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Gender and Youth Inclusivity in South Africa's 2024 Elections

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2024 national and provincial elections in South Africa marked a significant turning point in the country's political landscape. The once dominant African National Congress (ANC) only secured 40% of the vote, necessitating the formation of a Government of National Unity (GNU). President Cyril Ramaphosa characterised these election results as a “victory for democracy”, emphasising the electorate's

demand for collaborative governance. However, for collaborative governance to thrive, governance processes and structures must be inclusive of all stakeholder and demographic groups. This contribution assesses whether such representation exists within the new government for two groups: women and youth.

INCLUSION OF WOMEN

In 2024, women constituted 55% of eligible voters, numbering approximately 15.3 million individuals (SABC, 2024). Despite this substantial demographic presence, only 42% of the candidates nominated for the recent general elections were women, translating to around 6,234 out of a total of 14,866 candidates. This underrepresentation is particularly concerning given that women have historically played a crucial role in South Africa's democratic processes.

The ANC's Statement of Intent for the GNU outlined foundational principles such as constitutionalism, non-racialism, non-sexism and commitments to peace and stability, particularly for women and children. While these principles reflect an intention to promote inclusivity, the formation of the new government has not prioritised gender parity or gender equality. Rather, the GNU's diversity is in relation to political parties, and less so in terms of South Africa's demographic diversity.

Women's representation in parliament declined from 46% in 2020 to 43% in 2024 (Gender Links, 2024),

while the current cabinet saw a nearly 10% decrease in women's participation. This regression is alarming. South Africa has fallen from being the country with the highest number of women in parliament in Southern Africa to third place (IDEA, 2024). The ANC's quota system, introduced during the 2009 elections, had significantly increased women's representation. However, this was not a legislated quota and many of the other parties who joined the GNU do not implement a quota, hence the decline in numbers. Although President Ramaphosa holds significant prerogative powers in appointing his cabinet, other interests have been prioritised with the formation of this cabinet. Consequently, we have witnessed a substantial drop in women's representation following the elections (Parliament of South Africa, 2024). Although women's representation in government has decreased, they have been active as election observers and peace monitors, increasing inclusivity with respect to conflict prevention and the determination of the credibility and peacefulness of the elections.

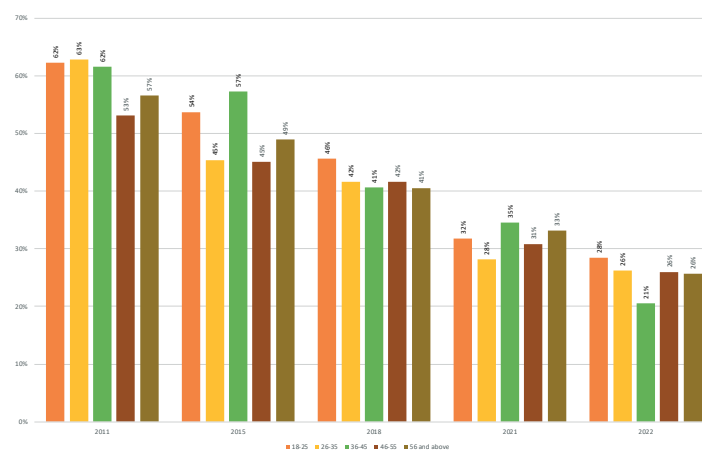
INCLUSION OF YOUTH

The dwindling turnout of young voters at elections around the world is widely regarded as a tell-tale sign of what some democracy scholars refer to as a global democratic recession (Carothers & Press, 2022). Both in the developed and developing world, citizens, particularly younger people, seem to have lost confidence in the virtues of the democratic state.

This also seems to be the case in South Africa. In its recent flagship publication, titled "African Insights 2024: Democracy at risk – the people's perspective", Afrobarometer finds that although most young South Africans still subscribe to democratic values, there has been a marked decline in recent decades among those who feel that these values manifest and result in tangible improvements in their quality of life (Afrobarometer, 2024). Figure 1 below provides a breakdown of South Africans by age category who responded that they were satisfied with how democracy functions in the country. The decline of approval across age groups over time is patently clear.

Figure 1:
Supply of democracy, 2011-2022, by age group

Source: Afrobarometer



The above findings indicate that political parties have interpreted the electoral mandate as an opportunity for elite power-sharing rather than for broadening inclusivity. This interpretation often prioritises party interests over the diverse needs of constituents, particularly women who have historically fought for their rights and representation. This situation

presents several key insights regarding inclusion in South Africa's political landscape:

1. **Dependency on quotas:** Thirty years into democracy, women's political representation remains largely dependent on quotas, and these need to be legislated rather than voluntary.
2. **The need to guard hard-won rights:** Gender equality appears to be an expendable value when political stakes are high and, therefore, women need to organise to ensure that their rights and visibility are not eroded.
3. **Youth and women collaboration:** Youth and women (many of whom are also youth) need to find ways of meaningfully collaborating to ensure that both can advance in relation to representation and participation in governance.

The outcomes of the 2024 elections underscore the significant reversals in gender inclusivity and the long way we still need to go towards youth inclusivity within South Africa's political framework.

As the country navigates this new landscape, all societal segments must be meaningfully represented in governance. It is crucial for women to mobilise effectively to maintain and advance their rights and interests within this evolving political context. The challenges confronting South Africa impact men, women, youth, those with disabilities and various groups differently. Thus, meaningful inclusion across all demographics is essential to achieve appropriate policy responses that ensure the wellbeing of all citizens is taken into account: "Leave no one behind".

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for political parties

- Give more prominence to policy issues like youth unemployment that resonate with young South Africans.
- It is essential to strengthen gender and youth quotas within all political parties.
- Policies must be developed that consider both demographics without sacrificing one for the other.

- Political parties should also prioritise gender issues throughout their campaigns rather than relegating them to late-stage discussions or afterthoughts. By doing so, they can demonstrate a genuine commitment to inclusivity that resonates with their constituents' needs.

Recommendations for women and youth

- Women should continue to use their agency in ways that will support their advancement in terms of political representation.

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