



South Africa Post-Election Review Policy Series POLICY BRIEF NUMBER 3

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Electoral participation in South Africa's 2024 general elections

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2024 general elections in South Africa were highly contested by 52 political parties as well as independent candidates for the first time in national and provincial elections. A higher-than-expected growth in the voters' roll increased the number of registered voters to 27.8 million. There were hopes that the prospect of competitive elections would boost electoral participation. Indeed, the long

queues at polling stations on 29 May created the false impression of a high turnout across the country. In reality, only 58% of the registered voters turned out to vote, compared with 66% in 2019. The 16.3 million people who voted represented just 40% of the voting-age population (VAP). Declining voter turnout in the context of a 'watershed election' has raised alarm bells about the health of South Africa's democracy.

BACKGROUND

While declining voter turnout is a problem worldwide, South Africa has fallen below the global average. According to International IDEA's 2024 Global State of Democracy Report, voter turnout as a percentage of the voting-age population has fallen from 62.2% in 2008 to 55.5% in 2023 across the 173 countries studied. South Africa's voting-age population turnout in 2024 was 15.5 percentage points below the global average. Declining voter turnout is concerning. As Schultz-Herzenberg (2020: 4) explains, voter turnout is a "crucial barometer of the vitality and health of a democracy". Low turnout erodes the legitimacy of elected governments which aren't perceived to represent the will of the people, and it can lead to policy outcomes that serve the interests of a few active voters at the expense of the general population.

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What happened in the 2024 elections?

Voter registration: There was a surge in youth-targeted civic education and voter registration campaigns. About 1.2 million new voters were registered by the IEC between November 2023 and February 2024, most of them young people. Because new voter registrations have not kept up with population growth, the voters' roll represents an ever-shrinking proportion of the voting-age population.

Youth aged 18–29 were only 18% of registered voters in 2024, compared to 28% in 2004.

Legislative barrier to voting: An amendment to section 24A of the Electoral Act (Act 73 of 1998) introduced a requirement for voters to inform the IEC in advance of their intention to vote at a voting station other than where they were registered. This was a change from previous elections where the only requirement for voting anywhere in the country was completing a form at one's chosen voting station on election day. Nearly 2 million voters voted in this way in 2019. The new amendments were poorly publicised leading to confusion on election day. There were reports of significant numbers of voters being turned away from voting stations because they did not appear on the voters' roll. At the 191 voting stations that the EISA's observer mission visited, 18% of voters were turned away.

Protests and voter suppression: The Eastern Cape experienced multiple protests on the official election day, 29 May, and on the two days set aside for special voting. On election day, five voting stations were unable to open because of protest-related disruptions. Security incidents in other parts of the country appear not to have had as great an impact on turnout.

Provincial differences: A notable feature of this election was the stark differences in voter turnout across provinces. Turnout was highest in KwaZulu-Natal (62.3%), followed by Gauteng (61.9%) and the Northern Cape (61.5%). These are also the three provinces that produced hung legislatures with no party winning over 50%. The North West (51.4%) and Limpopo (52.1%) had the lowest turnout and they are also the provinces where the ANC received the highest proportion of votes. It is clear that low turnout disadvantaged the ANC which was unable to convince voters in its strongholds to go to the polls.

POLICY ALTERNATIVES

The solutions to declining voter turnout cannot be achieved by policy or legislation alone. Central to restoring citizens' trust in democratic institutions is the government's ability to deliver its constitutional responsibility to improve the quality of life of all citizens and respond to their needs. However, several targeted interventions can be implemented to improve participation in future elections.

Recent research by Mahlangu and Schulz-Herzenberg (2022) makes compelling findings on the correlation between political participation and political efficacy – the feeling that one's actions can influence politics and that the government is responsive to one's demands. Civic education is critical to improve citizens' understanding of the system and to empower them to utilise the available tools to hold the government accountable.

Removing administrative barriers to participation through automatic registration would give all eligible voters the option to vote without the additional cognitive and resource burden of remembering to register. An opt-out provision can be made for those who don't want to be on the voters' roll. Runciman et al. (2021, 2024) demonstrate how much individual and administrative barriers, including voter registration, contribute to electoral abstention.

Finally, the current closed-list proportional representation system is meant to incentivise turnout because every vote counts. Instead, it has increased apathy because voters feel disconnected from their political representatives.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for the IEC

- Initiate a comprehensive civic education programme with an emphasis on political participation and civic engagement beyond elections.
- Implement automatic voter registration of citizens with an opt-out option.

requirements to the electoral system that undermined voter turnout.

- Consider electoral system reform that improves the accountability of politicians, which is critical to consolidating democracy and constitutionalism.

Recommendations for the Electoral Reform Consultation Panel

- Consider the impact on political participation in its recommendations on alternative electoral systems for South Africa. Some of the amendments to the Electoral Act added complicated

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