

MAKING SENSE OF VOTER TURNOUT IN THE 2024 SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL AND PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

The 2024 general elections in South Africa were highly contested. There were 52 political parties, as well as independent candidates who were allowed for the first time in both the national and provincial elections (NPEs). There was also a higher than expected growth in the voters' roll, increasing the number of registered voters to 27.8 million (SABC 2024). In addition, these were the first NPEs for which the predicted outcomes were uncertain, with conflicting predictions about whether the African National Congress (ANC) would lose its parliamentary majority for the first time since 1994.

There were hopes that the prospect of competitive elections would boost voter turnout, which had been falling since 2009. Indeed, the long queues at polling stations on 29 May created the impression of high turnout rates across the country. In reality, however, only 59% of registered voters turned out, a substantial drop from the 66% in 2019. The 16.3 million people who voted represented just 41% of the eligible voting-age population (EVAP).

Declining voter turnout in the context of a 'watershed election' has raised alarm bells about the health of South Africa's democracy (O'Regan 2024). While it is true that falling voter turnout is a problem worldwide, South Africa fell below the global average. The Global State of Democracy Report 2024 published by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) indicated that voter turnout, as a percentage of EVAP, fell from 62% in 2008 to 56% in 2023 across the 173 countries that were studied (International IDEA 2024). South Africa's EVAP turnout of 41% in 2024 was 15 percentage points below the global average.

As Schulz-Herzenberg (2020, p. 4) explains, voter turnout is a 'crucial barometer of the vitality and health of a democracy'. Elections are the 'the source of democratic legitimacy' (Dalton 2006, p. 11) and the most important activity for

citizens to undertake in a democracy. Low voter turnout erodes the legitimacy of elected governments. Indeed, Lipjhart (1997, p. 2) argues that ‘the democratic goal should be not just universal *suffrage* but universal or near universal *turnout*’ (italics in the original). When political elites are elected by a relatively small proportion of voters, they are likely to make governance decisions that serve those few active voters – at the expense of the general population (Hershey 2009).

Amid concerns of ‘democratic backsliding’ in South Africa and globally, democracy scholars and practitioners must examine why voter turnout fell in the 2024 NPEs (Human Rights Watch 2024). This paper provides an analysis of voter behaviour in these elections. It addresses the following questions:

- How has electoral participation evolved in South Africa from 1994 to 2024?
- What theoretical explanations of voter turnout fit the South African context?
- How did legislative and administrative changes in 2024 constrain or enable turnout?
- What were the consistencies and disparities in voter turnout across provinces, genders, and age groups?

The paper is divided into six sections. It begins with a note on methodology, followed by an overview of voter turnout trends since 1999. A brief discussion of the academic literature on political participation and voter behaviour is then provided. The next section discusses the political context of the 2024 elections, with a focus on the legislative and administrative changes that influenced voter registration and turnout. Thereafter, the paper presents extensive voter turnout data sourced from the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) of South Africa and other sources; this section includes a discussion of several themes that emerge from the data. The last section concludes the paper with recommendations for policymakers, regulators, and researchers.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCES

Let us begin with a methodological note on how to calculate voter turnout. In South Africa, the IEC calculates voter turnout as a proportion of registered voters. Arguably, a more accurate measure for voter turnout is derived from the EVAP, a figure that includes all citizens aged 18 years and older (Runciman et al. 2019). However, it is notoriously difficult to find one broadly accepted figure for EVAP in South Africa. The IEC does not include EVAP figures in official voter registration data and makes only occasional mention of the EVAP in its reporting. International

IDEA's comprehensive voter turnout database uses publicly accessible Statistics South Africa (StatsSA) population data, which does not disaggregate citizens and non-citizens and thus tends to inflate the size of the EVAP.

This paper uses historical EVAP data from research by Schulz-Herzenberg (2014; 2019; 2020), a preeminent researcher on voter behaviour in South Africa. Schulz-Herzenberg's EVAP estimates include only South Africans of voting age. For the 2024 elections, the paper draws from EVAP estimates for May 2024 as provided by StatsSA and sourced from SABC News Research during the election period (SABC 2024). All historical and current election registration and results data is publicly available from the IEC website (IEC 2024f). The source of historical disaggregated voter turnout data is the evaluation reports published by the IEC after each election (IEC 1999; 2004; 2009; 2014a; 2019a).

At the time of writing, the IEC had not yet released its 2024 election evaluation report. However, the IEC granted the author access to unpublished voter participation (VP)¹ data, which is cited in this paper as 'personal communication IEC 2024'. The VP data was obtained via voter management devices (VMDs) in 22 931 of the 23 292 voting districts and represents 9 174 108 distinct ID numbers with a verified status on the voters' roll. This data is incomplete, but it does allow one to extrapolate trends in turnout across demographic groups.

TRENDS IN VOTER TURNOUT 1999–2024

South Africa has held seven NPEs since 1994. The voters' roll was first compiled for the 1999 election, which means there have been six past general elections for which one can measure and compare voter turnout. Table 1 shows that from 1999 to 2014, voter turnout as a proportion of registered voters was over 70%. Turnout reached a peak of 89% in 1999, before falling to 77% in 2004 and 2009. The turnout figure declined further in 2014, to 73%. The 2019 elections saw an even sharper drop in turnout, to 66%, and this trend of rapid decline continued in 2024, when turnout fell to 58.6%.

An analysis of voter turnout as a proportion of EVAP paints a bleak picture. In 1999, EVAP turnout in South Africa was 72%, which fell sharply to 57% in 2004. The figure rose to 60% in 2009 before declining marginally to 57% in 2014 and then dropping more steeply to 49% in 2019. In 2024, EVAP reached an historic low of 41%.

1 The IEC uses the term 'voter participation' instead of 'voter turnout' for the number of voters who cast a ballot on election day. This paper uses the two terms interchangeably.

