



# Reclaiming People's Power Through Electoral Reforms

TESSA DOOMS

# Executive summary

There is a growing debate about the need for electoral reforms in South Africa. Many of these talks have been informed by politicians, political parties and civic organisations. However, while those most impacted by changes to electoral systems are the voters, they are often overlooked in discussions about electoral reforms, as the emphasis tends to be on the procedural and technical aspects of elections. Yet voters have a vested interest in voting systems. Their political power is as much enabled or constrained by how they vote as by for whom they vote or why they vote. This policy insight explores the relationship between democracy and its promise of people's power and the voting systems used. It is the result of voter-centred workshops on electoral reforms led by the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) and the Rivonia Circle, held in nine communities in Gauteng, the Eastern Cape and North West. Based on the outcomes of these workshops, this policy insight argues for electoral reforms that respond to voter expectations of participation, development and accountability.

Workshop participants explained their dissatisfaction with elections as a response to poor service delivery and inadequate economic outcomes, as well as low levels of accountability. For voting to be meaningful, voters must have the power to help monitor the work of public representatives and to sanction or fire representatives who are not delivering on their developmental or political expectations. Electoral reforms can empower voters by creating more direct accountability mechanisms between public representatives and voters, thus building people's power beyond voting day. Participants further noted that, alongside electoral reforms, there was a need for civic and political education. This should not only inform communities of the workings of electoral and governance systems but also entrench inclusive participatory practices for voters between elections. This policy insight illustrates the need to expand electoral reform debates and initiatives to include a focus on voting processes and outcomes that empower voters. Electoral systems are political. Elections have an impact on the distribution of and constraint on the power of voters and political parties and candidates. The work to improve electoral outcomes must be predicated on the imperative to strengthen democracy and deliver on its sacred promise that 'the people shall govern'.

## Introduction

In 2024, South Africa celebrates 30 years of democracy. The struggle against apartheid as a legal and political system ended with the realisation of 'one man [person], one vote', a slogan that gave common purpose to the anti-apartheid movement. The 1994 election was the first true enactment of democracy. In 1955, the Mass Democratic Movement had adopted the Freedom Charter as its lodestar in the fight against apartheid and, more importantly, as a vision for freedom. While the Freedom Charter addresses many areas of public life, including jobs, land and education, its opening salvo gets to the heart of what it

takes to attain and maintain a democratic project: 'We, the People of South Africa, declare for all our country and the world to know... that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all the people...'<sup>1</sup>

If democracy in South Africa is truly to be a project of governance for and by the people, it must be guided by the 'will of all the people'. Thus, it should be concerning to every citizen when there is mass non-participation in democratic processes and elections.

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This policy insight assesses the merits of voter participation in South Africa by reflecting on the views of voters about their reasons for participation or non-participation in elections. It argues that South African voters are losing faith in the power of the vote. This disillusionment is not limited to the quality of electoral options but also reflects voters' dissatisfaction with the link between the act of voting and the lack of accountability of failing public representatives. Electoral reforms are an opportunity to strengthen voters' power and participation by designing electoral systems that foreground representation and increase representatives' accountability to voters and communities.

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## Voter participation in decline

Millions of South Africans are opting out of voting. The official voter turnout in the last local government elections in 2021 was 45%. When one considers the full universe of voting-aged South Africans is 40 million people and only 12 million show up for an election, as

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<sup>1</sup> Britannica, "Freedom Charter: South Africa (1955)", accessed June 2, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Freedom-Charter>.

was the case in the 2021 local government elections, voter turnout is approximately 30%.<sup>2</sup> While 27.7 million people registered as voters in the 2024 national and provincial elections in South Africa, only 58.6% voted. However, official turnout does not tell the full story, as this 58.6% – 16.23 million voters – represent only 40% of the more than 40 million people eligible to register to vote. In both the 2021 and 2024 elections, the will of a quarter or less of the voting population determined the fate of the country.<sup>3</sup> This is a far cry from the Freedom Charter’s objective of a government that reflects the will of all its people. Among the reasons for voter decline is a growing disillusionment with voting.<sup>4</sup>

The problem with using apathy as a catch-all for voter decline is that it fails to account for nuanced understandings of why people retreat from voting

