

VOTER PARTICIPATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

**A Human Sciences Research Council Study
for the Independent Electoral Commission**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

VOTER PARTICIPATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa is striving to consolidate a rigorous system of electoral regulations and administration. These efforts aim to entrench institutional checks and safeguards typical of advanced, industrialized democracies—and to do so in a middle-income country with among the most severe social inequalities in the world. Inequality in South Africa is complex, reflecting the interplay of many factors—such as socioeconomic class, legacies of racial discrimination, gender, age, patterns of local political authority, and the uneven geographic distribution of physical and administrative infrastructure. A central challenge is to ensure that all South Africans—irrespective of their diverse social circumstances—have equal opportunities to take part in the electoral process. Put differently, the challenge is to ensure that social disadvantages do not pose unusually steep obstacles to voter participation within any segment of the electorate.

This study clarifies patterns of voter participation in South Africa, with an emphasis on how social context affects the electoral process. It combines a national survey of 3054 voting-age South Africans, focus group interviews, and statistical analysis of local electoral and social profiles. In the survey and focus groups, respondents confirm that voter

participation is the product of both the ‘supply’ of opportunities to participate by electoral authorities and the ‘demand’ for those opportunities by voters. Among demand-side considerations frequently cited as reasons *not* to vote, dissatisfaction with one’s preferred party, perceived inability to influence election outcomes, and general disinterest emerge frequently. For example, asked how they would react if dissatisfied with their preferred party, nearly one quarter (23 percent) of the national survey sample stated that they would abstain from voting. And among respondents who reported not voting in the 1999 national election, the most common reasons given were either a belief that ‘my vote would not make a difference’ or a more general lack of interest (46 percent combined). Shifting to the supply side of voter participation, where electoral authorities’ primary responsibility lies, the registration process (33 percent) was by far the most cited procedural obstacle by nonvoters.

The analysis of local electoral and social data focussed on identifying any segments of the electorate in which social disadvantage compounds the practical difficulties associated with voter registration. The major findings—based on the use of statistical techniques for ‘ecological inference’ to extract individual characteristics from a comprehensive set of 2949 local electoral and social profiles—are as follows:

that rural residence is the overriding social factor linked to low registration among the socially disadvantaged (defined as those with less than grade 9 education). Although disadvantaged urban residents register at or above the average rate nationally, disadvantaged rural residents register at a substantially lower rate than the rest of the electorate.

that practical difficulties associated with registration are reflected in a ‘registration gap’ of 830,000 potential voters—the ‘gap’ being the additional number of disadvantaged rural residents that would have to register in order to match the rest of

the electorate's registration rate.

that the 'registration gap' is concentrated in four provinces that account for a large share of South Africa's disadvantaged rural population—the Eastern Cape (32 percent), KwaZulu-Natal (26 percent), Limpopo (17 percent) and Northwest (12 percent).

These findings—which suggest that the country still faces a major challenge of ensuring that disadvantaged rural communities become full participants in the electoral system—are reinforced by more anecdotal evidence from the focus groups. For example, one participant explained that the lack of rural registration points means that during registration campaigns 'people from a number of villages converge on a small town, and this creates overcrowding and long queues. Sometimes some go home without registering and have to come back the following day. This costs a lot of money, especially in areas where transport is a problem to go to town.' Another suggested that because many 'people are far from a big town,' to improve participation 'makeshift registration offices should be sent to rural areas.'

The report helps outline a strategy to reduce the 'registration gap', which could complement more conventional preparations for the 2004 national election. Specific features of such a strategy are:

to focus on practical measures to improve the accessibility of registration facilities and information to disadvantaged rural voters—for example, through increased use of mobile registration units or door-to-door canvassing;

to target the strategy geographically—using local estimates of the 'registration gap' from the atlas contained in the report to allocate resources and effort across and within municipalities; and

to assess the strategy's impact through ongoing analysis of registration and participation patterns among disadvantaged rural residents— including a systematic review following the 2004 national election.

The report concludes with suggestions for future research on voter participation in South Africa. First, in assessing the social inclusiveness of the electoral process, registration and participation rates among disadvantaged rural residents are crucial barometers. Trends in this segment of the electorate should therefore continue to be monitored carefully. Second, a better understanding of the sharp drop in participation between national and municipal elections can be gained by identifying and profiling individuals who vote in national but not municipal elections. Third, the geographic dimension of 'supply-side' obstacles to participation by the youth can be clarified through further research, with the aim of devising a targeted strategy to address the registration difficulties faced by this group. Finally, the study has shown how a two-pronged research combining conventional survey and focus group methods with the application of new statistical techniques to analyse linked sets of official electoral and social data.

PREFACE

After the 2000 municipal elections the Human Sciences Research Council embarked on a study of voting behaviour on behalf of the Independent Electoral Commission. The study consisted of three components, a review of the existing data (including voting returns), a national survey of adult citizens and a series of focus groups. The study was primarily aimed at better understanding the dynamic of voter behaviour and in particular on voter participation. This report is the culmination of that study.

The core HSRC team consisted of Michael O'Donovan, Phila Xuza and Rod Alence. The survey fieldwork was conducted by A C Nielsen and the focus groups were conducted by Tsimeni Consulting. Thanks are due to DFID which funded a substantial portion of the study.