

The cost of parliamentary politics in Senegal

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Introduction

For the legislative elections held on 31 July 2022, 1,727 people - 866 women and 901 men - were nominated on the party lists¹. Eight lists of candidates were in competition, compared with 47 for the 2017 elections. This drop in the number of lists was undoubtedly linked to the new sponsorship system, which required each list to obtain the signatures of a minimum of 0.5% and a maximum of 0.8% of voters. A proportion of these voters must come from seven different regions, with at least 1,000 people per region².

The introduction of a sponsorship system in 2018 adds to the already high costs of taking part in Senegal's legislative elections, because well before the official start of the electoral campaign, parties and party coalitions are obliged to deploy significant resources to collect the signatures needed to validate their list through the deployment of teams to collect signatures. The 21 days of election campaigning that follow are a period when colossal sums are spent by the parties and coalitions in their strategies to convince voters. Once installed in the National Assembly, MPs also face new financial demands linked to their status as elected representatives.

While a large proportion of the expenses, in particular the payment of the deposit and the financing of the election campaign, are borne by the party or coalition, a number of financial burdens also fall on the candidate. Candidates often pay out large sums to supplement an insufficient budget provided by the party or coalition, to maintain a political clientele or to meet certain social expectations. The aim of this study is to analyse and understand the factors that drive the cost of participation in the electoral competition for the legislative elections in Senegal.

Methodology

This qualitative study relies on data collection based mainly on face-to-face and online interviews as well as a literature review. 20 interviews (10 men and 10 women) were conducted between November 2023 and June 2024. These interviews were conducted with different profiles in order to benefit from a broader approach to the subject of the study; these included former MPs, MPs in office, academics specialising in political science, experts in the electoral field, Senegalese civil society actors, young activists, young members of political parties and young women members of women's movements.

Building on a previous study published in 2017³, this study looks specifically at women and young people in Senegalese politics, with the aim of understanding the extent to which money is a barrier to their participation in parliamentary politics. The study is structured around the following questions:

- What are the formal/informal costs involved in being selected to appear on your party's list of candidates?
- What are the expenditure items for a legislative election campaign?
- What factors influence the cost of a general election campaign?
- What is the party's financial contribution to a legislative candidate's election campaign?
- How do candidates raise the money to finance their campaigns?
- What kind of expenses and demands do MPs face once they are elected?
- How does gender and age affect campaign financing for women and young people?

One major difficulty encountered by the research team was the period chosen to conduct the study. It coincided with the budget session at the National Assembly, meaning that MPs targeted for interviews were not available. In addition, after the adoption of the Finance Act, the political players were mobilised by the collection of sponsorships and then by the campaign for the presidential election of 24 March 2024.

Historical background

From the early years of its independence until 1973, Senegalese almost always lived under a single-party system headed by the *Union progressiste sénégalaise* (UPS), created by Senegal's first president Léopold Sédar Senghor and Lamine Gueye. The single-party system⁴ was supposed to guarantee the stability of a country that had just achieved independence. National unity and the defence of territorial integrity were among the arguments put forward to explain the one-party system, although there were parties operating underground. Parties such as the *Bloc des Masses Sénégalaises* (BMS) and the *Parti du Regroupement Africain* (PRA) joined UPS, while others such as the Marxist-Leninist *Parti Africain de l'Indépendance* (PAI) and the *Front National Sénégalais* (FNS) were dissolved or banned.

In 1974, Senegal entered a new era of democratic openness with the creation of the *Parti démocratique sénégalais* (PDS) by lawyer Abdoulaye Wade. In 1976⁵, the maximum number of political parties allowed was three and they had to represent opposing schools of thought. There was the "socialist" current, embodied by President Senghor, the "liberal" current represented by the opponent Abdoulaye Wade and the "communist or Marxist-Leninist" current of Majmouh Diop. In 1978, a constitutional amendment led to the creation of a new centrist and conservative movement, the *Mouvement Républicain Sénégalais* (MRS), founded by Boubacar Guèye. The 1978 legislative elections also saw the opposition enter the National Assembly for the first time with the PDS.

In the early 1980s, President Senghor left office and his former Prime Minister Abdou Diouf⁶ became President of the Republic. In 1981, President Diouf, sensing that the context had changed, promulgated a law introducing a full multi-party system. This new law set out the legal framework

for political parties, in particular the conditions for forming a political party, the rules governing its operation and the monitoring of its activities. Diouf remained in power for 20 years and Senegal went through various phases leading to the first democratic changeover⁷ in 2000 following the election of the opponent Abdoulaye Wade.