A simple reading of voter retreat is to call it voter apathy, defined as a lack of interest in electoral participation.<sup>5</sup> The problem, however, with using apathy as a catch-all for voter decline is that it fails to account for nuanced understandings of why people retreat from voting. For example, there is a substantive difference between people who do not participate because they fail to see how voting affects their lives and people who withhold their vote as a sign of protest. Surely the latter must be credited with seeing a clear value to voting, such that they understand withholding a vote as leverage for impact. Even voters who withhold their vote owing to a dearth of quality options on a ballot are displaying care rather than apathy when demanding a better use of the vote than being forced to choose between the lesser of perceived evils. It is thus important to explore voter non-participation more probingly if we are to strengthen voter franchise.

## Electoral reform and the power of the vote

South Africa’s electoral system came under heightened scrutiny in the lead-up to the 2024 elections. In 2024 South African voters – for the first time since 1994 – experienced major changes to the electoral system to elect national and provincial governments.<sup>6</sup> These changes resulted from a Constitutional Court victory by the New Nation Movement

2 Carin Runciman and Martin Bekker, “Here Are Five Factors that Drove Low Voter Turnout in South Africa’s 2021 Elections”, *The Conversation*, December 8, 2021.

3 Victoria O’Regan, “The Big No-Vote: Over 11 Million Registered Voters Did Not Cast Ballots in 2024 Polls”, *The Daily Maverick*, June 7, 2024.

4 Runciman and Bekker, “Here Are Five Factors”.

5 Thulani Chauke, “Youth Apathy in an Electoral Democracy: A Critical Discourse on Civil Participation in South Africa”, *African Journal of Gender, Society and Development* 9, no. 3 (2020).

6 Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa, “What’s New in the 2024 Election”, 2024.

in June 2020 that ordered Parliament to amend the electoral act to include provisions for independent candidates to stand in national and provincial elections.<sup>7</sup> The New Nation Movement judgment, while limited to the question of independent candidates, was a broader argument for improving the quality of public representation and accountability by allowing candidates to represent communities independent of the pressure of political party influence and imperatives.

## The growing number of political parties in South Africa is testament to an increasing appetite among voters for representatives and political cultures

The growing number of political parties in South Africa is testament to an increasing appetite among voters for representatives and political cultures that differ from those of the dominant political parties. In the past five years there has been an explosion in the registering of political parties, from approximately 200 parties in 2019 to over 500 in 2024. While not all these parties contest all elections, many small, localised and issue-based parties are emerging in response to the growing social distance between public representatives and voters. This distance places constraints on voter and community access to governance processes and encourages low levels of accountability, as representatives defer to political party leadership, which local communities often cannot access. Yet the inclusion of independent candidates in the 2024 election has not responded to this reality sufficiently, as there were barriers to independent candidate participation. These included independent candidates competing directly with parties on the same ballots for votes, without the name recognition or election resources that parties have. Independent candidates could compete on multiple regional ballots (provinces) for a national seat but could not pool those votes across regions. The [Electoral Amendment Act of 2023](#) imposes high participation thresholds on independent candidates (such as the number of signatures to collect and the cost of candidacy). Even if fully implemented, these electoral reforms also do not significantly change the political dynamics that have created the distance between representatives and voters. They have, however, opened new conversations about the need for electoral reforms for improved accountability and renewed belief in the power of electoral participation.

The growing conversation about electoral reform triggered by the Electoral Amendment Act, which amends the [Electoral Act 73 of 1998](#), is an opportunity to explore the views of voters on voting and how voting processes could encourage a renewed belief in the

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<sup>7</sup> Dianne Hawker, “Newly Passed Electoral Amendment Act Set for ConCourt Showdown Over Independent Candidates”, *Daily Maverick*, August 21, 2023.

power of the vote. Narrowly speaking, the Electoral Amendment Act is about the introduction of independent candidates. However, it has raised questions about how to ensure the constitutional requirement of proportionality while allowing voters new options on the ballot and the direct accountability of individual Members of Parliament (MPs) rather than parties.

