

VOTES, VOICES AND VIEWS

A Review of the Management of the South African 2024 National and Provincial Elections

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INTRODUCTION

The 2024 national and provincial elections in South Africa were significant in that they marked 30 years of democracy in the country. For the first time in three decades, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party was predicted to fall below the 50 per cent mark required for it to maintain its majority control in South Africa's Parliament. In this period of heightened political tension, new electoral reforms allowing independent candidates to compete on the national and provincial ballots were implemented to allow a broadened scope of political competition and representation. This move reflects the country's evolving political landscape, in which the citizens demand a greater voice in their governance. However, the road to the elections was marked by challenges, including a series of pre-election legal disputes. These issues highlighted potential gaps in the electoral framework, raising concerns about the technical capacity of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and the overall reliability and trustworthiness of the electoral process.

For the IEC, a successful vote would reaffirm the country's democratic resilience and its ability to conduct credible elections. Failure could mean a setback to public trust in the electoral process, potential political instability, and diminished confidence in the country's democratic institutions. This would undermine both national and international perceptions of its commitment to democratic principles. The IEC faced criticism over its ability to handle complex logistical issues, such as voter registration and the timely provision of necessary materials to polling stations. Additionally, the number of court cases filed by political parties and candidates questioning electoral procedures and outcomes further strained the credibility of the process. Despite these challenges, the IEC managed to maintain public trust in its role as an impartial institution. By addressing some of the

technical issues and defending its decisions in court, the IEC was able to preserve its independence and neutrality (EU Election Expert Report 2024).

The elections presented both strengths and weaknesses in the current electoral system and in the performance of the IEC. One of the notable weaknesses was the continued decline in voter turnout, especially among young voters, with over 40% abstaining from the election. Additionally, logistical issues such as the late arrivals of voting materials, malfunctions in the deployment of the voter management devices (VMDs), discouragingly long queues, and a confusing multiple ballot paper system negatively impacted the voting process. The IEC's efforts to inform the electorate about the new system, which allowed for the participation of independent candidates, could have been more robust.

The fiscal, political, and legal developments around these elections presented a unique set of challenges for the IEC. Increased litigations, adjustments to logistics, results systems, and ballot design – including a third ballot paper – heightened these challenges.

There were also a number of positive developments. The IEC expanded voter participation through special voting mechanisms, such as creating an online registration system for diaspora voting for the first time since 2009. The introduction of special voting processes, such as home visits and voting for prisoners, further helped improve public trust in the electoral process.

This paper explores the management of the 2024 national and provincial elections, focusing on the challenges and successes faced by the IEC in ensuring a free and transparent electoral process. Using different election observer group reports, it outlines the legal and technical challenges encountered by the IEC, including litigations and disputes over electoral procedures, and how these factors influenced the credibility of the elections. The paper also evaluates the role of election observers and the overall perception of the IEC's neutrality and independence. By reviewing these elements, the paper provides insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the 2024 elections and offers recommendations for enhancing South Africa's electoral process moving forward.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

South Africa has been using a closed-list propositional representation electoral system since it transitioned from apartheid to democracy in 1994. An electoral system determines how the country's leaders are elected, and the choice of which electoral system to use should be based on what the citizens want to achieve (Phirinyane 2013). The proportional representation system was chosen because it would allow the continued representation of minority groups proportionate to their electoral support (Mhlongo 2020). The system in South Africa allows political

parties to compile candidate lists based on their own internal party rules and processes. In this system, voters consequently vote for a party with an associated candidate list determined by that party before the election.

The closed list system has resulted in some socio-political benefits related to inclusion. The ANC has long used a zebra system, alternating male and female representatives, resulting in South Africa having a relatively high number of women holding positions in the national and provincial legislatures. With the decline of support for the ANC, South Africa has also seen a decline in the number of women in Parliament, as gender parity is not a universal policy across political parties currently represented in Parliament. South Africa has declined to 22nd place globally according to IDEA's Women's Political Participation in Africa Barometer 2024.

