

## CHAPTER 2

# **‘SUPPLY’ AND ‘DEMAND’ SIDES OF VOTER PARTICIPATION**

To understand voting behaviour in South Africa, it makes sense to talk with potential South African voters. The study included a national sample survey and focus-group discussions, designed to clarify the factors that influence decisions about voter participation. In interpreting the results, it is useful to distinguish 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 those opportunities. Observed election turnout reflects the combined effects of supply and demand, but electoral authorities’ responsibility resides primarily on the supply side—that is, in giving potential voters the best possible opportunities to participate. So while electoral authorities can benefit from an understanding of demand-side considerations related to voters’ motivations, their attention should be directed primarily toward removing practical obstacles that discourage voter participation.

The aim of this chapter is to clarify the major factors that affect the supply and demand sides of voter participation in South Africa—with particular attention to major supply-side obstacles. Drawing on the survey and focus groups, it shows that turnout in recent South African

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elections has been highly sensitive to demand-side factors—in particular, voters’ perceptions of the importance of elections and their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with political parties’ performance. Overall participation’s sensitivity to factors largely beyond the direct control and responsibility of electoral authorities implies that in future elections turnout rates should be seen at best as very indirect indicators of the IEC’s performance. The chapter then goes on to explore the supply-side obstacles to participation that voters most often cite as reasons for *not* voting. The registration process features prominently, and it therefore should be central to future efforts to improve voter participation.

## **THE ANALYTICAL APPROACH**

South Africans’ views about voter participation were collected through a national sample survey and focus group interviews, both conducted in late 2001. They covered a wide range of issues related to voter behaviour, with the two ‘cycles’ of municipal and national elections held since 1994 as the points of reference. Questions addressed specific topics such as perceptions of the electoral process, factors that affect individuals’ decisions whether or not to participate, and expectations about future participation. The survey questionnaire was designed by the HSRC in direct collaboration with the IEC. It contained mostly structured items, but also a few open-ended questions. To ease potential sensitivities, respondents were not asked which political party or parties (if any) they support—and, in fact, the questionnaire contained no references to specific parties. Respondents were, however, asked for their views about political parties generally, and for their views about their own preferred (but unspecified) parties. Meanwhile, the focus groups

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were conducted to allow a more interactive and qualitative exploration of South African voting behaviour. As in the survey, though, facilitators did not probe participants' views about specific political parties.

The national survey involved face-to-face interviews with a stratified random sample of 3054 voting-age South Africans, conducted between September and November 2001. An innovative feature of the sample design was its stratification to improve representation of the diversity of the population's local electoral circumstances. Electoral wards were used as primary sampling units, and they were categorized according to two criteria—turnout in the 2000 election, and the relative homogeneity or heterogeneity of voting patterns. Turnout as a percentage of the voting-age population was calculated and wards classified in 'low,' 'medium,' and 'high' categories. Voting homogeneity or heterogeneity was calculated to distinguish between wards where votes were overwhelmingly cast for a single party in 2000 and wards where votes were more dispersed across parties. The three turnout categories were then each subdivided between 'homogeneous' and 'heterogeneous,' defining six sampling strata. Within each stratum, wards were then weighted proportionally to voting-age population and drawn randomly. This approach results in a sample representative of the national population, but it also guarantees coverage of the diversity of local electoral circumstances in South Africa.

The focus group interviews also targeted a representative sample of the population, except for a slight oversampling of voting-age youth. Seventeen focus group interviews were conducted countrywide between September and December 2001. Focus groups generally contained between ten and fifteen participants. To improve communication and openness, each group's composition was designed to be relatively homogenous in population group and, to a lesser extent, gender. Trained facilitators led the interviews, and an effort was made to match

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the demographic characteristics of the facilitator to the participants’.

## **THE FINDINGS**

The aim of the analysis of the survey and focus group results was to clarify the determinants of voter participation. Voter participation is affected by both the ‘supply’ of opportunities to participate by electoral authorities and the ‘demand’ for these opportunities among voters. The presentation of the findings begins with evidence of demand-side factors—that is, factors related to the voter motivation. Overall participation levels in South Africa are shown to be highly sensitive to such factors. Then attention shifts to the supply side, where electoral authorities’ primary responsibility lies. The voter registration process emerges as the steepest supply-side obstacle to participation, and anecdotal evidence from the focus groups suggests that this obstacle may be even steeper for disadvantaged rural residents.