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## Key takeaways from voters' reflections

Commissioned by SAIIA through funding from the Social Justice Initiative's New Futures Fund, 'Power to the Voter' workshops exploring the need for electoral reform in South Africa were held between 16 February 2024 and 19 March 2024. Trained facilitators who had been onboarded on 6 December 2023 organised, mobilised and facilitated these in the Eastern Cape, Gauteng and North West. Through the workshops, the Rivonia Circle facilitators reached 309 participants. The findings are divided into four thematic areas – the power of the vote, accountability, the need for voter and civic education and practical electoral reform suggestions.

### The power of the vote

Voting is often marketed as a tool for political and social change. Beyond its being a right and responsibility, voters are encouraged to vote if they want to change society.<sup>8</sup> In all the workshops except the Fort Grey community in the Eastern Cape, participants linked voting to basic service delivery or employment. Interestingly, regardless of whether voting was for national or local government, they overwhelmingly agreed that the primary purpose of voting was to see improvements in basic services such as roads, water, sanitation and housing, or to ensure access to jobs. In Qonce (formerly King William's Town) in the Eastern Cape, participants' perceptions were that ward councillors could influence employment opportunities, linking getting jobs to having the favour of a ward councillor.

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<sup>8</sup> Sunny Harris Rome, "Why Voting Matters", chap. 1 in *Promote the Vote: Positioning Social Workers for Action* (Springer, 2021).

This narrative is particularly prevalent among young people. A young person in Zeerust, in the North West, suggested that people voted when they thought jobs were on offer, in a climate of high youth unemployment. Older people, such as those in the Gauteng community of Evaton, spoke about the last time they had felt proud of voting, in 1994, when their hope for change had been based on a shared sense of achievement. Voting had been a victory in itself, a win for communities and future generations. However, since 1994 voting has not delivered, as democracy has not changed their lives, and they have lost trust in politicians.

### The perception of a direct link between voting and receiving services or economic opportunities has shifted the power of the vote from a duty to a transaction

The perception of a direct link between voting and receiving services or economic opportunities has shifted the power of the vote from a duty (to improve society) to a transaction (to improve personal circumstances). The notion of voting helping to build a collective good has in many ways been replaced with the idea of voting as personal purchasing power. A participant in Qonce said she would be voting because she 'wants to change the menu'. This would suggest that the focus is not even on electing new politicians or leaders but rather on what the politicians may offer to get that vote.

### Voters' experience of lack of service delivery is linked to the choice to not vote or participate in electoral politics

Voters' experience of lack of service delivery is linked to the choice to not vote or participate in electoral politics. What is the impact on the power of the vote if the transaction fails? People see no real connection between their vote and the development needed in their communities. This weakens the idea of voting as a tool for change. Instead, voters increasingly view voting as a way in which the government and political parties take away their power. They feel that voting gives more power to the government than it does to voters. This creates the impression that democracy only benefits politicians and takes power from the people rather than giving power to the people.

In the Eastern Cape township of Gompo, voters extended this idea that voting benefits politicians to include the idea that voting legitimises and even rewards corruption. It gives politicians (who, in the minds of voters, are all corrupt) legitimate access to more power and resources. This view may explain why protest is preferred as a means of change. While protest hardly produces systemic change in the short term, it diminishes the immediate power of politicians and systems.<sup>9</sup> Even if things do not change dramatically, the protester is using rather than transferring their power. Until voters see their vote as empowering themselves and their communities, there will continue to be a decline in participation. Voting should be followed by more than just practical change – it must also be an act that builds rather than dilutes people’s power.

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## Accountability

The transparency and accountability of politicians are top priorities for most voters. There is frustration with and a lack of trust in politicians who are loyal to their parties rather than to the communities on which they rely for votes. In Fort Grey, people do not trust political parties to identify representatives who will act on behalf of the community because the people elected do not engage with their constituents but rather defer to party leaders. Communities are thus asked to vote, only to be ignored once parties and their representatives are elected. Effectively, voters feel that public representatives represent parties rather than communities.

The question of accountability most often overlapped with people’s preferred electoral system. Direct representation was the preferred option among most participants across all communities. This was mainly seen as a way to resolve the problems that come from not knowing how to either contact or hold party representatives accountable. In Zeerust, participants preferred voting for people whom they knew personally because this would give them a better chance at engaging those representatives. It would also allow them to work with these representatives to solve problems and create change. In the community of Berlin in the Eastern Cape, people preferred a system that allowed them to directly elect leaders they knew and trusted, and who had a credible track record of delivery even without political power. They believed such a system would let the community feel that they had control and were fully involved and participating in key decisions.

