

# How increasing civic participation reshaped the democratic space during Congo's 2018 elections

*The long-delayed elections in Congo at the end of 2018 brought to an end the presidency of Joseph Kabila after 18 years, though there was evidence of widespread electoral irregularities and fraud. However, **Koen Vlassenroot, Godefroid Muzalia, Emery Mudinga and Aymar Nyenyezi Bisoka** found that there were positive signs of growing civic engagement and democratic participation during these elections, despite ongoing problems with the militarisation of Congolese politics.*



Presidential and legislative elections in DRC, Walikale 28 November 2011. © [MONUSCO/Sylvain Liechti](#) (CC BY-SA 2.0) licence

*Tumukule, tumukwepe* is an old saying in Bukavu meaning 'Let's take what he gives us, but do not let us get carried away by him'. This expression was given a new meaning during Congo's latest presidential and parliamentary elections, held at the end of 2018. Congolese citizens massively attended rallies of electoral candidates, and accepted the money and gifts being distributed as bribes to vote for them. Yet, in the end, the Congolese made their own choices based on personal interests and individual preferences.

**Research** conducted in the province of South Kivu confirms this remarkable shift in voting behaviour during the 2018 elections. Our analysis shows that these elections were a key moment in the structuring of the local democratic space. It suggests that critical citizenship is gradually replacing ethnic affiliation or patronage as guiding principles and logics of electoral dynamics. Voters have increasingly claimed the right to express their individual rather than collective preferences when voting for a new president, or members of national and provincial parliaments. It could be argued that Congo's elections have therefore contributed to a furthering of political emancipation.

For many observers, the presidential elections illustrate that 'a president can be chased, but his successor cannot be chosen'. This narrative refers to the claim that Congolese citizens rejected candidate Emmanuel Ramazani Shadary, former President Kabila's *dauphin*, but that simultaneously, the assumed winner of the elections, Martin Fayulu, was not appointed as the new President (a third candidate, Felix Tshisekedi, was declared winner, amid widespread reports of [election fraud](#)). Strikingly, it did not provoke massive protests, which suggests that the non-election of Kabila's candidate was considered a major achievement in itself. It also highlights that the elections were an opportunity to mobilise '*citoyenneté*', the Congolese translation of [civicness](#), which manifested itself in the right to vote, and acted as a strategy of resistance.

A closer look at electoral dynamics in South Kivu indeed reveals that, despite the claims of manipulation, bribery and fraud, the elections resulted in a broadening of the democratic space. This is particularly the case in urban areas, where voters demonstrated a remarkable resilience to the manipulation techniques and mobilisation campaigns of candidates. These techniques included the distribution of money and other goods, demagogic speech and the manipulation of ethnic identity. Our research findings confirm that in South Kivu these strategies had limited impact on the political behaviour of Congolese citizens.

The same trends were observed in rural areas where in previous elections voting generally tended to be guided by collective interests and instructions from customary chiefs. The latest elections reveal a different picture. Customary chiefs again actively promoted and incentivised the election of specific parliamentary candidates but in many cases failed to influence the popular vote. This can partly be explained by the weakening authority of customary authorities, yet also points to the declining importance of ethnic affiliation as a determining factor of voters' preferences. In addition to customary authorities, other social actors and structures including civil society leaders, ethnic associations and church leaders attempted to influence voter behaviour. In many cases, these structures and leaderships themselves were not able to agree on a common candidate, which confirms the growing importance of political association beyond ethnicity. Numerous harmonisation meetings within ethnic associations have taken place to convince candidates to abandon the race to the benefit of preferred ones. The pressure to reelect those in power was faced with popular rejection and the election results confirm that only a small minority of members of parliament succeeded in extending their political careers.

It would be misleading, however, to solely focus on the positive effects of Congo's elections. The flaws of the electoral process have been analysed at length [elsewhere](#). From a local perspective, the electoral process contributed to popular division and conflict dynamics, and the manipulation by existing power networks as a means to strengthen their position, or target opponents in existing local conflicts. As a result, standing cleavages dividing populations have deepened further. Also, in some cases, armed actors have tried to play a decisive role in the local electoral processes and have mobilised a strategy of threat to influence voters' behaviour. Although it was not a new (it also happened during the 2006 and 2011 elections), nor generalised trend, cases were reported of alliances with local strongmen, particularly in areas characterised by divisions and conflicts around customary power. This active involvement of armed groups in the electoral process contributed to a further [militarisation of local politics](#).

This all said, the results of our research in South Kivu force us to move beyond the classic debates on the democratic nature and outcomes of Congo's elections. Despite the fairly limited popular protest against the proclaimed results of the presidential election, Congo's elections reveal a gradual widening of the democratic space. Congolese citizens' claim of their right to vote finds expression in an individualisation of political behaviour. Most international attention has focused on the regime's strategies to keep power and on the assumed manipulation of election results but tend to ignore the fact that for most Congolese, these elections symbolise a partial victory and an opening towards a real political transition. The electoral experience has had profound effects on the political positioning of the local population. *Citoyenneté* includes the right to vote. Despite the undesired election results for many, the election's ability to mobilise may eventually contribute to a widening of the democratic space and political emancipation.

*This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of Democratic Audit. It was first published on the [Conflict Research Programme \(CRP\) blog](#). CRP is an international research programme led by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). It aims to understand the drivers of violence in the Middle East and Africa, and what kinds of interventions work to reduce armed conflict and its impacts.*

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