The closed list system does, however, have its drawbacks, often criticised as contributing to the inaccessibility and impunity of government officials. Growing public perceptions of government impunity contributed to declining levels of trust in political parties and government (HSRC 2023). Two developments in the 2024 electoral cycle are associated – at least in part - with this public malaise. The first is the introduction of independent candidates, and the second is the proliferation of political parties.

On 11 June 2020, the Constitutional Court of South Africa delivered its judgement in the landmark decision of *New Nation Movement NPC and Others v President of the Republic of South Africa*. The Court ruled that the Electoral Act 73 of 1998 is unconstitutional to the extent that it prevents adult citizens from standing for and being elected to the National Assembly and provincial legislatures as independent candidates. Consequently, ahead of the 2024 elections, Parliament was required to amend the electoral system through the enactment of legislation. This was aimed at addressing the evolving needs of the country's electoral system. To achieve this, the government established the Electoral Reform Consultation Panel (ERCP), composed of experts in election administration, law, and public service, to review the electoral system and recommend amendments to the current system that would regulate elections in South Africa in terms of the Constitution.

Following a process of consultations – including the establishment of a ministerial advisory committee on the electoral system – Parliament settled on a system that retains the spirit of the electoral system used from 1994 (at least for the 2024 elections). Thereafter an electoral reform panel should advise on a future electoral system. Following these processes, the president of South Africa assented to the Electoral Amendment Bill in April 2023, and the Electoral Matters Amendment Act was gazetted on 8 May 2024, 13 months and two weeks before the 2024 elections.

In the 29 May 2024 national and provincial elections, members of the National Assembly and the nine provincial legislatures were elected based on a party-list compensatory proportional representation system, with the new act simply accommodating independent candidates within the current system. To give effect to this, the 400 seats in the National Assembly are split into two portions. One portion of 200 seats designates each province as a region or constituency, with each province or region being allocated a designated number of seats depending on its population size; and a further 200 compensatory seats are reserved for political parties to contest.

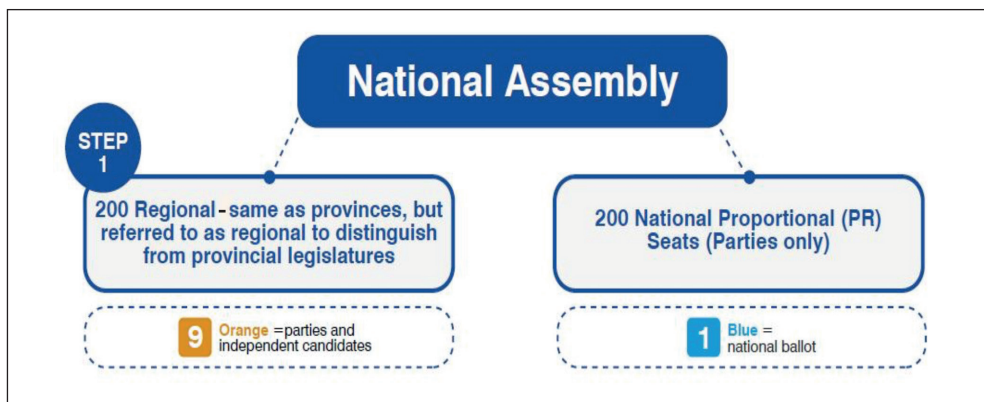


Figure 1: Seat Composition of the National Assembly

Source: Independent Electoral Commission (IEC 2024)

Figure 1 shows the dual-system seat composition of South Africa's National Assembly, which is divided equally between regional and national proportional representation systems.

The number of political parties on the national ballot paper has increased with every election cycle, from 19 in 1994 to 48 parties in 2019 and 52 in 2024. The new electoral system necessitated that voters received three ballot papers instead of the two they had in the past: two national ballots (the regional and compensatory ballots) and one provincial ballot paper. This created a significant amount of new and additional administration around the implementation of election processes for the IEC.

