

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This report began with the observation that South Africa is striving to consolidate a rigorous system of electoral regulations and administration typically found in advanced, industrialized countries—and to do so in a middle-income country with among the severe social inequalities in the world. In these efforts, 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. More specifically, the challenge is to ensure that social disadvantage does not pose unusually steep obstacles to voter participation in any segment of the electorate. The findings presented in this report have shown that such a segment does exist—as reflected in a substantial ‘registration gap’ among disadvantaged rural residents. The report has outlined a targeted strategy to improve the accessibility of registration facilities and information to this group of underrepresented potential voters.

A reduction of the ‘registration gap’ would build on South Africa’s favourable record of voter participation. The country’s first two democratic national elections showed South Africans’ strong commitment to exercising their hard-won political rights. In the historic ‘founding election’ of 1994, more than eight of every ten eligible voters went to the polls. 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

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of a registration requirement and the creation of the country's first common voter's roll. Still, official estimates put turnout 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 participation rate in 1999 is 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.

Despite these encouraging signs, overall turnout rates are only partial indicators of electoral inclusiveness—especially in a country with social inequalities as severe as South Africa's. A central aim of this study has been to clarify how South Africans' diverse social circumstances influence patterns of voter participation. For while overall turnout can easily be observed, surprisingly little has previously been known about the complex linkages between South African society and its electoral process. To help improve the understanding of voter participation, this study has employed a two-pronged approach. First, a national sample survey and focus group interviews were used to ask South Africans about various aspects of voter behaviour—and, in particular, about why they do or do not participate. Second, recently developed statistical techniques were applied to an original set of local social and electoral profiles—adding a social dimension to the analysis of the IEC's geographically detailed electoral data. The study's two components complement each other, and the findings and recommendations in this report integrate insights from both.

The analysis of the national survey and focus groups distinguished between the 'supply' and 'demand' sides of voter participation—'supply' referring to the quantity and quality of opportunities for participation provided by electoral authorities, and 'demand' referring to the strength of

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voters' motivations to exploit these opportunities. Demand-side factors emerged frequently as reasons *not* to vote—with potential voters frequently citing dissatisfaction with their preferred parties, their perceived inability to influence outcomes, and general disinterest. In accounting for participation patterns, considerations of voter motivation play a central role. Meanwhile, electoral authorities' primary responsibilities reside on the supply side—that is, in giving potential voters the best possible opportunities to participate. Among supply-side factors, South Africans point to voter registration procedures as the steepest obstacles to participation. In contrast, other concerns—such as inconvenient voting stations and the threat of political violence or intimidation—are much less prominent. The analysis of the national survey and focus-group data thus highlighted demand-side factors, but it also singled out registration procedures as a major priority for electoral authorities.

The statistical analysis of local social and electoral profiles pursued this finding regarding voter registration further—yielding geographically detailed information about how South Africans' diverse social circumstances influence registration patterns. It showed that rural residence is the overriding social factor linked to low registration among disadvantaged individuals (defined using low educational attainment as a 'proxy' indicator). Low registration among disadvantaged rural residents reflects practical obstacles related to sparse settlement patterns and weak physical and administrative infrastructure. These difficulties' scale was captured in an estimated 'registration gap' of 830,000 unregistered potential voters—the 'gap' being the additional number of disadvantaged rural residents who would have to register to match the rate for the rest of the electorate. The registration gap was shown to be concentrated in four provinces that collectively account for the bulk of South Africa's disadvantaged rural population—the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal,

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Limpopo, and the Northwest. The statistical analysis yielded estimates at the local (usually ward) level, and this information (contained in the atlas of local registration estimates) allows the registration gap to be pinpointed across and even within municipalities.

The report has outlined a recommended strategy to improve the accessibility of the electoral process to disadvantaged rural residents. The strategy emphasizes geographically targeted, practical measures to reduce the registration gap—bringing the registration rate for disadvantaged rural residents much closer to the benchmark for the rest of the South African electorate. A campaign making increased use of mobile registration units and door-to-door canvassing—targeted at the specific areas where the participation gap is largest—will ease difficulties associated with low participation among disadvantaged rural residents. The recommended strategy was informed by both components of the study—with the national survey and focus groups identifying registration procedures as the main ‘supply-side’ factor for electoral authorities to tackle, and the statistical analysis of local profiles sharpening the focus on the unusually steep obstacles to registration faced by disadvantaged rural residents.

Voter participation is the ‘raw material’ of any system of democratic electoral politics. Reducing practical barriers to participation will improve the translation of South Africans’ formal political rights into substantive inputs that ‘deepen’ the country’s democracy. The benefits of enhanced voter participation accrue largely independently of possible changes to the principles governing how votes are translated into political representation—such as modifications to the precise mix of proportional and constituency-based representation. The desirability of undertaking supply-side measures to improve participation does not depend on any particular outcome of current discussions about the legislative framework for political representation. Meanwhile, as electoral authorities proceed

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with efforts to institutionalize rigorous electoral procedures, continued monitoring is needed to identify segments of the electorate where this commitment to procedural rigour risks discouraging voter participation. This study is a contribution to such a process—highlighting the importance of improving the accessibility of registration facilities and information to potential voters in disadvantaged rural areas.

Some suggestions for future research on voter participation in South Africa flow from the study. First, in assessing the social inclusiveness of the electoral process, registration and participation rates among disadvantaged rural residents are crucial barometers. Special attention should be given to monitoring trends in this segment of the electorate—incorporating as much local detail as possible. Second, a detailed analysis of participation in municipal elections would help inform preparations for the 2005 election. In South Africa, turnout tends to drop by roughly half from national to municipal elections. While similar ‘supply’ and ‘demand’ factors affect participation in both types of election, it could be quite illuminating to identify and profile individuals who vote in national but not municipal elections. Third, the geographic dimension of ‘supply-side’ difficulties experienced by the youth can be clarified through further research. Birth year information contained in the voter’s roll (encoded in voters’ ID numbers) can be extracted and linked to census population estimates to identify areas where youth registration is particularly low. A similar strategy to the one developed here to target disadvantaged rural residents could be developed to target the specific difficulties faced by the voting-age youth. Finally, the study has shown the practical value of new statistical techniques for analysing the IEC’s impressive collection of GIS data. While surveys and focus groups will remain a staple of electoral research, participation overreporting among survey respondents makes it difficult to distinguish voters from nonvoters reliably without also turning to official sources of ‘hard’ electoral data.

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The study has shown how 'ecological inference' techniques for statistical analysis can complement more established survey and focus group methods. The two-pronged approach used in this study can be applied to many other pressing issues in the field of electoral research.