, crowding out general-interest and objective political discourse and civic information.

Digital visibility is extremely concentrated

The distribution of political visibility on social platforms is extremely unequal. Across the four countries analysed, political engagement shows Gini coefficients averaging approximately 0.78, indicating severe concentration of attention. This means that in practical terms, a tiny fraction of X accounts capture at least 78% of engagement and impressions on X, producing a winner-takes-all attention political economy that sidelines local, community-based, and non-elite political voices.¹⁰

Social Media Algorithmic Visibility Dynamics of Political Content in Selected African Countries

Indicator	Implication	Kenya	Namibia	Nigeria	Uganda
Digital Attention Inequality (Gini Index)	The degree to which political visibility is concentrated among a small number of posts. Higher values indicate extreme concentration of attention.	0.772	0.786	0.788	0.786
Political Engagement Advantage (Engagement Multiplier)	Relative engagement generated by political content compared with non-political content. Values above 1 indicate algorithmic amplification of political posts.	2.25x	1.98x	2.16x	2.56x
Algorithmic Penalty for in-depth Political Discussion (Depth Tax)	Decline in digital reach when posts contain substantive or policy-focused discussion. Higher values indicate stronger suppression of complex political discourse.	-46.80%	-53.60%	-55.40%	-66.80%
Visibility Advantage of Negative Political Narratives	Negative political content receives greater additional visibility than positive political messaging.	6.86%	4.94%	16.88%	13.29%

Sources: Social Media Listening Experimental Study in Kenya, Nigeria, Namibia and Uganda, 2025-2026

¹⁰ CcHUB Social Media Experimental Study, conducted over 75 days across Kenya, Nigeria, Namibia and Uganda

HOW ALGORITHMS SHAPE ELECTIONS



Why This Matters for Electoral Integrity in Africa

- African electoral systems are highly vulnerable to algorithmic risk, as social media functions as an unmonitored electoral infrastructure.
- Digital platform owners underinvest in Africa-focused content moderation, making social media political mobilisation largely invisible to oversight.
- State responses, such as internet or social media shutdowns, fail to address the core problem of algorithmic harm.
- Engagement-optimised systems disadvantage candidates (especially women) by lacking the resources for sustained digital amplification.
- Global evidence (such as the TikTok bias in Romania 2024)¹¹ confirms the dangers of disproportionate recommendations. Where TikTok recommended one of the candidates' content 4.6 to 14 times more frequently for voters, resulting in an unexpected first-round electoral outcome.
- Africa's younger, inexperienced electorates, the majority of whom are first-time voters, and weaker institutions face an even greater risk of destabilisation from these dynamics.

In conclusion, this study repositions African voters not as passive users of global digital technologies but as rights-bearing participants in democratic systems increasingly shaped by algorithmic power. Making the unseen electorate visible is no longer optional; it is central to protecting electoral integrity in Africa's rapidly digitising democracies.

For more information, read the full report [HERE](#)

¹¹ Adina, J. 2025. The Impact of Social Media on Political Discourse and Democracy: The Case of Romania. Available [here](#)

Notes

- 1 Statista. 2022. Social Media use in Africa. Available [here](#)
- 2 Amakah, K., Conroy-Krutz, J., Amewunou K. (2024). Africa's shifting media landscapes: Digital media use grows, but so do demographic divides. Afrobarometer Dispatch No.800. Available [here](#)
- 3 Bakshy, E., Messing, S., & Adamic, L. A. (2015), and Pariser, E. (2011).
- 4 Amakah, K., Conroy-Krutz, J., Amewunou K. (2024). Africa's shifting media landscapes: Digital media use grows, but so do demographic divides. Afrobarometer Dispatch No.800. Available [here](#)
- 5 CcHUB Social Media Experimental Study was conducted over 75 days across Kenya, Nigeria, Namibia and Uganda.
- 6 The “For You” tab is the exclusive user’s tab on the X and TikTok accounts, where content is largely directed by algorithms and consumed.
- 7 Adina, J. 2025. The Impact of Social Media on Political Discourse and Democracy: The Case of Romania. Available [here](#)