Additionally, the Political Party Funding Act (6 of 2018) came into operation on 1 April 2021 and was implemented for the first time in national elections. This required political parties to disclose donations exceeding R100 000, promoting transparency in party financing. Initially, the IEC conducted a number of workshops aimed at informing the political parties about their duties. Parties

not represented in Parliament or provincial legislatures argued that submitting audited financial statements every year was too onerous. After seeking legal advice, the IEC confirmed that submitting audited financial accounts was mandatory and that not doing so would be in contradiction of the law. Ahead of the 2024 elections, several political parties were ordered by the Electoral Court to pay administrative fines of R10 000 and R40 000, for failing to provide audited financial statements to the IEC. These included the African Independent Congress (AIC), African National Congress (ANC), African Transformation Movement (ATM), Congress of the People (COPE), National Freedom Party (NFP), and Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC) (Allsop 2024).

THE IMPACT OF ELECTORAL REFORMS ON ELECTION PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT

The nature and timing of the changes presented challenges for the IEC ahead of the 2024 elections. The Constitutional Court made its ruling in June 2020, followed by the passing of the Electoral Amendment Act in April 2023, with the elections being held in May 2024. This left limited time for an inclusive and comprehensive rollout. The impact on the IEC of this late implementation includes reduced preparation time to adapt its systems; insufficient opportunity for comprehensive voter education; operational complexities in updating ballot designs and vote-counting procedures to accommodate independent candidates; and issues with reallocating resources to manage these changes. With limited time, the IEC struggled to adapt its systems efficiently. This led to operational complexities, particularly in deciding on whether to update the ballot designs or come up with the third ballot and seat allocation formula to accommodate independent candidates.

The delay compromised the commission's ability to update voter information systems, recruit and train election staff, and streamline logistical operations which are crucial for a smooth electoral process. The time constraints resulted in insufficient comprehensive voter education. This left many voters unclear about the new voting procedures, potentially leading to confusion and an increase in invalid or spoiled ballots.

The introduction of independent candidates in the regional elections required significant updates to ballot layouts, and the IEC was pressed for time to ensure these changes were clearly communicated to electoral stakeholders. These challenges highlighted the risks of late-stage implementation and underscored the need for early reforms to mitigate disruptions and ensure the integrity of the election process.

Adding to the election management complexities were several additional court cases brought forward by parties related to the proposed timelines. In the end, however, all parties accepted the election results despite the initial court challenges, which were later withdrawn. One such case was by the Labour Party, which petitioned the Constitutional Court to adjust the IEC's election timetable after failing to meet deadlines for documentation submissions. However, the court ruled in favour of the IEC, reinforcing the institution's adherence to legal frameworks.

In terms of the timing of changes to the Elections Act, international best practice emphasises the fairness, transparency, and integrity of electoral processes, as highlighted by both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance (ACDEG) (African Union 2007). While neither document specifies exact timelines for modifying electoral laws, they stress the need for equal and fair conditions in elections. Article 25 of the ICCPR guarantees citizens the right and opportunity to participate in public affairs, vote, and be elected. The ICCPR also calls for equal and fair election conditions, suggesting that changes to election legislation should not be implemented in a way that unfairly affects participants.

Regionally, Article 2 of the ACDEG emphasises the values of democracy and the rule of law, while Article 17 calls for impartial electoral organisations to ensure free and transparent elections. Abrupt changes to electoral laws, especially close to election dates, may compromise impartiality and fairness. This highlights the delicate balance between implementing necessary electoral reforms and ensuring adequate preparation time for election management bodies, voter education, and system adaptation to uphold the integrity of the democratic process and ensure full voter participation and understanding.

The Roles and Responsibilities of the Independent Electoral Commission

Chapter 9 of the Constitution of South Africa provides for state institutions supporting constitutional democracy, which include the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). Ensuring the effective separation of powers and upholding the Constitution requires vigilant oversight and robust counterbalancing institutions. Sections 190 and 191 of the Constitution establish the IEC as a permanent institution responsible for managing the elections at national, provincial, and municipal legislative levels. The commissioners, one of whom must be a judge, are appointed for a seven-year term, renewable once. The IEC as an electoral management body appears to have been designed as an independent institution that can operate without outside influence (Phirinyan 2013). The IEC is guaranteed

functional and institutional autonomy and is only subject to the Constitution and the law. It is funded by budgetary allocations approved by the National Assembly and donations from other sources.