In analysing participation from the demand side, considering reasons South African voters give for not participating is useful. One important consideration is voters’ satisfaction with their preferred political parties. If voters are dissatisfied with their preferred parties’ performance, at election time three possible courses of action are available—they can vote for the same party anyway, they can vote for another party, or they can abstain from voting. Figure 1 presents findings from the national survey regarding respondents’ hypothetical reactions to dissatisfaction with their preferred party. The most common reported reaction (57 percent) is to keep voting for the same party. Such a reaction does not imply unthinking support. For example, one focus group participant mentioned the importance of patience—which is not

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necessarily infinite. He explained that even if dissatisfied that he would ‘continue voting for my party . . . as it takes time to make changes.’ Nearly a quarter (23 percent) of respondents said they would express their dissatisfaction by abstaining, while one fifth (20 percent) stated that they would vote for another party. In understanding why individuals choose to go to the polls or not, the willingness of a substantial portion of the electorate to withhold its votes out of dissatisfaction with political parties highlights the importance of demand-side determinants of participation.

The national survey also offers insights into participation in the reasons for *not* voting given by respondents who reported that they did not vote in the 1999 national election.<sup>1</sup> The most important considerations were either a belief that one’s vote would not affect the election outcome, or the belief that the election outcome would not affect one’s life. Figure 2 presents the survey results (with some response categories combined to simplify presentation). Nearly half (46 percent) of nonvoters claimed that they did not vote either because they thought ‘my vote would not make a difference’ or were ‘not interested.’ To illustrate, one focus group participant expressed frustration with the irrelevance of election outcomes to living conditions: ‘The reason I never voted is because in this area we stay in there is still no improvement in social conditions. You put someone new the situation is still not improving. You put someone [else] new the situation is still the same.’

After disinterest and belief that ‘my vote would not make a difference,’ the next most cited reasons for not voting in 1999 were related to voter registration—especially the lack of appropriate identify

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<sup>1</sup>The substantive interpretations also apply to data on reasons for not voting in the 2000 municipal elections. For simplicity, the discussion here focuses exclusively on the 1999 national election. Data on the 2000 election is contained in the separate technical summary report of survey findings.

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documentation. As shown in figure 2, registration emerges as by far the most important supply-side obstacle to participation—reported by 33 percent of declared nonvoters. This figure greatly exceeds other features of the electoral process—such as the distance to travel to voting stations or the length of queues (6 percent combined), and the threat of violence (mentioned by only 0.3 percent of nonvoters).

While complaints about registration procedures are not confined to any particular segment of society, some focus group participants expressed particular frustration with the accessibility of registration facilities in rural areas. One 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 where transport is a problem to go to town.’ Another suggested that because many ‘people are far from a big town,’ to enhance participation ‘makeshift registration offices should be sent to rural areas.’ In sum, concerns about registration procedures remained fresh in the minds of survey respondents and focus group participants in late 2001—more than two years after the registration campaign that preceded the 1999 national election.

## **C**ONCLUSION

This chapter has presented findings about voter participation in South Africa— drawing on evidence from a national survey and focus group interviews conducted in late 2001. The analysis distinguished between the ‘supply’ of opportunities for voter participation by electoral authorities

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and the ‘demand’ for those opportunities by voters. Participation levels in South African elections are quite sensitive to demand-side factors. Specifically, decisions *not* to vote were attributed to a combination of dissatisfaction with political parties, a general lack of interest in elections, and the belief that ‘my vote would not make a difference.’ Meanwhile, by far the steepest supply-side obstacle identified in the survey was the registration process. Among nonvoters, registration difficulties dwarfed considerations related to the convenience of voting stations—and the fear of political violence and intimidation was barely mentioned. While frustrations with registration procedures were not unique to any segment of the electorate, the focus groups provided anecdotal evidence that these frustrations are more severe in rural areas. Chapter 3 presents additional descriptive data from the national survey, adding more detail to this chapter’s major findings about the ‘supply’ and ‘demand’ sides of voter participation.