



South Africa Post-Election Review Policy Series POLICY BRIEF NUMBER 2

Votes, Voices and Views: A Review of the Management of the South African 2024 National and Provincial Elections

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The current socio-economic and political context is characterised by increasing perceptions of systemic corruption, poor service delivery and the government's growing detachment from ordinary citizens. The implications of this context have been a general decline in the levels of confidence and trust in South African government institutions. The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) has not been immune to this sentiment, enjoying only 40% of the public trust (HRSC, 2023). Domestic and international observer groups were invited by the government of South Africa to give an unbiased assessment of the 2024 National and Provincial elections.

The observers of the 2024 elections proposed several policy actions to strengthen future elections. Key measures include amending electoral legislation to promote transparency, addressing gaps in campaign rules and financial accountability, and resolving logistical and technical issues within the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). Furthermore, enhancing voter engagement and ensuring cooperation among observer groups are essential to restoring public trust in the electoral process. These strategic actions would foster a more resilient democratic process that reflects the will of the South African people.

BACKGROUND

Election observation plays a vital role in maintaining transparency, ensuring that electoral processes adhere to international standards and boosting public confidence in election results. Ahead of the 2024 elections, the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) accredited 197 local and international observer organisations. These observers were invited to provide independent assessments of the electoral environment and processes based on a combination of international, continental and regional benchmarks, as well as South Africa's legal framework for elections.

Observation report findings

Observer groups' key findings highlighted both positive developments and areas of concern. Positive developments included:

1. The overall political and electoral environment remained calm and peaceful.
2. The recruitment process for temporary election staff was commended for its transparency.
3. The regular consultative meetings held by the IEC with all electoral stakeholders during the entire electoral process were widely praised.

However, some common concerns were flagged across the observer reports, including:

1. The late introduction of the Electoral Matters Amendment Act, Act 14 of 2024, created confusion among voters and political parties.
2. Civic and voter education efforts were insufficient, particularly in rural areas and among youth.
3. Gaps remain in the legal framework regarding the start and end of political campaigns.
4. Inconsistency of the application of polling procedures – Some voting stations used one ballot box for all three ballots while other stations used three ballot boxes for each ballot. With voter management devices (VMDs) not operating well, some staff were focused on repeatedly rebooting the VMDs, which delayed the voting process, and some voters turned away.
5. A growing disconnect between the government and citizens highlighted the need for a more inclusive approach to electoral participation, especially among younger voters.

Despite challenges, observers commended the IEC's efforts to maintain neutrality and uphold the integrity of the electoral process. However, several urgent recommended reforms are needed to restore public trust and ensure the integrity of the electoral processes going forward.

POLICY ALTERNATIVES

While legislative changes expanded possibilities for democratic participation and representation, they have also created new complexities. The IEC now faces the task of managing a more fragmented political landscape. The oversight of independent candidates and the enforcement of campaign rules, among other responsibilities, have come under strain, revealing gaps within the current system.

In response to the challenges highlighted in the 2024 electoral process, various policy alternatives can be considered. First, enhancing the legal framework governing electoral processes is crucial. This could involve amending existing laws to tighten regulations around campaigning, ensuring that parties and independents adhere to transparency

standards. Second, improving voter engagement initiatives, particularly those targeting youth and the marginalised, could help bridge the gap between eligible voters and registered participants. This might involve community outreach programmes and educational campaigns emphasising the importance of civic participation.

Ideally, electoral integrity and governance improvements should be accompanied by real efforts to address socio-economic challenges. Realistically, the IEC will need to distinguish itself from the broader systemic issues driving voter dissatisfaction, particularly poor perceptions of the government's performance and service delivery failures.

Recommendations to the IEC

- The IEC can 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.
- Prioritise legal reforms that focus on enhancing transparency in campaign rules, including regulation of independent candidates.
- Ensure clear timelines for campaigning.
- Enhance the reliability of voter management devices (VMDs) to prevent delays and ensure seamless voter verification.
- Improve logistics management to ensure the timely delivery of essential materials on election days in future elections.

- Provide adequate training of staff to ensure the uniform application of voting procedures.

Recommendations for the government and Parliament

- Ensure that major amendments to electoral legislation are made well in advance of elections to provide legal certainty, allow for adequate operational adjustments by the IEC and promote stakeholder awareness.
- Amend existing laws to tighten regulations around campaign rules and financial accountability, ensuring that parties and independents adhere to transparency standards.

By implementing these recommendations, South Africa can strengthen its democratic institutions and pave the way for a more inclusive and accountable political landscape.

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