The National Treasury's 2021 Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) proposed cutting the IEC's budget by almost R800-million between 2022 and 2025. According to the 2024 National Treasury statement:

While budget reductions were announced in the 2024 Budget to address the country's unsustainable debt burden, measures were taken to specifically ensure that requirements for the elections are adequately resourced... As part of the 2024 Budget process, the National Treasury continuously engaged with the IEC on its funding requirements for the 2024 National and Provincial Elections... The 2024 Budget Review outlined these measures: a) Reversing spending reductions to the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), making an additional R250 million; b) Allowing the IEC to retain its accumulated surpluses of R1.5 billion; and c) Providing additional allocations of R350 million for the security of the election process.

The Portfolio Committee on Home Affairs expressed concerns over the impact of budget cuts on the IEC operations. The committee was particularly concerned about the effect on programmes two and three – the outreach, and the implications of this for running free and fair elections (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2024). Specifically, the IEC faced a R128 million budget cut for the 2024 elections, despite being tasked with managing an expanded mandate due to changes in the electoral system, including the introduction of independent candidates. These new responsibilities increased the demands on the IEC's resources, particularly in terms of voter education and logistical management. However, the National Treasury clarified that despite budget cuts to help with the country's debt, the IEC received enough money for the 2024 elections. The statement asserted that the IEC received extra funds, including an additional R250 million and was allowed to keep R1.5 billion from its surplus. They also received R350 million to help secure the election process. Even though some reports said the IEC did not have enough money, the Treasury confirmed that the IEC's election costs could be managed with the resources they had. According to the EU Election Expert Report (2024), the IEC had to use the available budget to reprioritise its projects related to the elections and will need to continuously retain surplus funds to address deficits in future years.

OBSERVING THE NATIONAL AND PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS IN 2024

Election observation, both citizen and international, has gained a reputable influence globally. In highly competitive elections, the scrutiny of electoral processes increases as both political parties and the public demand higher levels of transparency and accountability to ensure the fairness of outcomes. This places the IEC under intense pressure to adhere strictly to legal frameworks while addressing operational challenges. Election observers play a critical role in alleviating these tensions by providing impartial assessments of the electoral process. They serve as credible intermediaries by documenting and reporting on potential irregularities, thereby guiding electoral commissions to address grievances effectively.

Ahead of the 2024 elections, the South African Government and the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) invited election observer missions to assess the elections and offer recommendations on the process (AU 2024; EISA 202c). The IEC accredited over 150 organisations to observe the 2024 elections, including international election observation groups. The assessment of the electoral process is based on international, continental, and regional benchmarks for elections, as well as the legal framework for elections in the Republic of South Africa. The presence of international observers is important not only because of their ability to bring international legitimacy, but also because they are often perceived as non-partisan and neutral.

Most of these international organisations are signatories to the 2005 Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and the Code of Conduct for International Election Observers (UN 2005). They also have norms, values, standards, and codes of conduct for election observation. The assessment of the electoral process is based on these benchmarks as well as the legal framework for elections in the Republic of South Africa.

Observation groups were deployed in all nine (9) provinces of South Africa, where they observed the final stages of the campaigns and special voting and election day procedures, including the opening of polls, voting, closing, and counting processes.

The obligation of states to provide citizens with the right to vote is also contained in international agreements and declarations adopted by international organisations such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the African Union, and the United Nations. For example, Article 2.1 of the SADC *Principles of Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections* mandates the member states to conduct regular, free, fair, transparent, credible, and peaceful democratic elections to institutionalise the legitimate authority of representative government. Article 2 of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance provides that:

All member states must [p]romote the holding of regular free and fair elections to institutionalise legitimate authority of representative government as well as democratic change of governments.

Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognises the right of citizens to participate in the activities of government, while Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) further affirms this right, specifically providing for participation in the public affairs of states, which includes the right to vote.

Preparedness of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC)

While the IEC performed well in some areas, such as increasing the number of voting stations and handling special voting arrangements, it faced challenges in fully meeting its mandate of voter education, a crucial part of its legal responsibility to enhance democratic participation. This paper highlights some of the areas identified as requiring strengthening by different election observation groups.

Ahead of the 2024 national and provincial elections, the IEC developed and implemented the election timetable in consultation with the political liaison committees (PLCs). They worked with the IEC to set deadlines for candidate nominations, special vote applications, and other electoral milestones. This collaboration helped ensure all stakeholders adhered to the legal framework and procedural requirements. The role PLCs play is crucial in fostering communication and coordination between the IEC and political parties during electoral processes. They operate at the national, provincial, and municipal levels and serve as platforms to discuss and resolve electoral issues.

Figure 2 indicates the trust levels in various institutions in South Africa over 20 years. The data is divided into five institutions: the national government, parliament, local government, political parties, and the electoral commission. The IEC started with relatively high trust in 2004 at 69%, peaking in 2010 at 71% (see Figure 2). While the IEC remains one of the most trusted public institutions in South Africa relative to many other public institutions, it is also in decline at 44% in 2023 (Kotzé 2023). This trend suggests a decreasing confidence in the IEC over the two decades, indicating possible challenges. However, it is argued that the IEC's decline in public trust is a result of collateral damage in an overall declining confidence in all public institutions and the political system.

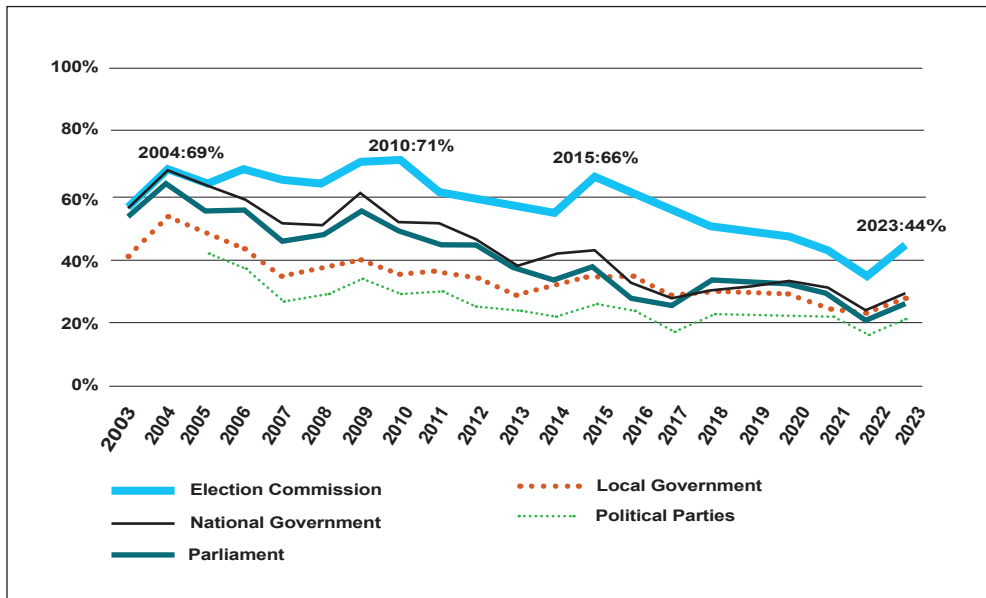


Figure 2: Institutional Trust Electoral Commission in relative perspective (2003-2023)

Source: HSRC South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2003-2023

The IEC’s financial resources available for the 2024 elections were deemed sufficient by the National Treasury. When coupled with increased operational demands, these seemed to be inadequate, particularly in areas like voter education and special voting arrangements. The IEC managed an increase in the number of registered voters, establishing 23 292 voting stations – a 1.6% increase from 22 924 in 2019. It also handled a 105.8% rise in registered special voters, significantly increasing the logistical workload for home visits and special voting arrangements. These additional pressures may have affected the IEC’s ability to fully prepare for the new electoral system.