Table 1: Comparison of voter turnout: NPEs from 1999 to 2024

Election Year	Voter Turnout (%)	Total Votes (Millions)	Registration (Millions)	EVAP Turnout (%)	EVAP (Millions)	Non-voters as a Proportion of EVAP (%)
1999	89.3	16 228 462	18 172 751	71.8	22 589 369	28.1
2004	76.7	15 863 558	20 674 926	56.9	27 865 537	43.1
2009	77.3	17 919 966	23 174 279	59.8	29 956 957	40.2
2014	73.4	18 654 771	25 390 130	57.0	32 687 600	42.9
2019	66.0	17 672 851	26 756 629	49.3	35 868 190	50.7
2024	58.6	16 291 516	27 782 477	40.9	39 753 087	59.0

Source: Calculated by the author from preliminary election reports (personal communication IEC 2024), StatsSA data (SABC 2024), and Schulz-Herzenberg's (2014; 2020) data

Within 25 years, the ranks of non-voters (unregistered voters and registered voters who did not turn out) have more than doubled: they represented 28% of eligible voters in 1999 and 59% in 2024. After thirty years of democracy, almost three-fifths of eligible South Africans abstained from the ballot. It is crucial to understand why. The next section provides a broad overview of the literature on political participation and voter behaviour. The aim is to identify possible theoretical approaches and models to explain the trend of declining voter turnout in South Africa.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND VOTER TURNOUT

Turning out to vote is the foundational activity of democratic citizenship. As Aldrich (1993, p. 246) writes, 'turning out to vote is the most common and important act citizens can take in a democracy'. Voting is the most common form of political participation. Political participation encompasses all activities that people undertake to directly or indirectly affect politics. Globally, patterns of political participation have changed over time as citizens have adopted new forms of action to influence their democracies (Dalton 2006). Conventional forms of participation – like voting and political party membership – have declined, while unconventional participation – such as protesting, political consumerism, and internet activism – has increased (Van Deth 2014; Hill & Routledge-Prior 2016).

Democracy scholars have lamented the decline of voting among established and new democracies alike, viewing it as a sign of democratic erosion and a

risk factor for the democratic backsliding that has been evident in democracies around the world (Lipjhart 1998; Macedo et al. 2005; Kostelka 2017; Olar 2023). The question 'Why do people vote?' is thus one of the primary preoccupations of democracy scholars. The academic literature provides three main explanations for voter turnout, namely, resource models, psycho-social factors, and institutional determinants.

Resource Models

Resource models of voter turnout focus on the material and social resources that inform electoral participation. Scholars argue that higher levels of education, income, and social class make it more likely that an individual will be politically interested and turn out to vote, because the person has enough money, skills, information, and time to participate (Verba et al. 1993; Lipjhart 1998; Smets & Van Ham 2013). The costs of voting discourage voters with fewer resources from participating (Lipjhart 1998). Age is a determinant of VP that is closely linked to resources. Young people generally turn out to vote at lower rates than older groups, 'primarily because the costs of voting are highest for this population group' (Schulz-Herzenberg 2019, p. 141).

Critics of the resource model argue that voting is a relatively low-cost activity that requires little skill and effort or time on the part of citizens (Dalton 2006). Indeed, in many democracies, women are more likely to vote than men, despite having fewer material and social resources. In the first decade of democracy, political participation in South Africa similarly disconfirmed the resource model. Studies of voter behaviour indicated that black Africans, who were historically the demographic with the lowest income, education, and social status, were the most likely group to register and turn out in the 1999, 2004, and 2009 elections (Lodge 1999; Hoeane 2004; McLaughlin 2007).

Lodge (1999) found that voter abstention rates in the 1999 election were highest among urban and lower-middle or working-class minorities (white, coloured, and Indian). He posited that this pattern was the result of political disengagement and lack of party identification. African voters had strong identification with the ANC and were thus more likely to turn out. Analysts began noting a growth in partisanship and participation among the middle classes during the 2004 elections (Schulz-Herzenberg 2006). By the 2014 election, VP had plummeted among lower income groups and was rising among the middle and wealthy classes (Southall 2014; Schulz-Herzenberg 2014; Everatt 2016). Everatt (2016, p. 62) cites a 'mash-up' of StatsSA income data and IEC data on VP that shows voter turnout among low-decile income households fell steeply over the 2004, 2009, and 2014 elections. By contrast, turnout increased in the upper-decile

income households. In other words, the poorest South Africans 'are disengaging from the electoral project in significant numbers, dropping from a point of near equality in 2004' to 10 percentage points below higher income voters in 2014 (Everatt 2016, p. 63).

With approximately 63% of the population living below the upper bound poverty line in 2024, a continuation of this trend risks disenfranchising the majority of South Africans (World Bank 2024). Some post-election analyses of the 2024 NPE indicate that the outcome of the election was influenced by differential turnout between high-income suburbs and low-income townships (Netshitenzhe 2024). A class analysis of voter turnout goes beyond the scope of this paper but should be prioritised for future research.

Increasing voter abstention, particularly among the youth, has been attributed to high participation costs caused by onerous institutional barriers (Kersting 2009; Runciman et al. 2019) as well as 'disillusionment and disinterest' (Oyemi & Mahlatji 2016; Ryabchuck 2017; Runciman et al. 2019). Instead, citizens favour informal activities that they feel are more effective in garnering a response from political leaders (Ajambo 2007; Malila 2016, Oyemi & Mahlatji 2016; ACCORD 2019). Tracey-Temba (2018) found that protest was the preferred mode of politics among young people who did not feel they were taken seriously in formal political platforms. In their studies on the role of protests in political participation, Booysen (2007) and Runciman (2016) view protest and voting as co-existing, as these practices are mutually reinforcing forms of participation under a dominant party system.

Psycho-sociological Theories

These theories emphasise individual motivational attitudes of voting that are shaped by both psychological or cognitive factors and the social environment. Sociological factors include the social cleavages and environment that can impact voter behaviour (Schoeman & Puttergill 2007). Psychological factors include a) political efficacy, which refers to an individual's perception of their ability to influence politics; b) party identification, which means 'psychological attachment with one preferred party that guides electoral behaviour' (Schulz-Herzenberg 2009, p. 4); and c) political interest.

Political efficacy refers to the feeling that one's actions can influence politics and the government is responsive to one's demands. The concept includes internal efficacy, which refers to an individual's sense of their own competence in understanding politics; and external efficacy, which means an individual's perception of the political system's responsiveness to citizens (Mahlangu & Schulz-Herzenberg 2022). Successive Afrobarometer and South African Social Attitudes

Survey reports have shown that South African voters have low levels of political efficacy and that this trend is associated with low levels of political participation (Mattes & Richmond 2015; HSRC 2023b).

Party identification, or partisanship, used to be a strong predictor of voter behaviour in South African elections (Ferree 2006; Habib & Naidu 2006; Kersting 2009; Habib & Schulz-Herzenberg 2011). Partisanship has declined in recent years, creating a growing proportion of ‘floating voters’ and increasing political pluralism (Schulz-Herzenberg 2019; Runciman et al. 2021; Bekker et al. 2022; Schulz-Herzenberg & Mattes 2023).

