

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

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. 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. Social inequalities in South Africa are 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. This report helps clarify how such diversity affects voter participation in South Africa, and it recommends a targeted registration strategy to improve the representation of disadvantaged voters in future elections.

Overall participation in the country's first two democratic national elections paints a broadly favourable picture of South Africans' will and capacity to exercise their hard-won political rights. In the historic

Voter participation in South Africa

'founding election' of 1994, an eligible electorate of roughly 23 million cast 19.7 million votes—giving an estimated participation rate of 86 percent. The second national election five years later occurred in a less euphoric atmosphere and was accompanied by initiatives to institutionalize new electoral procedures—most notably, the introduction of a voter registration requirement and the creation of the country's first common voter's roll. Still, 16.2 million voters went to the polls—with official estimates placing the voting rate at more than 70 percent of the eligible electorate. The sheer scale of participation in 1994 and 1999 dwarfed levels attainable in all previous (racially restricted) South African elections. And for international perspective, even the turnout in 1999 stands very close to the worldwide average for national elections held in the 1990s—exceeding figures for recent elections in some established democracies, such as the United States and France.¹

Despite these encouraging signs, overall participation rates are only partial indicators of electoral inclusiveness—especially in a country with social inequalities as severe as South Africa's. Assessments should consider not only how many people vote, but also how representative voters are of the diversity of society as a whole. In particular, it is important to examine whether practical obstacles to participation cause socially disadvantaged individuals to vote at lower rates than the rest of the electorate. To expect uniform participation levels in all segments of society is unrealistic, as many eligible voters in any country are likely to choose not to go to the polls out of political disinterest, dissatisfaction, or even defiance. Yet if participation is unusually low among the severely socially disadvantaged, the failure to vote may be due less to conscious

¹International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), *Voter Turnout from 1945-1997* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 1997). Note that estimates used for international comparisons are based on participation as a percentage of the entire voting-age population, and not the smaller population of eligible voters.

Voter participation in South Africa

political choice than to practical difficulties. The inaccessibility to many disadvantaged individuals of, for example, election-related information, registration materials, or polling stations may discourage or prevent many from voting. In assessing the electoral process' inclusiveness, participation among disadvantaged segments of society therefore merits careful attention.

This report seeks to clarify the social bases of voter participation patterns in South Africa, and it outlines a strategy to improve the representation of disadvantaged voters in future elections. Data from a national sample survey and focus-group discussions show that voter registration procedures are the most important practical obstacle to participation. Attention then turns to the impact of social context on registration rates, through the statistical analysis of registration and census data linked at the local (usually ward) level. This analysis identifies a 'registration gap' among socially disadvantaged rural residents—that is, it shows that this segment of society is registered at a much lower rate than the rest of the electorate. The report concludes by recommending a targeted strategy to reduce the 'registration gap' in future elections, built around a comprehensive set of simple tables and local maps showing where the gap is most pronounced countrywide. In sum, the report aims both to contribute to the understanding of voter participation in South Africa, and to offer practical guidance about how future participation patterns can be improved.

OVERVIEW OF THE REPORT

The remainder of the report proceeds in four chapters, followed by an 'atlas' of local estimates of the registration gap. Chapter 2 discusses the various factors that affect voter participation. It introduces a

Voter participation in South Africa

distinction between the ‘supply’ and ‘demand’ sides of voter participation—‘supply’ referring to the quantity and quality of opportunities to participate provided by electoral authorities, and ‘demand’ referring to the strength of voters’ motivation to exploit these opportunities. Election turnout reflects the combined effects of supply and demand, but electoral authorities’ responsibility resides primarily on the supply side—that is, in giving all potential voters the best possible opportunity to participate. And among supply-side factors, data from the national sample survey point to voter registration as the steepest obstacle to participation. Thus, chapter 2 shows that the registration process should be a central priority for electoral authorities as they try to enhance voter participation.

Chapter 3 presents additional survey findings on voter participation. Themes covered include the correlation between perceived local development initiatives and participation, demographic breakdowns of self-reported participation data, and reasons given by respondents for *not* voting. The discussion is mainly descriptive, aiming to add greater detail to the central survey findings on the ‘supply’ and ‘demand’ sides of voter registration. A notable refinement of the general observations in chapter 2 is to identify a tendency for the youth and rural residents to express greater concern with supply-side obstacles to participation, related to voter registration procedures.

Chapter 4 shifts from the survey and focus groups to the statistical analysis of local social and electoral profiles. The substantive focus is on the relationship between social inequality and voter registration. The aim is to identify any segments of society in which social disadvantage compounds the practical difficulties associated with the registration process, resulting in unusually low registration rates. Recognizing the complexity of South African social inequalities, low educational attainment (less than Grade 9 completed) is used as a flexible—if

Voter participation in South Africa

imperfect—indicator of (or ‘proxy’ for) social disadvantage. Among those meeting this criterion, the analysis shows that rural residence is the most important social factor linked to low registration. So while disadvantaged urban dwellers register at or above the national average, the registration rate of disadvantaged rural residents is much lower than that of the rest of the electorate—reflecting practical difficulties related to sparse settlement patterns and weak physical and administrative infrastructure. The shortfall’s size is captured in an estimated ‘registration gap’ of 830,000 unregistered potential voters—the ‘gap’ defined as the additional number of disadvantaged rural residents who would have to register to match the registration rate for the rest of the electorate. The registration gap is concentrated in four provinces with large disadvantaged rural populations—the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, and the Northwest Province. Chapter 3 thus identifies where social disadvantage compounds practical difficulties of the registration process and presents estimates of the resulting registration gap.

Chapter 5 discusses implications for voter registration strategy that flow from the research findings. It outlines major features of an approach to reducing the ‘registration gap—that could complement more conventional preparations for the 2004 national election. The strategy should emphasize practical measures to improve the accessibility of voter registration facilities and information to disadvantaged rural communities—for example, through the increased deployment of mobile registration units. The strategy should also be targeted geographically—using information in this report about where the ‘registration gap’ is largest to allocate resources across and within municipalities. Finally, whatever approach is taken to reducing the registration gap, it is recommended that registration and participation rates in disadvantaged rural communities continue to be monitored closely, including a

Voter participation in South Africa

systematic review following the 2004 election.

Chapter 6 contains brief concluding remarks. It draws together major findings from throughout the report and make suggestions for further research.