Observation groups recommended that any major amendments to electoral legislation be made well in advance of elections to provide legal certainty, allow for adequate operational adjustments by the IEC, and promote stakeholder awareness.

Political Parties and Independent Candidates

In the 2024 elections, issues surrounding political party funding and campaigning highlighted the need for stronger regulatory frameworks. Observers noted that the lack of transparency in campaign financing created an uneven playing field, with well-resourced parties gaining significant advantages over smaller parties

and independent candidates (African Union 2024). The inclusion of independent candidates further complicated this dynamic, as the existing regulatory framework was insufficiently detailed to address their unique campaigning and funding needs. Additionally, in the absence of clear timelines for campaigning, parties with greater organisational capacity were better positioned to launch early campaigns and buy more airtime, leaving smaller parties and independent candidates at a disadvantage.

Observation groups recommended prioritising legal reforms in future elections to focus on enhancing transparency in campaign rules, including the regulation of independent candidates. Enhancing transparency in campaign rules is essential, particularly with the increased inclusion of independent candidates. This transparency would level the playing field and ensure all contestants adhere to the same accountability standards. Additionally, there should be clear timelines for campaigning. Well-defined timelines for campaigning are critical to ensuring fairness and allowing adequate preparation for all parties.

Voter Registration

Physical voter registration for the 2024 elections was complemented by online registration, which was available until 23 February 2024 when the election date was gazetted. Eligible diaspora voters were afforded the opportunity to register using the online platform for the first time during the 2024 elections, thereby expanding voter participation. The certified total number of voters for the 2024 elections was 27 782 477, marking a marginal increase of 3.9% compared to the 26 736 803 registered voters in 2019. However, the gap between eligible and registered voters has continued to increase since registration became a requirement for voting in South Africa. Observer groups reported concerns over a high number of potential voters, estimated to be around 13,7 million, who did not register to vote.

Observation groups suggested that the IEC could better leverage technology to improve its reach with potential youth voters by utilising digital platforms to engage potential voters and improving partnerships with community organisations, schools, and universities to further enhance outreach efforts and encourage a culture of active citizenship.

Special Voting

The legal framework makes provision for special voting regardless of the voter's location or status. Only registered voters who could not travel to their voting station on election day and voters who could not vote at the voting station where they were registered on election day could apply to vote earlier at the same voting

station. There was an increase in the number of registered special voters of 105.8%, from 774 094 in 2019 to 1 592 949 in 2024 (EISA 2024c). This voting took place on 27 and 28 May 2024. In cases where a voter was not able to vote on those days, they were allowed to vote on election day at the voting station where they were registered. Party agents and observers were allowed to observe the special vote.

The special vote was reported to have been effectively administered by the IEC although some concerns were raised. These included instances where the voters were not at home at the time of the visits by polling officials; some voters had provided incorrect addresses for home visits, which led to a loss of productive man hours. In several instances the secrecy of the ballot was compromised due to the proximity of the voter and staff because of the layout of the homes.

Voting on Election Day

Section 5 of the Electoral Commission Act of 1996 mandates the IEC to promote knowledge of electoral processes and ensure that elections are run smoothly. However, in the 2024 elections, many voters expressed confusion over the colour-coded triple ballot paper system, highlighting a gap in voter education. The IEC's efforts to inform the electorate about the new system, which allowed for the participation of independent candidates, could have been more robust. This shortfall in communication may have impacted voters' understanding of the changes, undermining the IEC's duty to ensure a well-informed electorate.

The reforms that came with Article 24A of the amended Electoral Act 23 brought about challenges and ambiguities on election day. It required voters who intended to vote at a different voting station than the one they were registered at to notify the IEC, indicating at which voting station they intend to vote, within the prescribed deadline. This resulted in their names being added to the special voters list.