Political interest is arguably more important than resources in determining voter behaviour (Schulz-Herzenberg 2020). Family influence and home life play a strong role in shaping an individual’s interest in politics and likelihood of political participation. In addition, voting in one election increases a person’s likelihood of repeated participation. For example, De Kadt (2017) found that South African youth who voted in 1994 had positive feelings about voting and intended to continue to vote.

On the other hand, sociological factors include group identities – such as gender, race, ethnicity, social class, and religious affiliation. The psychological and sociological determinants intersect in the concept of ‘mobilisation agents’, which refers to formal and informal social networks that mobilise citizens to participate in politics. Membership of organised groups, such as political parties, community associations, and churches, shapes an individual’s political motivations.

Early scholarship on South African democracy was dominated by ‘racial census’ theories, which explained voters’ choices in the elections as being the product of racial identities rather than rational choices (Giliomee & Simkins 1999). This theory was cited to explain the ANC’s one-party dominance (Giliomee et al. 2001). However, the theory was challenged academically for being too reductive (Mattes et al. 1999; Hoeane 2004; Ferree 2006) and was refuted in reality by the growing plurality of choices among black voters (Friedman 2015; Paret 2016).

Institutional Explanations

Institutional determinants of voter turnout include electoral laws, policies, and rules that govern elections. Scholars argue that the electoral laws and systems a country adopts can influence who turns out to vote (Norris 2004; Blais 2006).

Voter registration has been characterised as ‘a substantial barrier to voting’ (Ansolabhere & Konisky 2006, p. 83), and ‘onerous’ voter registration requirements have been criticised ever since voter registration was introduced in 1999. Friedman (1999, p. 15) stated that South Africa adopted the American democratic ‘assumption that is the citizen’s responsibility to claim the vote, not the state’s

obligation to extend it'. Lodge (1999) reminds readers that voter registration was strongly supported by political elites because of concerns about widespread voter fraud in the 1994 election.

In a study on low turnout in the 2021 local government election (LGE), Runciman et al. (2021) found that most respondents cited individual and administrative barriers as reasons for not voting. These barriers included people not being present in their registered ward on voting day or not being registered to vote. Non-registration was the primary reason given by students and young people. Several scholars proposed removing the voter registration requirements to boost VP (Schulz-Herzenberg 2014; 2019). However, proponents of voter registration argue that it is a necessary measure to ensure the integrity of elections and maintain public confidence in South Africa's nascent democracy (IEC 2007, p. 16). This view was reinforced by the Constitutional Court, which stated that 'the right to vote is, of course, indispensable and empty without the right to free and fair elections, [as] the latter gives content and meaning to the former.'²

Concerns about election integrity have become widespread among the general public in the context of falling levels of trust in public institutions (HSRC 2023; IJR 2024). In the runup to the 2024 NPEs, the IEC was targeted by toxic mis- and dis-information campaigns, which were aimed at delegitimising the elections (MMA 2024). Indeed, the quality of the IEC's administration in the 29 May 2024 elections was far below the excellent standards it was known for. Overall, in the context of heightened scrutiny, there might not be much public support for loosening the registration restrictions.

LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY CONTEXT

The 2024 election was held under a slightly different electoral system from that of previous general elections. This development followed the 2020 ruling by the Constitutional Court in the *New Nation Movement* matter, which stated that the Electoral Act 73 of 1998 was unconstitutional because it restricted contestation in NPEs to political parties. The Constitutional Court gave Parliament until June 2022 to amend the Electoral Act to allow independent candidates to run for elected office (Mbete 2022). The Electoral Amendment Act 1 of 2023 was then passed after a highly contested parliamentary process, which civil society characterised as lacklustre and superficial.

Parliament's delays in processing amendments to the various electoral laws, combined with successive court challenges to the legislation, created significant

2 Cited in *Kham and Others v Electoral Commission and Another* [2015] ZACC 37

legal and administrative uncertainty in the runup to the 2024 elections. The complications limited the time available to the IEC to prepare for the elections. The uncertainty also impacted logistical arrangements and affected the training of election officials and voter education about the new electoral system.

The most consequential legislative change in the 2024 elections was the amendment to section 24A (S24A) of the Electoral Act. The amendment introduced a requirement for voters to notify the IEC in advance of their intention to vote at a station other than the one where they were registered. This move was a response to media reports of people having double-voted in the 2019 elections. The amendment put an end to the practice of allowing registered voters to vote anywhere in the country as long as they completed a form at their chosen voting station on election day – a practice widely used in the previous NPEs. In the 2019 election, 1 892 139 people had cast their votes away from the voting stations where they were registered.

The amendment to S24A was passed by Parliament in March 2021, before the New Nation judgement on independent candidates (Hansard 19 March 2021). The amendment went largely unnoticed by the media and caught many people by surprise when it was applied by the IEC in the 2024 elections. On 29 May 2024, there were many reports of voters being turned away from voting stations where they were not registered because they had not notified the IEC of their intention to vote elsewhere by the stipulated date (17 May 2024). At the 191 voting stations that EISA's observer mission visited, 18% of voters were turned away, with two-thirds of them being turned away for attending the 'wrong' voting station in terms of the S24A amendment (EISA 2024).

Lack of voter education on S24A and the impact on disenfranchisement was raised by several domestic and international election observer missions (Mutsila 2024; Defend our Democracy 2024). The IEC and political parties have been criticised for not doing enough to inform voters of the new requirements (IRR 2024; Vilakazi-Alberts 2024). It is almost impossible to know exactly how many registered voters across the country were disenfranchised because of S24A and how big an impact this issue had on voter turnout.

According to the IEC (2024e), approximately 360 000 voters had received S24A approval to vote outside their voting district. That number represents only about 20% of the number of voters who had received the same approval in 2019. Hence, approximately a million voters could have been disenfranchised in 2024. The lack of voter education on S24A unnecessarily caused confusion at voting stations and led to doubts about the management of the election.

VOTER PARTICIPATION IN THE 2024 ELECTIONS

Voter Registration

Voter registration was a major election issue in the year running up to the 2024 elections. This issue arose in the context of the historically low participation during the 2021 LGEs. The voters' roll had dropped by 128 784 voters in 2021 compared to the 2016 elections, and only 46% of registered voters had turned out to vote in 2021. Low VP in the 2021 elections has been blamed on the Covid-19 pandemic (Van Onselen 2024b).

The IEC sought to make up for the lost momentum by focusing its 2024 voter registration campaign on first-time voters under the age of 30. This cohort has historically been disproportionately underrepresented in the voters' roll. To reach these voters, the Commission partnered with civil society organisations to initiate youth-centred registration drives using social media and celebrity events to make voting attractive.