A second alternation took place in 2012 with the victory of Macky Sall, former prime minister of Abdoulaye Wadem whilst the third changeover took place in 2024 with the first-round victory of opposition candidate Bassirou Diomaye Faye. Faye's party, the *Patriotes africains du Sénégal pour le travail, l'éthique et la fraternité* (PASTEF), was a member of the *Yewwi Askan Wi* ("Liberate the people" in Wolof) coalition, which in 2022, with the help of another coalition, Wallu Sénégal ("Save Senegal"), won 80 of the 165 seats in the legislative elections. This was the first time in Senegal's legislative history that the opposition had won so many seats in the National Assembly.

The 2022 legislative elections took place against a backdrop of high tension. In March 2021, Senegal witnessed violent demonstrations⁸ in several of the country's cities, particularly Dakar and Ziguinchor, following the arrest of the main opposition leader, Ousmane Sonko. The president of the PASTEF party and mayor of Ziguinchor was accused of rape by an employee of a massage parlour in Dakar. Charged, he was nevertheless released and placed under judicial supervision. Although this put an end to the riots, it did little to ease the tension between the authorities and the opposition. The pre-electoral period was also marked by controversy surrounding President Macky Sall's alleged intention to run for a third term, as well as a dispute over the invalidation of some of the lists of the *Yewwi Askan Wi* (the main opposition coalition at the time) and *Benno Bokk Yakaar* (the former ruling coalition) coalitions. Despite this very tense pre-electoral context, the elections were held calmly and serenely.

Senegal has a mixed system for electing deputies. Legislative elections combine majority and proportional representation. 53 MPs are elected by proportional representation from a national list and 112 by majority voting. For the latter type of election, 97 seats are divided between the country's 46 departments with the remaining 15 seats allocated across diaspora constituencies. A minimum of one MP and a maximum of seven are elected in each of the 46 departments, with that reduced to a minimum of one and maximum of three in diaspora departments. The number of MPs per constituency is proportional to the demography of each department and is set by decree. The single-round departmental majority system, representing more than two-thirds of the seats, tends to favour the parties and coalitions with the most resources and a national footprint, with the proportional representation system at national level ensuring the presence of smaller parties.

Of the 165 parliamentary seats, women hold 73 seats. In 2010, the National Assembly passed a law introducing "absolute gender parity"⁹ in all elective institutions, with lists of candidates alternating between men and women. In practice, however, as the heads of lists in elections are almost always men and the number of candidates elected on the same list is often odd, female representation remains below 50%. Nevertheless, in the new legislature, more than 44% of the seats in the National Assembly elected in July 2022 are held by women, the highest proportion in any parliament in West Africa.

The drivers of cost in parliamentary politics

During election campaigns, parties and candidates incur expenses that are difficult to quantify precisely in the absence of a law governing campaign expenses or requiring campaign accounts. But the consensus is that "money flows freely" during election campaigns. One candidate running for the 2022 legislative elections, who eventually withdrew, declared that "money is the most important thing when you decide to go to the polls"¹⁰. As one former MP, an unsuccessful candidate in the July 2022 general election, points out, "campaign spending is elastic. It all depends on what you have. It can be billions or millions"¹¹. Campaign expenditure covers both "formal" items - budgeted expenditure on communication, logistics and other campaign activities - and more "informal" items - money and gifts to religious and traditional dignitaries. These expenses are shared between the party (or coalition) and the candidate.

The pre-election campaign

The parties and their candidates spend huge sums of money to take part in the elections, starting with the deposit that is required for every list competing. For the legislative elections on 31 July 2022, this was set at 15 million CFA francs (around €22,860) for each list of candidates. The deposit is paid by the party or coalition. In the case of a coalition, the member parties are called upon to contribute the necessary amount. This contribution may come from subscriptions paid by party activists and officials, or from fundraising campaigns (as we have seen with the Pastef party in recent years). Some participants in this study pointed out that the deposit may also be paid in full by the national list leader, who is often the party or coalition leader.

Collecting sponsorships is also a costly operation. It requires considerable logistics to travel to at least seven regions of the country to collect the number of signatures needed to validate the list of candidates.

Sponsorship is extremely expensive. It requires activists to be out in the field collecting signatures; it's like an election campaign. And depending on the representativeness of each party, the expenses are enormous because you have to travel, and if you can't travel, you need resources for the representatives on the ground.¹²

The election campaign expenditure: logistics, communications and organisation

Logistics are one of the biggest items of expenditure in an election campaign. As a candidate from the *Benno Bokk Yakaar* coalition ("United in Hope", the coalition in power from 2012 to 2024) in one of the country's 46 départements points out, "an election campaign involves moving towards the people. So you need vehicles to transport your political machinery"¹³. Logistical costs include hiring cars for campaign teams, buying fuel and paying drivers.

