



## INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

### **VOTER REGISTRATION MECHANISM NEEDS TO CHANGE** **A government mandated by only 25,5% of eligible voters is not good enough** *By Daryl Swanepoel*

On 29 May South Africans again go to the polls to elect their public representatives using an electoral system that is deeply flawed in terms of registering the voters to enable them to exercise their democratic rights. It cannot be that a government is said to be elected by the majority when they in fact have received votes from less than a third of those eligible to vote. Yet that is so 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 44% - less than half. Put differently, **the ruling party serves in government at the pleasure of only 25,5% of the eligible voters.**

The South African Constitution affords the right of all citizens above the age of 18 to vote. But to do so, they need to register with the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). In this regard, only 26,756,649 citizens were registered to vote in 2019, whilst the total over 18 population (that is eligible voters) at that point 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 (44,5%) and the ruling party's national mandate, measured in terms of eligible voters, a paltry 13,5%. This is illustrated in the table below.

Elements	Source	2019	2021
Overall population	Stats SA, in CRA	58,775,022	60,142,992
Less: Population under 18	UNICEF	19,411,049	19,961,409
Eligible voters	Own calculation	39,363,973	40,181,583
Registered voters	IEC	26,756,649	26,204,579
Registered voters as a % of eligible voters	IEC	68%	65%
Turnout of registered voters (PR ballots)	IEC	66%	44,5%
Turnout of eligible voters	Own calculations	44%	29%
Total valid votes in the election (PR ballots)	IEC	17,437,379	11,720,611
Votes obtained by ruling party in the election	IEC	10,026,475	5,407,329
Ruling party % of valid votes	IEC	57,5%	46%
Ruling party votes as a percentage of registered voters	Own calculations	37,5%	21%
Ruling party votes as a percentage of eligible voters	Own calculations	25,5%	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 29 May 2024. As in 2019, here too, only 68% of eligible voters are registered to vote.

This dilemma is not only the making of the policymakers. Citizens themselves need to embrace their civic duty, nearly a third of which 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 can do better.

The best way to ensure this, is automatic voter registration. Every South African has to be issued with an identity document, 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.

And such a system will hold a number of benefits for both the voting system and the population register:

- In terms of 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. By changing one's address for voting purposes will also help ensure an up-to-date population register.
- There will be significant cost savings in that only one register will need to be maintained, not two – the population register and the voters roll – as is the current scenario. This cost saving could be used to fund voter education, a current area of underfunding. The voter education can also be used on campaigns to motivate citizens to carry out their civic duty by participating in elections.
- Democracy will be enhanced, in that under the current system, if one has not registered to vote, but changes one's mind and subsequently wishes to vote – for example coming to new conclusions during the election campaign, one will simply be turned away at the polling station. Under the automatic voter registration system that will not be the case, in that one will automatically be on the voters roll.
- Electoral transparency will be enhanced, in that society will not be misled into a false sense of contentment that our democracy is healthy. With the true statistics automatically generated, the factual situation will be exposed.

The Minister of Home Affairs is currently in the process of appointing a Electoral Review Panel, which panel 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 their mandate. To this end the Inclusive Society Institute will be making representations to both the Ministry and the Panel after its establishment.

***Daryl Swanepoel is the Chief Executive Officer of the Inclusive Society Institute. The Inclusive Society Institute promotes Democracy, Human Rights and Constitutionalism. Its Electoral Expert Panel is currently finetuning its proposals for a new electoral system for South Africa.***