The number of registered voters rose from 26.76 million in 2021 to 27.78 million in 2024, achieving the highest level since the dawn of democracy. According to the IEC, 77% of new registrations were for young people in the 18–29-year age group. Most new registrations were made in person during the two registration weekends. However, around 240 thousand people used the online registration portal, 47% of whom were under the age of 30 (Capa 2024).

Voter registration has not kept up with population growth. As Table 1 shows, between 1999 and 2024, the number of registered voters grew by 10 million people, which represents a 35% growth rate. By contrast, the EVAP grew by 17 million people (43%) over the same period. Moreover, the voters' roll represents a shrinking proportion of the EVAP. In 1999, 80% of eligible voters were registered, compared with 70% in 2024. There were 12 million eligible voters who did not register for the 2024 elections. As mentioned, one reason for the widening gap was the low level of registration among young voters. The next section examines the age and geographical distribution of registered voters.

Registration Across Age Groups

South Africa is a young country, with 70% of the total population currently aged 40 or younger. Population expansion has skewed the age distribution of the electorate towards younger voters; in 2024, there were 11.1 million voters under the age of 30. At 28% of the EVAP, people aged 18–29 years were the largest cohort of eligible voters. The second largest group was the 30–39-year cohort, at 26%. Hence, in total, 54% of the potential electorate was younger than 40 years, representing 21.3 million

individuals (Table 2). However, despite making up the largest proportion of the EVAP, youth under 30 were disproportionately underrepresented among registered voters in 2024. For the first time since 1999, this age group accounted for less than a fifth of all registered voters (18%).

Table 2: Comparison of voters' roll numbers and estimated EVAP for 2024 NPE

Age group	EVAP	Age Group as % of EVAP	Number of Registered Voters	Age Group as % of Registered Voters	% EVAP Registered
18–19	2 032 272	5.11	550 687	1.98	27.1
20–29	9 073 863	22.83	4 408 139	15.87	48.6
30–39	10 198 809	25.66	6 831 835	24.59	67.0
40–49	7 596 640	19.11	6 008 072	21.62	79.1
50–59	5 083 116	12.79	4 578 479	16.48	90.1
60–69	3 362 552	8.46	3 140 624	11.30	93.4
70–79	1 775 083	4.47	1 541 439	5.54	86.8
80+	630 750	1.59	723 202	2.64	114.7
Total	39 753 087	100	27 782 477	100	69.9

Source: SABC 2024

Just under half (48.6%) of people aged 20–29 years were registered to vote in 2024, a drop from the 53.7% that were registered in this age group for 2019 (see Table 3). Encouragingly, the proportion of registered 18–19-year-olds increased from 18.5% in 2019 to 27.1% in 2024. Nonetheless, the voters' roll is shrinking because young voters are registering at lower rates than older cohorts; registration rates are significantly higher among older people than youth.

Over 90% of voters older than 40 years are registered to vote. As the proportion of registered voters in the 18–29-year cohort has declined, so too has the overall level of registration and turnout within the EVAP.

**Table 3: Age cohort comparison of EVAP and registration for 2019 NPE
(based on StatsSA estimates)**

Age Group	Estimated EVAP (From 2018 Population Estimates)	Percentage of Total EVAP ^a	Registrations (Certified Voters' Roll)	Percentage of Total Registered Voters ^b	Registrations as a Percentage of EVAP*
18–19	1 843 831	5.1	341 186	1.3	18.5
20–29	9 871 020	27.5	5 299 144	19.8	53.7
30–39	8,990 803	25.1	6 685 439	25.0	74.4
40–49	6 081 394	17.0	5 480 336	20.5	90.1
50–59	4 361 794	12.2	4 228 558	15.8	96.9
60–69	2 818 624	7.9	2 737 553	10.2	97.1
70–79	1 355 150	3.8	1 336 946	5.0	98.7
80+	545 574	1.5	647 487	2.4	118.7**
Total	35 868,190^a	100.0	26 756 649^b	100.0	74.6

Notes:

* Calculated as column 3 (voters' roll) divided by column 1 (2018 EVAP estimates).

** For the 80+ year group, estimated EVAP was smaller than the number of registered voters, leading to an unrealistic high percentage.

Source: Schulz-Herzenberg (2020, p. 8), with modifications to captions.

Table 4: Comparison of EVAP and registration growth rates: 1999–2024

	1999	2004	2009	2014	2019	2024
Number of registered voters	18 172 751	20 674 926	23 174 279	25 390 130	26 756 649	27 782 477
Number of new voters	N/A	2 502 175	2 499 353	2 215 851	1 366 499	1 025 828
% growth of registered voters	N/A	14	12	10	5	2
EVAP total	22 589 369	27 865 537	29 956 957	32 687 600	35 868 190	39 753 087
% of registered voters	80	74	77	78	75	70
% growth of EVAP	N/A	23	7.5	9	10	11
Number of non-registered voters	4 416 618	7 190 611	6 782 678	7 297 470	9 111 541	11 970 610
% of non-registered voters	20	26	23	22	25	30

Source: Author's calculations, based on data from Schulz-Herzenberg (2009; 2014; 2019) and SABC (2024)

Table 4 shows that the rate of growth of the voters' roll has declined significantly since 2019. Before 2019, the voters' roll had double-digit percentage growth, with a high of 14% in 2004, 12% in 2009, and 10% in 2014. In 2009 and 2014, the EVAP growth rate was lower than the growth rate of the voters' roll. This pattern reversed in 2019, when the EVAP growth rate of 10% was double that of the voters' roll (5%). In 2024, the EVAP growth rate (11%) was more than five times the growth rate of registered voters (2%). Voter turnout can be expected to decline for as long as the growth of the voters' roll is outstripped by the expansion of the EVAP.

Registration Across Provinces

Geographical variations in registration rates have been a feature of the voters' roll since 1999. As in previous elections, the provinces with the most registered voters were Gauteng, with 6 541 978 (24% of the roll); KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) with 5 738 259 (21%); the Eastern Cape, with 4 061 045 (12%); and the Western Cape with 3 317 072 (12%). These are also the four provinces with the largest populations (see Table 5).

There was considerable variation in the proportion of the EVAP that was registered in each province. Provinces with large rural populations, such as Eastern Cape (85%), Limpopo (79%), KZN (78%), and Northern Cape (75%), had the largest proportions of registered eligible voters. Gauteng (59%) and Western Cape (65%) had the lowest proportions.