During election campaigns, it is also customary for candidates to organise caravans to meet voters in different parts of the country. The size of these caravans, and the areas they cover, depend very much on the resources available to the parties, coalitions and candidates. A candidate from the *Yewwi Askan Wi* (Liberate the People) coalition, who was involved in a departmental list, said that his team had incurred debts at the end of the campaign "because there was no more money available for fuel"¹⁴.

Another candidate nominated by an opposition coalition in the department of Dakar said that his list had decided not to hold caravans or large rallies, due to a lack of funds¹⁵. "Given our lack of funds, we opted not to hold any rallies or caravans for the 21 days of the election campaign, and to make only local visits. So we didn't need any logistics for that", he said. "Every day we went in the morning or in the afternoon to one of the communes of Dakar. We had a WhatsApp group with 19 members, each representing a commune, to organise the outreach visits. We'd go round, hand out flyers and talk to people," he added. Although this option is less costly, people are more used to the format of meetings (rallies) or caravans. The two coalitions that obtained the best results in the election and the most seats in the National Assembly were those that deployed the most resources during the campaign period.

Communication is another major item of expenditure in a general election campaign. This includes communication media such as posters, flyers and t-shirts bearing the candidates' image. Some candidates add to this item media coverage of their activities, through the traditional media or social media networks. Strategies differ here and also depend on the resources available to the candidates. For example, a candidate from the *Yewwi Askan Wi* coalition said that he had staked everything on his social media accounts. According to him, he spent virtually nothing on communication otherwise¹⁶. The same strategy was used by a candidate from a coalition that was only present in 22 of the country's 46 departments. "The most difficult thing is to make ourselves heard, so we were able to use the right channels. Money isn't everything. There are localities where we scored without having set foot there"¹⁷ he claimed.

A candidate from another opposition coalition in the department of Dakar also explained that he had not spent much on communications, due to a lack of money. "We made do with what we had," he said. For example, he added, "I have a younger brother who does screen printing, and he used to make me t-shirts. And it depended on what was needed, sometimes ten, sometimes five,

depending on how many people were coming. Sometimes we'd just go with caps that we'd make for 700 CFA francs each. If we made 20, that's 14,000 CFA francs. So all the leaders of the 19 communes of Dakar each had two caps, two T-shirts and a polo shirt, and that's how we managed"¹⁸ .

Apart from the costs mentioned above, there are other more informal costs involved in an election campaign, generally borne directly by the candidate himself. These include the costs of maintaining a certain political network, by offering gifts in kind or in cash to activists or certain groups or associations (young people, women or students). Candidates also show a desire to be in the good graces of certain traditional and religious dignitaries deemed to be influential.

I've been to all the religious families, and it's extremely onerous. There are expenses for religious notables. You always have to give something.

Even if the 2022 legislative elections were a special election marked by a context of strong mistrust of the current government, money was a decisive factor in the results of the vote, which placed the three coalitions - *Benno Bokk Yaakar*, *Yewwi Askan Wi and Wallu Sénégal* - in the lead, as they and their candidates were able to deploy a great deal of financial, logistical and human resources to campaign.

Post-election costs

Once elected, Senegalese MPs are also faced with a variety of financial burdens. On the one hand, there are the costs associated with requests from activists (help with family ceremonies, health care) and, on the other, costs associated with participation in socio-cultural or sporting events for which the MP is chosen as sponsor, thus requiring his or her financial contribution. "The burdens placed on MPs are enormous", suggested an MP who is going through his first parliamentary experience.¹⁹

Once you've got political responsibility, most Senegalese think you've suddenly become super-rich. They used to ask you for 50,000 CFA francs (about €76), now they are going to ask you for 100,000 (about €152) explained another MP elected on the list of the former ruling coalition *Benno Bokk Yaakar*.²⁰ Another MP said that some months he has to spend 600,000 CFA francs (around €914, which is almost half his monthly salary) to respond to various requests²¹. Some MPs are also asked to take money from their salaries to help fund their political parties. "We are asked to contribute 10% of our income," says one opposition MP. If we take 1,300,000 CFA francs (around €1,980) as the basis, which is the monthly allowance for a single MP²², this represents 130,000 CFA francs per month. But this varies from one political party to another.