The late electoral reforms had a financial impact on several key operation areas, such as hiring additional staff and preparing specific voter education campaigns to inform voters of the legal changes. A total of 400 000 voters applied to vote under section 24A (African Union 2024). However, some voters who had not provided notice arrived at the polling station and were expected to cast their ballots. This was another challenge faced by the IEC to inform voters timeously about the legal changes to avoid significant numbers of disenfranchised voters.

Figure 3 shows the percentage of South Africans who were aware of voter education campaigns by province in 2023. The bottom sections represent respondents who were aware of voter education campaigns, while the top sections represent those who were not. Mpumalanga has the highest awareness level, with 77% of residents indicating familiarity with voter education initiatives, followed by North West at 67% and KwaZulu-Natal at 61%.

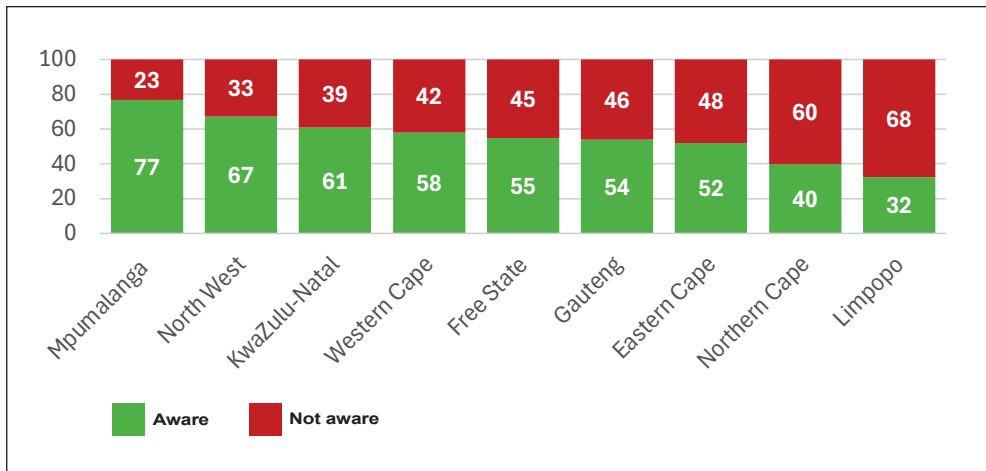


Figure 3: Percentage of South Africans who are aware of voter education campaigns by province, 2023

Source: IEC Voter Participation Survey (VPS) 2023

These figures suggest that voter education campaigns in these provinces may have been more effective and visible. In contrast, provinces like Limpopo, the Northern Cape, and the Eastern Cape show lower awareness levels, with 68%, 60%, and 48% of respondents, respectively, indicating they were not aware of these campaigns. Limpopo, in particular, has low levels of awareness at only 32%, suggesting potential gaps in voter education outreach in these provinces.

The data underscores the need for targeted efforts to improve voter education efforts and reach provinces with lower awareness, especially with recent changes in the legal framework for elections. The disparities suggest that tailored strategies, considering regional demographics and communication preferences, might be necessary to enhance voter education awareness nationwide.

EISA's election observation mission (EISA 2024c) reported long, slow queues primarily caused by the VMDs malfunctioning or running out of power. In some cases, the polling staff resorted to manual voters' rolls for identification of voters, while in other stations, polling staff first attempted to resolve technical challenges with the VMDs. Some stakeholders criticised the IEC for inadequate planning and training of electoral staff. The IEC later clarified that the VMD is not for verification of voters but is only a tool to facilitate the identification of voters and accelerate the voting process; every voting station still uses a manual voters' roll.

Observer groups have recommended enhancing the reliability of VMDs to prevent delays and ensure seamless voter verification. Regular stress testing can also help to ensure their effectiveness under high voter turnout conditions.

Moreover, backup systems such as manual verification procedures should be ready to mitigate technical failures.

On election day, several voting stations reported not receiving materials on time, which delayed the opening of voting stations. Observer groups have suggested improving logistics management to ensure the timely delivery of essential materials on election days in future elections. Partnerships with logistics companies or deploying real-time tracking technologies can significantly improve the efficiency of material distribution.