Interestingly, both Gauteng and Western Cape saw significant decreases in their EVAP registration from 2019 at 8.1 and 6.8 percentage points respectively. A possible explanation is that both provinces have experienced disproportionate increases in their overall populations since 2019. According to StatsSA's (2023) migration report, Gauteng and Western Cape receive the majority of internal migrants. This feature means these provinces are the most likely to have transient populations such as students and migrant workers, who maintain their voter registrations in their home provinces.

High inward migration does not account for the two other provinces with conspicuously low EVAP registration levels, namely, Mpumalanga (65%) and North West (65%). More than a third of eligible voters in these provinces were not registered, and levels of registration had dropped by 6.7 and 6 percentage points respectively. The only province that showed a slight increase in its EVAP registration since 2019 was Limpopo (which rose from 78.6% to 79.1%).

Table 5: Comparison of EVAP and voters' roll by province

	2024		2019	
Province	EVAP	% EVAP Registered	EVAP	% EVAP Registered
Eastern Cape	4 061 045	84.7	3 858 048	87.2
Free State	1 917 274	76.0	1 878 475	77.9
Gauteng	11 084 944	59.0	9 503 734	67.1
KwaZulu-Natal	7 336 980	78.2	7 031 592	78.6
Limpopo	3 513 779	79.1	3 317 455	78.6
Mpumalanga	3 115 696	65.0	2 732 851	71.7
North West	2 726 235	64.9	2 402 383	70.9
Northern Cape	872 198	75.3	778 406	80.5
Western Cape	5 124 936	64.7	4 374 246	71.5
Total	39 753 087	69.9	35 868 190	74.6

	2024		2019	
Province	Registered Voters	Province as % of Voters Roll	Registered Voters	Province as % of Voters Roll
Eastern Cape	3 439 320	12.4	3 363 161	12.6
Free State	1 456 927	5.2	1 462 508	5.5
Gauteng	6 541 978	23.5	6 381 220	23.8
KwaZulu-Natal	5 738 249	20.6	5 524 666	20.6
Limpopo	2 779 657	10	2 608 460	9.7
Mpumalanga	2 025 070	7.3	1 951 776	7.3
North West	1 768 576	6.4	1 702 728	6.4
Northern Cape	656 826	2.4	626 471	2.3
Western Cape	3 317 072	11.9	3 128 567	11.7
Out-of-country	58 802		7 092	
Total	27 782 477	100.00	26 756 649	100.00

Source: 2019 data from Schulz-Herzenberg (2020, p. 15) and 2024 data from SABC (2024)

A notable shift in geographical registration patterns has been the vast increase in registration among South Africans living abroad. Out-of-country registration has been available to all citizens living abroad since 2019, but in earlier elections this option was only available to staff at South African diplomatic missions. Other citizens wanting to vote abroad had to be registered within South Africa and notify the IEC in advance of their intention to vote outside the country. In the 2019 election, there were 7092 out-of-country registrations. In 2024, the number of voters who registered abroad increased eightfold, to 58 802. The IEC attributed the large increase to the online registration system. A special voter registration weekend for South African nationals abroad was held at the end of January 2024 and was hosted at 111 foreign missions globally.

Voter Turnout: Demographic and Geographic Trends

In the runup to the 29 May 2024 elections, there was consensus among political pollsters and analysts that voter turnout would be the main determinant of the election result. In a proportional representation system, low turnout can raise the proportional strength of each vote cast by voters at the polls. In a tightly contested race, parties that can persuade their supporters to go to the polls on election day have a significant advantage over parties whose support base does not. This advantage is referred to as differential turnout.

Experts had various opinions about how voter turnout would affect political parties' performances in the election. Polling company Ipsos (2024) projected that the ANC would benefit most in the low (41%–43%) and medium (57%–59%) voter turnout scenarios, winning a projected 46% of the vote in a low turnout scenario and 44% in a medium turnout scenario. A high turnout scenario would benefit the DA, EFF, and smaller parties. The reason was that new and undecided voters were relatively unlikely to vote for the ANC.

Others took the opposing view that a reduction in voter turnout would reduce the ANC's vote share (Schulz-Herzenberg & Mattes 2023; Van Onselen 2023b). Using data from previous elections, Van Onselen (2023b) demonstrated how the ANC's share of the vote fell from 58% of registered voters in 1999 to 37% in 2019. Voter turnout fell 13 percentage points over the same period, from 89% to 66%. This analysis indicates that voters who voted for the ANC in the past were staying away from the polls instead of voting for other parties. As Van Onselen (2023b) commented, 'this election is all about turnout... the smaller the turnout, the more it hurts the ANC'.

Overall, the big question for the 2024 election was whether disgruntled ANC supporters would abstain from the elections or switch their allegiances to new parties. Ultimately, the projections of low turnout bringing an end to the ANC's

electoral dominance were correct. Voter turnout fell below the 60% mark to 58.6%, and the ANC's share of the vote fell to 40%.

Differential turnout across provinces and social demographics was a critical determinant of the election outcomes. The VP data provided by the IEC from 22 931 of the 23 292 voting districts are used in the discussion below. I adopt a thematic approach to this analysis of voter turnout, covering the following themes:

- turnout differences between genders
- differences in turnout across provinces
- turnout differences across age groups
- voting volume by time of day.

Gender and Turnout

Women have constituted the majority of voters in South Africa since 1994, and women register at higher rates than men across all age groups. In the 2024 election, women made up 55% of registered voters. Female voters in the 30–39 age group represented the largest proportion of *all* registered voters, at 13.2% (Tolmay et al. 2024, p.4).

In line with historical trends, women accounted for the majority of voter turnout in the 2024 elections. Women made up 58% of the total voter turnout, a slight increase from the 57% of women voters who turned out in the 2019 elections. Among the 16.3 million voters who turned out, 9.5 million were women, compared with just under 7 million men. Furthermore, two-thirds (62%) of registered women turned out to vote, compared to just over half (55%) of registered men (Table 6).

At the time of writing, the IEC had not yet released precise voter turnout data disaggregated by gender and age. However, it is likely that higher turnout among women was prevalent across the age groups. It is also likely that the gender difference increased among the older groups, as women live longer than men.

