

ELECTIONS

Automatic registration will ensure voting rights

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ON MAY 29, South Africans again go to the polls to elect their public representatives, using an electoral system that is deeply flawed in terms of registering voters to enable them to exercise their democratic rights.

It cannot be that a government is said to be elected by the majority when, in fact, it has received votes from less than a third of those eligible to vote. Yet, that is the case in South Africa.

In the previous national election, much acclaim was made of the good voter turnout. Two-thirds of the registered voters cast their ballots in 2019. On the face of it, not bad. However, when one does a deeper dive into the electoral system, one discovers that the turnout of eligible voters (that is all citizens over the age of 18) was only 49% – less than half. Put differently, the ruling party serves in the government at the pleasure of only 25.5% of eligible voters.

The South African Constitution affords the right of all citizens above the age of 18 to vote. But they need to register with the Electoral Commission. In this regard, only 26 756 649 citizens were registered to vote in 2019, while the total over 18 population (that is, eligible voters) numbered 39 363 973. Thus, only 68% of eligible voters were enabled to vote. It is the enabling mechanism that is problematic.



The position was even worse in the 2021 municipal elections, where the registered voter turnout was substantially lower (45.86%) and the ruling party's national mandate, measured in terms of eligible voters, a paltry 13.5%. Despite much being said about the recent successful voter registration weekends, truth is, the position has not changed for the upcoming national election on May 29, 2024. As in 2019, here too, only 68% of eligible voters are registered to vote.

Citizens themselves need to embrace their civic duty, nearly a third of whom have not done so. It is, however, the responsibility of the policymakers to provide the most transparent and effective means to enable citizens to exercise their constitutional right to vote. And in this regard, South Africa could do better.

The best way to ensure this is auto-

matic voter registration. Every South African has to be issued with an ID, for which they are registered on the Department of Home Affairs' population register. The population register could simply double up as the voters roll, doing away with the unnecessary and expensive duplicitous system. This is not a foreign concept. It is an accepted practice in many countries.

Such a system would hold many benefits for the voting system and population register:

Under section 11(1) of the Identification Act, Act No. 68 of 1997, "Every person whose name is included in the population register who attained the age of 16 years and an identity card has thereafter been issued to him or her, after any permanent change of his or her ordinary place of residence or his or her postal address, notify the Director-General within the prescribed time and in the prescribed manner of that change of residence or postal address".

Similar provisions apply for the voters roll. Changing one's address for voting purposes would also help ensure an up-to-date population register.

There would be significant cost savings in that only one register would need to be maintained, not two – the population register and the voters roll – as is the current scenario. The cost saving could be used to fund voter education, an underfunded area. Voter education could also be used on

campaigns to motivate citizens to carry out their civic duty.

Democracy would be enhanced, in that under the current system, if one had not registered to vote, but changed one's mind and, subsequently, wished to vote, for example, coming to new conclusions during the election campaign, one would simply be turned away at the polling station. Under the automatic voter registration system, that would not be the case; one would automatically be on the voters roll.

Electoral transparency would be enhanced, in that society would not be misled into a false sense of contentment that our democracy was healthy. With the true statistics automatically generated, the factual situation would be exposed. The minister of Home Affairs is in the process of appointing an Electoral Review Panel that will be tasked with making proposals for a new electoral system to be implemented from 2029 onwards. It is important that the efficacy of voter registrations also be included in its mandate. To this end, the Inclusive Society Institute will be making representations to the ministry and the panel after its establishment.

Swanepoel is the chief executive officer of the Inclusive Society Institute. The institute promotes democracy, human rights and constitutionalism. Its Electoral Expert Panel is fine-tuning its proposals for a new electoral system for South Africa.