The origin of money

The candidates interviewed for this study were not very forthcoming about the sources of funding for their campaigns, apart from the funds made available to them by their parties or coalitions. Although most admitted that they had received financial support from friends or well-wishers. One candidate from the former ruling coalition, who was also director general of a national agency at the time of the study, said that he had saved his salary to help finance his campaign. Holding a position in the state apparatus is an asset for many political players. The salaries paid to the heads of national agencies and other semi-public companies provide them with substantial financial resources for their political activities.

The lack of transparency surrounding money spent on election campaigns in Senegal can be explained by the fact that the country has no law governing their funding: there is therefore no traceability of candidates' campaign expenses, including for legislative elections. As a result, there is no way of knowing where the money comes from or how much candidates spend on an election campaign.

Even within the parties, the question of where the money comes from is taboo, except perhaps for the main leaders who know something about it"²³

This was confirmed by a candidate in the last legislative elections, who claimed that the entire campaign budget was provided by the president of his party, without any explanation as to where the money came from.²⁴ The "funding mechanisms are hidden and often leave no trace known to the general public. The only visible reality is the circulation of money during election campaigns".²⁵ According to an opposition MP, "we have 'wealth-driven elections' that exclude those who have no money, and these elections mean that those who are elected may be beholden to certain lobbies, certain powers of money, both inside and outside the country".²⁶

The ruling coalition, which generally wins legislative elections, is often accused by the opposition of using public funds (particularly political funds) to finance its political activities, especially during election campaigns.²⁷ Whilst opposition parties are suspected of receiving financial support from abroad.²⁸ In theory however, the operation of political parties is governed by a law dating from 1981, which prohibits the financing of parties by foreign funds. This law stipulates that political parties must finance themselves out of their own funds, with contributions from their members or activists, among others. Senegal's political history shows that it is the parties and coalitions with the most resources that generally win the most seats in the National Assembly.

The participation of women and young people in parliamentary politics

In the current configuration, the sums needed to run a campaign are likely to keep out competent but under-resourced candidates. Despite the significant increase in the number of women in the National Assembly, some observers feel that the quality of their political participation still leaves something to be desired. "It is as if the parties and coalitions are content to put women on the lists just to comply with the parity obligation, without taking into account the quality of those who are invested" explained an expert²⁹. Another maintained that although the law on parity has led to greater representation of women in elective bodies, particularly in the National Assembly, it has not led to better representation³⁰. Through what he calls "the sexual division of political labour", he stressed that the "gender balance" introduced by parity conceals a persistent "imbalance between the sexes"³¹. For example, only one woman headed the national list for the 2022 legislative elections. What's more, out of 238 departmental list heads, there were only 32 women.³²

Parity allows for a feminisation of political life exists without calling into question the dominant position of men in governing bodies³³

Money has become "an element of exclusion from political life in Senegal. Women are the first victims because they have less access to resources than men". This was confirmed by a former MP who has been a political leader for more than twenty years: "it's the men who hold the resources, so women are forced to be under the thumb of a male leader who funds them practically as if they were godfathers for women and young people by giving them the means for their political action at grassroots level".³⁴ Social burdens and family responsibilities are another obstacle to women's political participation: "women have so many activities and responsibilities at home that they have little time to devote to political activities"³⁵. Research has shown that "the more domestic responsibilities women have, the less likely they are to succeed in their political careers"³⁶.

Youth – in Senegal this is anyone between the ages of 15 and 35, in accordance with the African Youth Charter adopted in 2006 – are also marginalised.³⁷ For a long time, young people entered the National Assembly through quotas granted to the youth and student movements of political parties on candidate lists. This enabled famous political figures such as Khalifa Ababacar Sall and Modou Diagne Fada to become MPs at the age of 27 and 29 respectively. Senegal's electoral code stipulates that you must be at least 25 years old to be elected to the National Assembly. However, no member of the current legislature (2022-2027) is under 30. This is not just a Senegalese problem. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), only 2.86% of parliamentarians worldwide are under 30³⁸. A young politician interviewed for this study highlighted the issue of a lack of experience as a barrier:

Many young people are excluded from legislative elections because they are considered to have no experience and are therefore not credible candidates for the post of MP. This should not be the case, because young people are graduates and have acquired experience, but they are given a bad rap when it comes to experience. What must come first is competence, not age.