Table 6: Voter participation and turnout by gender, 2024

Gender	Voters' Roll (A)	% Registered by Gender	VP – Adjusted (B)	% Vote by Gender	% Turnout by Gender (B/A)
Female	15 345 033	55	9 481 567	58	62
Male	12 437 444	45	6 809 949	42	55
Total	27 782 477	100	16 291 516		59

Source: IEC unpublished voter turnout data (personal communication IEC 2024)

Although women form the majority of the South African electorate, their voices and concerns are underrepresented in news media coverage of the elections and party manifestos. South Africa also saw a decline in women's representation in the National Assembly 2024, dropping from 46% to 43% – the same proportion as in 2009 (Tolmay et al. 2024, p. 15). The decline was particularly pronounced in provincial legislatures, where women's representation fell from 46% overall to just 38% (Tolmay et al. 2024, p. 17).

Turnout Across Provinces

Voter turnout declined in all provinces in the 2024 election compared to 2019. However, there was notable variation in the extent of the decline across the provinces. As Table 7 indicates, the sharpest decline was in Gauteng, which dropped by 10 percentage points. In the Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga, and North West, turnout dropped by 8 percentage points each; similarly, turnout in Limpopo and Western Cape fell by 7 points. The Free State, KZN, and Northern Cape were the least affected, with turnouts that declined by 5 percentage points.

The pattern of turnout decline across the provinces bucks the trend from previous elections. Gauteng, KZN, and Western Cape have traditionally shown the smallest decline in turnout, which some political analysts have attributed to relatively high levels of electoral competition in those provinces (Schulz-Herzenberg 2020). In KZN, the decline was again minor, but Gauteng and Western Cape showed large drops in the number of voters who turned out. The reason for this reversal may be the effect of the S24A requirement on voters to notify the IEC of their intention to vote outside of their normal voting stations. As mentioned, Gauteng and the Western Cape have very transient populations and receive the majority of the country's internal migration. Hence, these provinces have the most voters who were likely to be affected by the S24A amendment.

There was considerable variation in the pattern of voter turnout across provinces. Turnout was highest in KZN (62.3%), followed by Gauteng (61.9%) and Northern Cape (61.5%). These three provinces also produced hung legislatures, with no party winning above 50%. The North West (51.4%), Limpopo (52.1%), and Eastern Cape (53%) had the lowest turnout rates; they are also the provinces where the ANC received the highest proportion of votes in the national and provincial races. It appears that differential turnout did indeed disadvantage the ANC (see Table 7).

Table 7: Provincial voter turnout: National ballots by province, 2014–2024

	2024			2019	2014
Province	Voters' Roll	Voter Participation (VP)	% Turnout	% Turnout	% Turnout
Eastern Cape	3 439 320	1 836 398	53	61	70
Free State	1 456 927	842 989	58	63	73
Gauteng	6 541 978	4 051 809	62	72	77
KwaZulu-Natal	5 738 249	3 575 434	62	67	77
Limpopo	2 779 657	1 448 365	52	59	63
Mpumalanga	2 025 070	1 174 589	58	66	76
North West	1 768 576	909 475	51	59	69
Northern Cape	656 826	404 030	62	67	74
Western Cape	3 317 072	2 009 311	61	68	74
Out-of-country	58 802	39 116	67	N/A	N/A
Total	27 782 477	16 291 516	59	66	73

Source: Unpublished IEC data (personal communication IEC 2024) as well as 2019 data (IEC 2019b) and 2014 data (IEC 2014b)

Age and Turnout

An examination of voter turnout reveals large differences between the age groups. Expectations that the increase in new registrations among youth would result in higher turnout rates for younger demographics were not borne out by the data. As in the past three NPEs, turnout was higher among older groups (50–80+) than younger cohorts. Figure 1 shows that the highest turnout rate (82%) occurred among registered voters in the 70–79 age group. The lowest turnout rate (45%) was among the youngest voters, aged 18–19 years.

This was the first time that the turnout rate was highest among voters in the 70–79 age group. In the two previous NPEs, turnout had been highest in the 60–69 cohort. The pattern is attributable to what Schulz-Herzenberg (2020, p. 18) calls the 'trickle-up effect', where people continue to display their acquired voting habits as they 'move from one cohort to the next as they grow older'. In other words, today's 70–79-year-olds are the same people who in 2019 were in the 60–69 group, which had a turnout rate of 83%, and in 2014 they were in the 50–59 age group, with an 80% turnout. A detailed breakdown appears in Table 8. These older individuals have carried their learned habits of voting through time. However, as older people age and die, they account for a smaller proportion of the voters' roll and have steadily less impact on the aggregate turnout, compared with the upcoming younger groups.

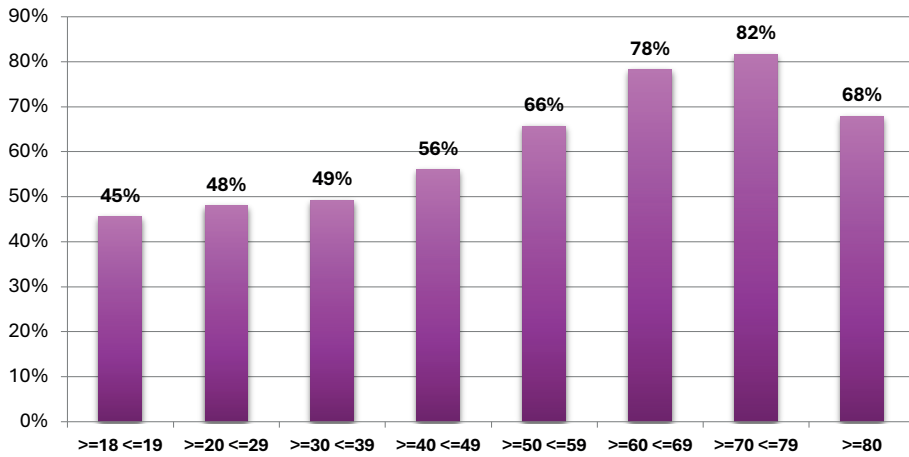


Figure 1: Percentage of turnout by age group in the 2024 national and provincial elections

Source: Unpublished IEC data (personal communication IEC 2024)

Table 8: Voter turnout by age in South African elections from 2014 to 2024

Age	2024			2019			2014
	Registered Voters	Voters	% Turnout by Age	Registered Voters	Voters	% Turnout by Age	% Turnout by Age
18–19	550 687	250 342	45	341 186	273 010	80	83
20–29	4 408 139	2 115 191	48	5 299 144	2 952 459	56	72
30–39	6 831 835	3 358 032	49	6 685 439	3 894 927	58	69
40–49	6 008 072	3 361 157	56	5 480 336	3 641 763	67	74
50–59	4 578 479	3 004 210	66	4 228 558	3 319 719	79	80
60–69	3 140 624	2 454 558	78	2 737 553	2 269 768	83	80
70–79	1 541 439	1 257 945	82	1 336 946	997 661	75	73
≥80	723 202	490 082	68	647 487	323 544	50	53
Total	27 782 477	16 291 516	59	26 756 649	17 672 851	66	73

Source: Unpublished IEC data (personal communication IEC 2024) and past IEC reports (IEC 2019a, p. 68; IEC 2014a, p. 44)

Among younger age groups, the trickle-up effect could lead to even steeper declines in aggregate voter turnout in the future. These individuals have learned the habit of *not* voting and may continue to abstain as they grow older. Combined

turnout among voters under 40 years was 47%, whereas voters aged 40 or older had a combined turnout rate of 70%. Because the under-40s constituted 54% of all registered voters in the 2024 elections, their low turnout reduced the overall turnout rate to 59%.