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<sup>9</sup> Adam Habib, “Understanding Violent Protest in South Africa and the Difficult Choice Facing Leaders”, *The Conversation*, November 8, 2020.



Voters also experience manipulation and withdrawal of services in an attempt to sway them. Political parties use membership as a tool to keep communities and individual voters at arm's length from accountability and participatory processes between elections. Voters would, for example, like to be included in their parties' decision-making process for choosing MPs. Instead, the country's closed list proportional representation system creates the impression that party lists are curated by party politics for the benefit of the party, not communities.

For communities, accountability is about retaining and building voter and community power beyond the vote. In South Africa it has become the norm for voters to seek accountability through protest. Afrobarometer argues that protest becomes a default when other forms of accountability is limited – one of the drawbacks of proportional representation systems. It states that people are more likely to protest in party-based proportional representation systems because, unlike constituency-based systems, they are less likely to be able to contact their elected representatives. In addition, the demands they can make of those representatives are unclear.<sup>10</sup>

While people are interested in direct voting, they are also unsure about its efficacy. Political culture in South Africa focuses on party politics – many do not know about independent candidates or unrepresented parties. The dominance of big parties with funding, media access and representation in Parliament signals that there is not enough community- and constituency-level engagements by new parties. The country has not yet created a culture that sees the value and viability of smaller and emerging parties as representatives in elected positions in Parliament and provincial legislatures. While communities express an interest in alternative political systems and representatives, the path to getting there is a big unknown. The community of Sharpeville in Gauteng best summed up the concerns of moving to direct representation when they warned that, while voting for individuals may be better, issues of accountability and transparency may still not improve, as power breeds corruption. Ultimately, regardless of the system, if the people who are elected are corruptible and unaccountable, the problem of poor outcomes will persist.

Making the path to alternative politics clearer cannot be left to politicians and bureaucrats alone. This community committed to learn more about the political parties and people who want their vote. For communities such as those of Berlin and Qonce, the prospects of building political power outside of existing options were exciting. In Berlin, the community was energised to demand changes in how they voted because they wanted to know their MPs. People believe having the right people in Parliament with skills, competency, character and good reputation – and who are active in community development – is the only way to help the country address its most pressing challenges and manage resources

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10 Sarah J. Lockwood and Matthias Krönke, "Do Electoral Systems Affect How Citizens Hold Their Government Accountable? Evidence from Africa" (Working Paper 181, Afrobarometer, May 2018).

in a productive way. In Qonce, the community committed to learn more about the different political parties and individuals who appear on the ballot. The general sense in this community was that they voted for parties out of loyalty and 'playing it safe' in order to access economic opportunities that are only available through the office of the ward councillor.

Greater accountability could be a catalyst for political participation but will require civic, political and voter education that creates new cultures rather than simply focusing on new leaders or new institutions.

## The need for voting and civic education

Voters want a change in the overall political culture in South Africa, with many participants saying that the current status quo does not allow community and political activism to thrive outside political structures. Civic, political and voter education is a necessary tool for increased democratic participation. 'Education' as applied to civics and politics should not be narrowly interpreted. Civic, political and voter education is not meant to be a curriculum taught by 'experts' to 'ordinary people'. Rather, it should be an empowering engagement that allows all people to access knowledge, develop skills and create local space for building power to participate in democracy on terms they understand and in ways that promote change.<sup>11</sup>

Knowledge and information are key to building people's power and encouraging participation. An alarming feature of the 2024 elections was the growing distrust in both political parties and the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), hitherto a well-regarded institution. This was articulated by communities as a fear that the IEC had been infiltrated by political actors. There is increasing misinformation and disinformation around elections. Because people do not have knowledge of objective processes it has become harder to separate facts from conspiracy theories. This is particularly important in the context of changes to the electoral system and voting processes. People do not understand why and how independent candidates have been included in the national and provincial elections or why there are three ballots. In the absence of information, people become sceptical and distrustful of the IEC.