Even though all the participants in this study agreed that money is an obstacle to young people's political participation, many felt that the internal organisation of parties does not favour young people's ascent either. Young people very often occupy marginal positions in party bodies, and it is not uncommon for people in their forties to be placed at the head of political parties' youth movements. The political party apparatus is monopolised by the elders, and the advancement of young people is "conditional on their being 'protected' by a godfather or godmother"³⁹. For most of the participants in this study, it is at the level of the functioning of political parties that reforms must be made in order to give more responsibility to young people. It should be pointed out, however, that things are beginning to change in Senegal, with the emergence of political parties and movements founded or led by people who are relatively young or younger than we are used to. One example is Pape Djibril Fall, of the *Les Serviteurs* party, who led the coalition of the same name in the 2022 legislative elections, and who was elected deputy at the age of 36 and was a candidate in the 2024 presidential election. Another example is Pastef, whose founding members are mainly young civil servants.

The impact on Senegalese democracy

A true parliamentary democracy cannot exist without the political participation of as many people as possible and the representation of the different strata of society. The current political system in Senegal allows political parties with greater financial resources to obtain the largest number of seats in the National Assembly. Until 2022, the coalition supporting the President of the Republic systematically obtained an absolute majority in the legislature. This coalition can not only use state resources for its electoral campaigns, but can also place its main leaders in positions that give them access to public resources to maintain their political networks, thus creating a clear imbalance in electoral competition. Similarly, some MPs, particularly those in the majority, often receive benefits in cash or kind from the President of the Republic or ministers, and become beholden to the latter when it comes to voting on legislation or monitoring government action.⁴⁰

The lack of transparency surrounding the sources of funding for election campaigns is also a serious threat to Senegalese democracy. Without an obligation to reveal the sources of their funding, candidates in legislative elections may give themselves to the highest bidders, thereby defending particular interests to the detriment of the people. A solution put forward by the National Commission for Institutional Reform advocates for "capping campaign budgets and providing public funding for political parties in line with the representativeness of each party".⁴¹ But as far back as 1998, the constitutionalist Professor El Hadj Mbodj was given the task of submitting consensual

recommendations on the conditions and procedures for financing political parties from the state budget⁴². However the proposals never came to fruition.

Money is also an obstacle to optimum participation by women and young people in parliamentary politics. Their political careers generally depend on co-optation by other politicians who act as sponsors. While the number of women sitting in the National Assembly has risen significantly since the law on parity was passed in 2010, young people are still poorly represented.

However, in recent years the Pastef party has adopted an innovative approach to mobilising resources for its political activities, including election campaigns. The party regularly organises fundraising campaigns involving its activists and supporters in Senegal and the diaspora.⁴³ Pastef also markets products bearing the party's logo, such as t-shirts, key rings and bracelets. This type of resource mobilisation, which puts the spotlight on activists and supporters, is to be encouraged, as it makes them important players in the life of parties, and by extension democracy, rather than being seen as mere electoral cattle to be mobilised during elections in return for a few banknotes.

Conclusions and recommendations

This study on the costs of parliamentary politics reveals that taking part in elections, including legislative elections, is very expensive in Senegal. Parties, coalitions and candidates spend large sums of money to finance their bids. Once they have been elected, MPs also have to deal with the costs associated with various solicitations: requests from activists, sponsorship and support for cultural and sporting events.

The study also shows that the use of money in politics in Senegal is highly opaque, mainly due to the absence of a law governing campaign spending. As a result, there is no traceability of where the money comes from, how it is used or how much is spent on an election campaign. The recommendations proposed to address this include the effective application of the law on political parties and, above all, the adoption of a law governing the financing of election campaigns:

- The effective application of the law on political parties in order to rationalise the number of parties - over 300 to date according to the Ministry of the Interior - and to ensure greater transparency in the use of money in politics is needed. Although the law currently requires political parties to file their financial statements every year, very few do so.
- Open discussions on the conditions and procedures for introducing a law on the funding of political parties from the state budget should be prioritised. The drafting of this law could be inspired by best practice elsewhere in the world.
- Public funding should be accompanied by a ceiling on campaign expenditure, as well as the obligation for each party or coalition, if not each candidate individually, to open a campaign bank account enabling all transactions to be tracked.

- Include in the Finance Act for an election year the amount allocated to candidates and political parties for campaign expenses. However, a commission should first be set up to draft legislation determining the criteria and procedures for distributing public subsidies to political parties and setting a ceiling on campaign expenses for political parties and candidates.
- Set up a body to audit campaign accounts or, failing that, entrust this task to the Audit Court. A financial agent should also be appointed to manage the account and liaise with the audit body.
- Encourage parties to initiate reforms to promote the effective and efficient political participation of young people and women.
- Following the example of gender parity, introduce a law guaranteeing a minimum quota of young people to be included on electoral lists.
- Promote and facilitate independent candidatures for legislative elections, which could further encourage the participation of young people and women outside the traditional political party system.

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