The picture is even more stark when calculating turnout as a percentage of EVAP. Voters under 40 had a EVAP registration rate of 55% and a EVAP turnout rate of 27%. Voters older than 40 had more than one-and-a-half times the respective EVAP registration rate, at 87%, and double the EVAP turnout rate, at 57% (see Table 9). The trickle-up effect bodes poorly for the future of voter turnout in South Africa.

Table 9: Turnout as a percentage of EVAP, broken down by age

Age Group	EVAP	Number of Registered Voters	% EVAP Registered	Voters	% Turnout of Registered Voters	% EVAP Turnout by Age
18–39	21 304 944	11 790 661	55	5 723 565	47	27
40–80+	18 448 141	15 991 816	87	10 567 952	70	57
TOTAL	39 753 087	27 782 477	69.9	16 291 516	59	41

Source: Author's calculations based on unpublished IEC data (personal communication IEC 2024)

A contrasting view is the generational theory of voter behaviour, which suggests that as people get older, they are more likely to register and turn out to vote. Therefore, there should be no alarm about the current low rate of electoral participation among youth. However, the main assumption underlying a generational explanation of turnout is that people become increasingly interested in elections as they grow older and take on individual, familial, and societal responsibility. They marry, have children, and progress in their careers.

Yet the youth unemployment rate is above 50% among people aged 15–34 years in South Africa. Unemployed youth account for 60.8% of the 15–24-year cohort and 41.7% of the 25–34-year group (StatsSA 2024). This situation means that many young people will be unable to achieve the traditional markers of adulthood that are associated with electoral participation.

Findings of the HSRC's 2023 pre-election survey of youth who planned to abstain or were uncertain about voting in the 2024 elections corroborate the above interpretation. The most widely cited reason for their planned abstention and uncertainty was 'poor government performance in addressing poverty, unemployment and corruption' (HSRC 2023). Among those youth who said poor socio-economic conditions were the most important reasons why they were

considering not voting in the 2024 NPE, 57% had voted in one or more previous elections. When asked what the IEC could do to encourage them to vote in the current election, many raised concerns that do not lie within the IEC's mandate, particularly job opportunities.

The crisis of voter turnout cannot be divorced from the crisis of unemployment and poverty. As Everatt (2024) explains, the generation born after the end of apartheid 'are the hardest-hit by unemployment and the lack of opportunities, and show high alienation... fewer young people are doing as well as their counterparts from 30 years ago; most are muddling along, searching for opportunities'. If the South African economy continues to marginalise the 'born-frees', we can expect to continue seeing their alienation reflected in their low voter turnout rates.

The Mystery of First-time Voters

In previous elections, the 18–19-year cohort had very high turnout, despite having the fewest registered voters. This trend did not continue in 2024. Table 10 compares turnout rates among the youngest voters in the elections over the years from 2009 to 2024. Voter turnout in this age group was above 70% in the previous three elections and reached a peak in 2004, at 83%, then fell slightly to 80% in 2019. In 2024, it was 45%.

Table 10: Voter metrics for the 18–19-year cohort in elections between 2009 and 2024

	Registered	Actual Voters	% Turnout
2024	550 687	250 342	45
2019	341 186	273 010	80
2014	646 313	534 065	83
2009	669 421	490 876	73

Source: IEC (2009, p. 94; 2014a, p. 44; 2019a, p. 68; personal communication IEC 2024)

Older youth, aged 20–29, have tended to show the lowest turnout rates among registered voters; only 36% of them turned out in 2019. The same pattern was observed in the 2021 LGEs, where 18–19-year-olds had a 71% turnout rate compared to the 20–29-year cohort's 35% turnout. In 2021, the 18–19 cohort had the highest turnout of all age groups, followed by 60–69-year-olds (64%) and then 70–79-year-olds (62%).

A possible explanation for previous high turnouts in the youngest cohort is that although relatively few of them register to vote, those who do so make

the effort to register because they really want to vote, and they similarly make the effort to go to the polls (Van Onselen 2023a). However, the novelty wears off in subsequent elections, which could explain the consistently low turnout rates among 20–29 year olds.

As noted, the pattern of youth turnout changed in 2024, with only 45% of 18–19-year-olds casting a ballot, a massive 35-percentage-point drop from 2019. This youngest cohort occupied the position of lowest turnout among all registered voters, with the 20–29 age group showing the second-lowest turnout rate for the first time. However, the very youngest age group had registered in considerably higher numbers than they did in the previous NPE, with 209 501 more individuals aged 18–19 registering in 2024 compared with 2019. Yet 22 668 fewer of them turned out in 2024, compared with 2019. Why did turnout drop so significantly in this age group?

One possibility is that young first-time voters were the most affected by the S24A rules. Many in this age group are students or young workers who are living away from home for the first time, and they may have been ignorant of the new rules requiring them to notify the IEC of their intention to vote at a different voting station. But the high turnout among 18–19-year-olds in the 2021 elections seems to contradict this view. Voting at the voting station where one is registered is enforced strictly in LGE rules in order to protect the integrity of ward elections. If 71% of young voters managed to vote where they were registered in 2021, one might have expected them to do the same in 2024.

While 18–19-year-olds represent only 1% of registered voters, they will be part of South Africa's electorate for the next fifty years. They represent the future of the country's democracy. It is important to understand what changed to limit their participation in 2024 if we hope to stem the tide of declining turnout.