Polling Staff

The IEC recruited and trained over 200 000 voting and counting staff to manage election day. At each of the polling stations there was an average of 10 polling officials. There were additional staff to complement the existing staff during vote counting. However, the polling staff demonstrated a lack of understanding of the new procedures, particularly regarding Section 24(a) where in some stations, the voters were allowed to vote; and 11 provided a national ballot only. In other stations, those voters were turned away (EISA 2024b). All voters who were in the queue at the time of closing were allowed to vote, even though some polling stations closed late because of the long queues. The results were announced publicly and posted outside the polling station, and party/candidate agents were given a copy of the results. Observers commended these measures as they contributed to the transparency of the process.

As the key implementers of election processes on the day, election staff need to have a clear and full understanding of the rules, roles, and responsibilities. Provision of adequate training of election staff to ensure the uniform application of voting procedures is essential for an efficient election process. The training may cover operational tasks, voter engagement, and conflict resolution to prepare staff for a variety of situations. The use of simulation exercises and mock elections can be used to assess readiness and ensure staff confidence.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2024 national and provincial elections in South Africa represented a pivotal moment in the evolution of the country's democratic practices, highlighting both the resilience and vulnerabilities of its electoral system. While the IEC successfully delivered a credible election despite challenges, the process underscored several areas requiring reform and improvements.

One of the most notable developments was the introduction of independent candidates into the electoral process, a significant step toward inclusivity that

addressed long-standing demands for broader representation. However, the late implementation of electoral reforms posed substantial challenges. Insufficient time for operational adjustments hindered the IEC's ability to conduct comprehensive voter education and adequately prepare for logistical demands, leading to several deficiencies. These included delays in the delivery of election materials and technical malfunctions with voter management devices, which disrupted operational efficiency.

Moreover, the elections exposed some weaknesses in the current system, including declining voter turnout and inequities in campaign financing. While the implementation of the Political Party Funding Act marked a progressive step toward financial transparency, its enforcement identified gaps that unduly affected smaller parties and independent candidates. Election observation groups emphasised the unfair advantage of well-funded parties, calling for stricter regulation and oversight of campaign financing practices.

Despite these challenges, the IEC demonstrated transparency during the electoral conduct by holding regular briefings for stakeholders and effectively managing pre-election legal disputes, thereby reinforcing its credibility. The widespread acceptance of the election results by political parties, even following initial legal challenges, reflected the robustness of South Africa's democratic institutions.

Looking ahead to improving South Africa's electoral processes, a multifaceted approach to reform is essential. Regulatory changes must be implemented well in advance of election dates to provide legal certainty and allow ample preparation time for the IEC. This would enable the IEC to refine logistical planning, improve voter education campaigns, and seamlessly integrate new systems, such as those accommodating independent candidates. Enhancing transparency in campaign financing is equally important, with enforceable rules requiring political parties and independent candidates to disclose funding sources and expenditures. Such measures would ensure fairness, level the playing field, and uphold accountability standards across all electoral participants.

Operational improvements must address the logistical inefficiencies highlighted in 2024. Ensuring timely delivery of election materials and enhancing the reliability of VMDs through regular testing and maintenance are critical steps. Furthermore, fostering voter education, particularly among younger demographics, through partnerships with educational institutions and community organisations will promote active citizenship. Robust staff training, including simulation exercises and mock elections, is necessary to ensure consistent application of election procedures and effective dispute resolution. Finally, greater collaboration with election observation groups can enhance transparency and

identify actionable recommendations for improving the electoral process, thereby reinforcing public trust in South Africa's democracy.

The general post-election outlook is filled with uncertainty but it also offers a potential turning point for reforms and growth. There is a sense of cautious optimism in the country that the new government will improve the country's social and economic status. The next five years will be interesting, and it is yet to be seen whether the government's national unity led by the ANC will be able to turn the country's political and economic fortune around and deliver on the promises made to the South African people. By implementing recommendations made by observation groups, South Africa can strengthen its democratic institutions and pave the way for a more inclusive and accountable political landscape.

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