Across communities there were calls for more civic and voter education in general, particularly for children before they turn 18. More information at a younger age empowers voters to better make sense of and judge information about electoral systems and processes.

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<sup>11</sup> May R. Anderson and Kevin S. Fridy, *Community Engagement, Civic Education and Democratic Governance in Africa: The Case of Ghana* (Springer, 2022).

## Practical electoral reform suggestions

There was overwhelming interest in introducing more direct representation in South Africa's electoral system. This was not without concerns about the potential feasibility or effectiveness of voting directly for individuals. At the same time, there was not an outright rejection of parties either. People want parties as a broad representation of the collective ideals for which they are voting, along with the ability to vote directly for individual representatives. Similar arguments have been made for a mixed proportional representation and direct electoral system in South Africa since 2002.<sup>12</sup>

There are various debates about whether and how direct voting would work. Workshop participants suggested changing the current informal constituency model in Parliament to one that is compulsory. They also recommended mandatory and regular visits by MPs before, during and after elections. Even without the introduction of direct voting, this practice could improve trust and accountability. Currently, the parliamentary system of constituency days and offices does not make engagements with communities mandatory and is largely unknown among voters who are not politically affiliated. This is not only a practical suggestion but is also implementable in the short term.

In addition, there were suggestions about the voting day becoming a voting week to give everyone a chance to vote and to increase voter turnout. Many voters said that there were logistical barriers to voting.<sup>13</sup> Participants from various communities raised the issue of a lack of identity documents as a practical inhibiting factor. To this end, the following suggestions were made:

- implement a hybrid voting system, with both physical and online registration and voting;
- ensure automatic voter registration for everyone above the age of 18; and
- introduce more innovation around waiting times at voting stations, as people may become discouraged due to long waiting times.

## Conclusion

Voting is a cornerstone of democracy. A central tenet of democracy – that 'the people shall govern' – finds expression in the voting process, as each voter can participate in collective decision-making about governance and the future of their societies. When the voting franchise is full and effective, it provides people with a unique moment to not only exercise their political will but also interact with others to build and use political power

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<sup>12</sup> Christine Botha, "Time for Electoral Reform and Dusting Off the Van Zyl Slabbert Report", *PoliticsWeb*, May 22, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Runciman and Bekker, "Here Are Five Factors".

collectively. When people abandon voting because they do not experience its power, they do not suffer powerlessness in isolation – the collective nature of democracy is harmed, as is the ideal that power is not the preserve of a few. In the South African context, where democracy functions in principle but in practice fails to deliver satisfactorily on developmental and human rights outcomes, voting as an expression of democracy becomes hollow. When accountability is absent, the power of the vote is at best limited and at worst diminished. Electoral reforms are about more than voting systems that are rational, credible and efficient. They also speak to the value people attach to the vote and the experience of voting as the beginning of an ongoing opportunity for voters and communities to co-govern between elections.

There is thus a need for electoral reforms in South Africa that respond to the need for inclusivity and accountability that last beyond voting day. Electoral reforms must be an opportunity to change not only how South Africans vote but also the overall culture of political and active citizenry that invites communities to reclaim their role in democracy through and beyond voting.

# Author

**Tessa Doms**

is a Director at the Rivonia Circle. She has expertise in democracy and governance as a community activist, facilitator, policy advisor and political analyst.

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# About SAIIA

SAIIA is an independent, non-government think tank whose key strategic objectives are to make effective input into public policy, and to encourage wider and more informed debate on international affairs, with particular emphasis on African issues and concerns.

SAIIA's policy insights are situation analysis papers intended for policymakers, whether in government or business. They are designed to bridge the space between policy briefings and occasional papers.

## Cover image

A woman wearing an African Congress for Transformation (ACT) party tshirt looks at other parties' election posters in Sharpeville, on March 21, 2024 (Olympia De Maismont/AFP via Getty Images)

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Jan Smuts House, East Campus, University of the Witwatersrand  
PO Box 31596, Braamfontein 2017, Johannesburg, South Africa  
Tel +27 (0)11 339-2021 · Fax +27 (0)11 339-2154  
[www.saiia.org.za](http://www.saiia.org.za) · [info@saiia.org.za](mailto:info@saiia.org.za)