

How youth expectations of local leadership mirror expectations of brands

By [Jenni Pennacchini](#), issued by [KLA](#)

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As the African National Congress (ANC) celebrates its 2019 election victory, South Africans will now be turning their collective attention to President Cyril Ramaphosa to see if he can deliver on his party's promises. Yet we surely cannot afford to ignore one of the most startling statistics to emerge from these elections: only 61% of SA's youth registered to vote in 2019 - which means that 6 million youngsters did not vote in the recent May elections. According to the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC), these figures mark the lowest youth representation seen in an election since 1999.



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Why should we be concerned?

Well, in simple terms, today's youth are tomorrow's political, economic and social leaders. The youth represent 36% of our population, and the country's fate will soon be in their hands.

Disillusioned and disengaged

While statistics can only paint a portion of the full picture, our youth have clearly disengaged from the country's complex political discourse. South Africa's young people are apathetic when it comes to their leaders, and often express deep-seated disillusionment with local politics.

"I don't think voting for any party is going to make any difference because you see how long the ANC has been in power and we don't see any difference. People are still waiting for houses and education. They are supposed to build schools and houses but they don't deliver on their promises." (Jennifer Kameel, 21, Eldorado Park – quoted in an article Eldorado Park youth to vote for jobs in the Sunday Independent, 5 May 2019).

This widespread apathy and feeling of helplessness amongst the youth comes at a time when local political leadership is under more scrutiny than it has been for a long time.

And like the rest of South Africa, young people express limited buy-in to the current leadership of the country: the *Ipsos Pulse of the People 2018* survey revealed that less than ½ of 18-24 year olds believe that the country is going in the right direction.

Where is authenticity and social conscience?

For those in the marketing and branding fields, it is fascinating to see that young people's expectations of leaders tend to mirror their expectations of brands - with a fierce demand for authenticity and social conscience.

This was underscored in a study conducted by KLA and More Beyond in 2017, which examined young South Africans' attitudes towards leadership. Around 60% claimed that you become a leader/role model when you are a 'good person', while leadership is predominantly about having responsibilities (80%) as opposed to having rights. Notably, two thirds of the respondents surveyed felt that there is a critical shortage of good leaders; and when asked to provide a description of leadership in the past, present and future, there is little to no hope of change. Also, current and historic leadership is mostly described as being 'controlling, bureaucratic, corrupt and using power to benefit themselves' - with future leadership being described as 'uncertain, a disaster, and getting worse.'

Voter apathy vs. political apathy

In the South African context, it is both interesting and important to consider that as a generation, Millennials are generally described as being more self-assured, ambitious, demanding and achievement-orientated than previous generations. To explore even further, the younger segment of this cohort is described as being "*bolder, louder, more expressive and more demanding*" than older Millennials (Nandi Zambodla, FCB Strategist commenting on their Millennial research, Bizcommuniy, 12 January 2018).

With this commentary in mind, their less active engagement in the voting process feels counter-intuitive. In fact, almost 80% of the youth surveyed in the KLA/More Beyond study already see themselves as leaders - and claim that 'you become a leader when you choose to be one.'

Moreover, many of them view themselves as key role models as opposed to looking up to those in positions of leadership or power. This would suggest that young people would be more actively working to shape the political future of their country. Perhaps it is therefore worth considering the following perspective, as expressed by Mpumelelo Mkhabela, an independent political analyst, in the BusinessTech.co.za "Young South African's just aren't interested in voting" article 30 April 2019:

"...voter apathy and not political apathy – in universities you see robust and noisy politics which is usually powerful enough to effect change."

Naturally, this leads to the question of why the youth's active engagement is displayed at universities, but not in the broader political discourse? Our young people clearly view themselves as leaders, and want to take an active role in shaping their own futures.

Arguably, the answer lies in the extent to which the youth are enabled to participate in forums whereby their voices can be heard – and therefore have the potential to make a meaningful difference.

As Tshidi Madia accurately notes in a News 24 article (21 Jan 2019): "*In the ANC, it has often been said that, due to its leaders only getting an opportunity to govern late in life, they should be allowed to continue because they earned it. But the party's insistence on deploying cadres to senior government positions has stymied its ability to organically grow and promote young leaders through the ranks.*"

Indeed, this is an interesting and worthwhile consideration. In many ways, it reflects a similar and deeply concerning dynamic that is emerging in today's workplace – where the youth are struggling to integrate and make their mark.

Modern misfits?

This dynamic was reflected in the KLA/More Beyond survey whereby many of the 'negative' narratives pertained to challenges with leadership in organisations. Given that the Millennial outlook and worldview is fundamentally different to previous generations, these challenges should come as no surprise. Millennials are ambitious, achievement-orientated and have high expectations of employees. Importantly, they are also agitators for change and are unafraid to question authority. A common Millennial complaint is that once they enter the workforce, they are not taken seriously - and their views and ideas are dismissed. Within this context, Millennials quickly become disenchanted, and often leave.

Without doubt, the challenges that young people face in the workplace – and in broader society - cannot be viewed as separate from the widespread political apathy we are now seeing. The critical question then becomes: how can we enable the youth to take start taking on the mantle of leadership?

Today, leaders across economic, social and political spheres have to think more deeply about the youth – and how we can better understand their unique perspective. Unless their passion, ambition, energy and talent can be harnessed for positive change, we risk steady decline on all fronts. For more information, visit www.kla.co.za

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