Voting Across the Day (Hourly Volumes)

The issue of when exactly people vote on election day and how voting volumes are distributed throughout the day is not often considered in South Africa's literature on voter behaviour. However, a preliminary analysis of voting times provides insight into the possible impact of election administration on voter turnout in 2024. Figure 2 presents election turnout data for 9 174 108 voters at 22 931 voting districts, representing 56% of total voter turnout. The figure shows that on 29 May, only 2 193 890 (24%) of voters visited voting stations within the first four hours of the stations opening (07:00–11:00). Most voting activity took place between 11:00 and 17:00, with nearly half a million voters voting after the official closing time of 21:00. This pattern differs significantly from 2019, when more than half of voters had cast their ballots by 11:00 and there was 'a very small number of voters voting beyond 21:00' (IEC 2019a, p. 68).

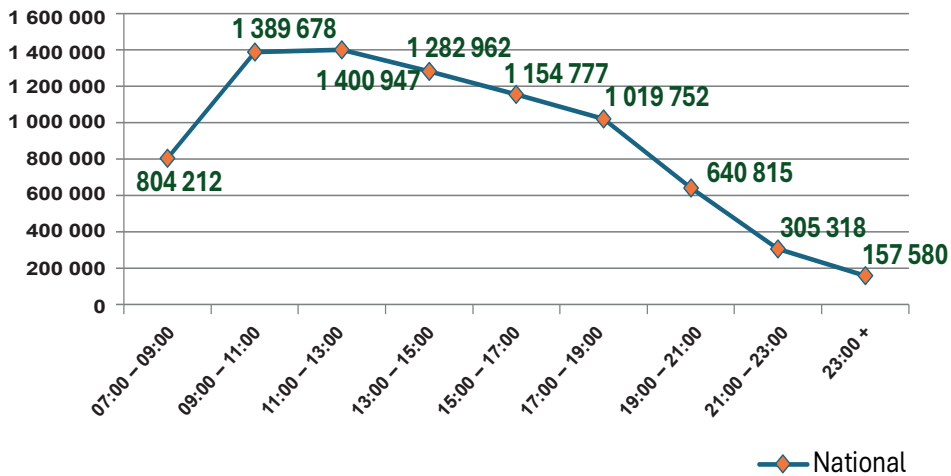


Figure 2: Volume of votes by time of day in the 2024 national and provincial elections

Source: Unpublished IEC data (personal communication IEC 2024)

Administrative Challenges

The observed trends in hourly voting volumes corroborate voters’ first-hand accounts of frustrating administrative delays at voting stations across the country. The African Union (AU) and European Union (EU) observer missions flagged the following issues in election administration:

- Faulty voter management devices (VMDs) that caused delays in voter verification.
- Delays in delivery of election materials.
- Poorly trained electoral staff, particularly presiding officers: the AU and EU missions recommended that training for electoral staff must be improved to ensure consistency in implementing voting procedures. The AU recommended a revision to ‘the recruitment process for polling staff to attract more qualified individuals, especially for managerial roles like Presiding Officer’ (AU 2024, p. 7).
- The introduction of a third ballot, the regional ballot, which complicated the voting process.
- Funding cuts to the IEC imposed by the National Treasury, which constrained the budget for training and logistics. One of the EU mission’s priority recommendations was to ‘ensure adequate funding for the IEC, especially in an election year’ (EU 2024, p. 40).

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In spite of all the political and logistical challenges, the international and observer missions all declared the election free and fair. Three decades of one-party electoral dominance ended abruptly with the ANC's loss of majority power. There was widespread acceptance of the election results and a peaceful transition to a new form of national government. The country is now governed by a coalition government of national unity (GNU) – for the first time since 1996. The results have been interpreted as a sign of a thriving and vibrant electoral politics, with discernible shifts in voting patterns as voters abandoned traditional party loyalties to support new entrants.

However, the record low voter turnout complicates this hopeful scenario. The reality of nearly 60% of the EVAP having abstained from the election indicates that South Africa's democracy is on shaky ground. Researchers of voter behaviour over the past fifteen years have warned about the cumulative effects of declining voter turnout. Even so, the reality regarding the 60% abstention in the 2024 election was a shock. To paraphrase Ernest Hemingway's description of how a person goes bankrupt, the crash in electoral participation happened in two ways: gradually, then suddenly.

The overarching conclusion from all discussions on voter turnout is that the declining rates of voter turnout cannot be addressed or solved through policy or legislation alone. Central to restoring citizens' trust in democratic institutions is the government's ability to deliver on its constitutional responsibility, which means improving the quality of life for all citizens and responding to their needs. However, several targeted interventions can be implemented to improve participation in future elections. Mahlangu and Schulz-Herzenberg (2022) recently outlined compelling findings about the correlation between political participation and political efficacy. Civic education is critical to improve citizens' understanding of the system and to empower them to utilise the tools available to hold government accountable.

Furthermore, removing administrative barriers to participation through automatic registration gives all eligible voters the option to vote, without the additional cognitive and resource burden of people needing to remember to register. An opt-out provision can be made for those who do not want to be on the voter's roll. The biggest hurdle to this proposal is the Constitutional Court's 2015 judgment requiring the IEC to include voters' addresses in the voters' roll.³ However, this point is not inherently contradictory to the principle of automatic registration and could be managed administratively.

The Electoral Reform Consultation Panel should consider the impact on political participation in its recommendations for alternative electoral systems for

3 A big thanks to Ebrahim Fakir for this insight.

South Africa. Some of the amendments to the Electoral Act added complicated requirements to the electoral system, which undermined voter turnout. Moreover, the current closed-list proportional representation system is meant incentivise turnout, because every vote counts (Sanz 2017). Instead, it has increased voter apathy because voters feel disconnected from their political representatives (Mongae 2023). McClendon (2016) also suggests that the distance makes elected representatives less responsive to citizens. Hence, electoral system reform to improve the accountability of politicians is essential for consolidating democracy and constitutionalism.

Finally, there is an urgent need for in-depth and sustained research on voter behaviour, using diverse methodologies. Current survey questions and approaches need to be updated. The consensus from dozens of voter behaviour studies published in the past thirty years is that there is a need for more targeted research to comprehend the drivers behind ‘voting, vote choice and abstention’ among the South African electorate (Bekker et al. 2022, p. 297). For three decades, the voter behaviour literature anticipated that the end of ANC electoral dominance would be accompanied by increased VP and turnout. However, that did not occur. It is particularly concerning that electoral change appears to have come about through the abstention of the poorest South Africans (Netshithenzhe 2024; Scholtz 2024). As Everatt (2016, p. 64) presciently observed: ‘The era of ineluctability is dead; the racial census is buried; the era of substantive electoral uncertainty has arrived. The price tag seems to be the electoral participation of the poor.’

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