

Why water, sanitation and climate will decide 2026 polls

As the 2026 elections approach, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) is no longer quietly sitting in the background. It is emerging perhaps for the first time as a decisive political front line.

Extensive consultations captured in the 2025 Citizens' WASH Manifesto reveal a striking truth: across regions, ethnicities and political leanings, Ugandans are united in their priorities.

First, households want reliable water within 500 metres, with functional, maintained infrastructure and not just ribbon-cutting ceremonies followed by abandonment.

Second, they demand universal sanitation and hygiene: safe household toilets, girl-friendly school facilities and investment in faecal sludge management for rapidly growing towns.

Third, communities are calling for firm environmental protection, especially for wetlands, riverbanks, lakeshores and forests that have been stripped by unchecked licenses and weak enforcement.

Fourth, citizens want district-level climate adaptation budgets, catchment restoration and climate-smart agriculture to withstand increasingly violent floods and prolonged droughts.

Finally, Ugandans want accountability and in this they want: open WASH budgets, citizen scorecards across all districts and a presidential-level WASH and climate compact to anchor long-term national action.

These demands are not abstract policy ideas. They are rooted in real pain.

Imagine a mother in Amudat walking hours to a muddy valley tank, knowing her children may fall sick again this week.

Imagine a farmer in Kasese watching his crops wash away after every downpour, his livelihood slipping with the eroded soil.

Imagine a family in Bududa sleeping in fear every rainy season, unsure if the next

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Sanitation

landslide will bury their home.

Imagine girls in Namayingo missing school because the latrine is unsafe, or a borehole that broke down two months ago has never been repaired.

These stories are not anomalies. They are everyday Ugandan realities shaping voter frustration, migration patterns, school retention and local economies.

For the first time since Uganda's return to multi-party politics, every major political party has included commitments on water, sanitation, environment and climate resilience in their 2026 manifestos. This shift signals growing national awareness, but scrutiny reveals significant gaps.

Most manifestos acknowledge WASH challenges, yet many fall short on: Financing models for universal access, long-term operation and maintenance for water systems, sanitation and faecal sludge financing, clear enforcement plans for environmental protection, local government funding, where service delivery actually happens.

Natural resource governance, especially around oil, gas and minerals is referenced across manifestos, but commitments vary widely in strength and transparency. No political party has yet presented the full package citizens demand.

This gap gives voters an unprecedented opportunity where they have the impe-

dius to push political actors beyond broad promises toward measurable, funded commitments. WASH and climate impacts are poised to influence Uganda's voting patterns more than ever:

In water-stressed regions (north, Karamoja, eastern Uganda), where access is below 50 percent, voters will prioritise candidates who commit to reliable supply and maintenance budgets. In climate-vulnerable districts like Bududa, Kasese and Teso, people living through landslides, floods and droughts will demand credible adaptation plans. In resource-rich districts such as Buliisa, Hoima, Moroto, Kasese, citizens increasingly want transparency and fair benefit-sharing.

Urban voters are likely to focus on sewerage expansion, drainage, waste management and water reliability.

Every constituency in Uganda has a WASH issue and a candidate who ignores this reality risks becoming irrelevant.

As Uganda moves toward the 2026 polls, four urgent questions should guide the national conversation:

1. How will universal access to water and sanitation be financed and delivered—not just promised?
2. What enforceable measures will protect wetlands, forests and water sources from destruction?
3. How will natural resource wealth directly benefit citizens, not just companies and elite actors?
4. How will Uganda prepare for the climate crises that are already reshaping rural and urban life? This election is not just about party colours, slogans or alliances. It is about dignity, survival and the future owed to Uganda's children. WASH is, therefore, not a footnote. It is the foundation of health, productivity, stability and national transformation. In 2026, it must become everyone's business, including voters, candidates and policymakers alike among others.

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